

INDEX OF REVIEWS

Chamber Music Op. 1 - first 3 reviews

Chamber Music Op. 2 - next 3 reviews

Chamber Music No opus - next 2 reviews

Harpsichord Music - just 2 reviews, i.e. last ones

BUXTEHUDE Complete Chamber Music, Volume 1. Seven Sonatas, op. 1. •

John Holloway, violin; Jaap ter Linden, viola da gamba; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, harpsichord. • dacapo/MARCO POLO 8.224003 [DDD]; 57:27. Produced by Claus Due.

Every so often a disc will appear which confounds expectations. This is one such, sadly in the wrong way. The villains of the piece are not the three outstanding Baroque players listed above, but the recording engineers, who have provided a recording whose empty-church resonance proves near fatal to the enterprise. Holloway's violin, although given great brilliance, frequently takes on an unpleasantly glassy tone, the gamba sounds hollow, and the harpsichord continuo is frequently all but submerged by string sound.

Starting a review by criticizing the recording may appear odd, but it has important repercussions for reactions to both music and performances, for as one might expect from such a master of counterpoint as Buxtehude these fine sonatas are highly contrapuntal works which demand absolute clarity of presentation. Published c. 1694, but probably written significantly earlier, they are full of invention and dramatic rhetorical gestures fully worked out on equal terms between the two string instruments, the harpsichord emerging only infrequently from its continuo role. The performances sound at their best in the improvisatory slow passages (there are few genuine slow movements) which act as a link between "busy" quick movements in which the ear is constantly battling against the odds to clarify textures. These fast-moving sections consequently take on a relentless quality which soon becomes wearisome.

This is all a great pity, for I'm sure the playing is much better than it sounds, and the project (obviously a result of the recent merger between the Danish company dacapo and the ever-enterprising Marco Polo) is admirably conceived and presented. Labeled as Vol. 1 of the complete chamber music of Buxtehude (which I imagine will run to three discs), one can only hope that future issues will allow the playing to be heard in a more flattering light. Meanwhile although no alternative complete recording currently exists there is a well-recorded ASV disc on which the Trio Sonnerie gives splendid performances of Nos 2, 4, and 6 (the last being the

most remarkable of the set) and a pair drawn from opus 2, seven further sonatas with the same scoring and doubtless the subject of the next issue in the dacapo/Marco Polo series.

Brian Robins

This article originally appeared in Issue 18:6 (July/Aug 1995) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Buxtehude: Violin sonatas Op. 1/Holloway

Review by: David Vernier *Artistic Quality: 8 Sound Quality: 7*

Buxtehude's Op. 1 sonatas have received expert (and deserved) attention on disc, both in trio form—violin, viola da gamba, and harpsichord—and with an added violin. This reissue, important because of the baroque-period credentials of its three performers, is part of Naxos' Buxtehude "complete chamber music" series (previously on Marco Polo), and it offers solid, well-considered if rather conservative renditions of these very fine pieces. Colleague John Greene has thoroughly discussed the various recordings available, citing differences in approach and performing style, and his brief assessment of this Holloway/Linden/Mortensen effort appears in the context of his review of the reference version on Harmonia Mundi with violinist Manfredo Kraemer. (Please refer to his comments by typing Q4867 and Q5204 in Search Reviews.)

Although the Kraemer recording features a second violinist and thus has somewhat of an advantage in the many improvisational, interactive passages, the one considered here uses its material well, not forcing the scale or inhibiting the flow with over-ornamentation. The wild and wonderful D minor sonata (No. 6) is especially exciting—particularly in the way the players relish the echo effects and dramatize the dynamic and tempo shifts—and it's certainly the highlight of the recording. That said, the quartet on the Harmonia Mundi disc really shows these sonatas' full expressive possibilities—and the sound is exemplary, unlike here, where the lower registers dominate and inner textures are somewhat cloudy.

Dietrich BUXTEHUDE (1637-1707) - MusicWeb Review Complete Chamber Music Volume 1

Seven Sonatas Op 1: No.1 in F; No.2 in G; No.3 in A minor; No.4 in Bb major; No.5 in C major; No.6 in D minor; No.7 in E minor Bux WV 252-258

John Holloway, violin; Jaap ter Linden, viola da gamba; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, cembalo

rec. Kastelkirken, Copenhagen, June/July 1994. DDD

NAXOS 8.557248 [57.32]

Originally released in 1995 on the Danish Da Capo label this disc marks the continuation of Naxos's commitment to Buxtehude following on from their complete organ music project. It is often said that any musician who the great J.S. Bach thought it worth walking 300 miles to hear must be worthy our attention. For myself I used to be sceptical of that story but now, having reviewed a few Buxtehude discs and having heard other works, I feel that the great J.S. was quite right. It must be remembered however that it was Buxtehude's organ improvisations that especially attracted Bach. Now, if only we could hear those. Nevertheless Buxtehude did write considerable quantities of chamber music and it is of high quality and interest.

The first really significant recording was by Trio Sonnerie directed by Monica Huggett on the ASV label in 1986. An LP originally the programme incorporated pieces from both Opp. 1 and 2. This was good because, as we are reminded in the excellent if rather analytical booklet essay by Niels Martin Jensen, Buxtehude regarded the two volumes as a complete unit.

This new CD gives us an opportunity to hear just the Op. 1 set - Op. 2 will soon follow - and one can assess the astonishing variety that the fifty year old composer created. Mr Jensen's essay gives us not only an excellent potted biography but also a quite detailed analysis of each sonata, movement by movement. I followed these notes assiduously whilst listening and was glad that I did.

Buxtehude's only major publications in his lifetime were of chamber music. These took place between 1694 and 1696. The seven books of sonatas show a fusion of influences from South Europe to the North via Paris. The Italian influence brings with it demanding idiomatic writing for violin. Dramatic effects derived 'style rappresentative' also appear imparting a sense of the music telling a story. The English contributed the virtuoso viol tradition and the fantasy and fantasy-suite forms. The German and Austrian traditions contributed fugal and contrapuntal movements in which the composer could show off his polyphonic skills.

The sonatas are made up of contrasting sections of varying number and length. Some are dances and some are variations with recitative-like transitional passages or simple showy bursts of passagework in a style now commonly known as 'stylus phantasticus'. The gamba plays a true obbligato part, completely independent of the harpsichord's basso continuo. In fast movements the texture is in two real parts with, some of the time, the bass playing a simplified version of the solo part. Almost every sonata has an ostinato bass movement whether in the form of chaconne-like repetitions or of harmonic passages. The Op. 1 no. 2 in G major is typical. It starts with a sonorous introduction marked *lento* but only three bars long. This leads directly into a lively fugal *vivace*. There is then a chromatic *adagio* which goes into a compound time *allegro* in the relative minor, based on a flourish of arpeggios in the violin. The ensuing *largo*, which is full of delicious suspensions, brings us back to G major. An *arioso* with variations explores the possibilities of an

eight-bar repeated bass line which is where the sonata ends.

Although it is the first sonata that I have briefly analysed, I need to add that despite the fact that each sonata is made up of these short sectional 'sound-bites' each is also utterly different and distinctly original. Buxtehude had such a lot to say musically, that he never repeats himself or his formulae.

I am in full agreement with the 'American Record Guide' which is quoted on the back of the CD case: "It is difficult to imagine a better recording of these pieces" and I would add emphatically, "and, of course, a better performance".

The fertile world of these seven sonatas is not esoteric or challenging but joyous and clever and life-enhancing, so that the more you listen the more you hear.

Gary Higginson

BUXTEHUDE Trio Sonatas, op. 2 • John Holloway, vn; Jaap ter Linden, vdg; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, hpd. • NAXOS 8.557249 (63:13)

This is a reissue of a dacapo disc that formed part of a three-CD series of the complete chamber works of Buxtehude. I reviewed the disappointingly engineered volume 1, the seven Sonatas, op. 1, back in *Fanfare* 18:6 (that has also been transferred to Naxos as 8.557248), but for some reason the second disc was never received for review.

While the Sonatas of op. 1 have been generously treated on record, with fine versions by the Boston Musuem Trio (23:1); an ensemble led by Manfredo Kraemer (26:1); and Convivium on Hyperion (not reviewed in *Fanfare*), those of op. 2 have fared poorly—so poorly, in fact, that as far as I'm aware this is the only complete version available. There is no apparent reason for such neglect, these works fully maintaining the outstanding quality of op. 1. They were published in 1696, two years after the first group, but it is probable that the sonatas in both sets were composed some years earlier. In any event, Buxtehude clearly saw them as an entity, referring in the dedication of op. 1 to its publication being the "first part" of his sonata collection (six further sonatas, recorded by Holloway and his partners on dacapo 8.224005, remained unpublished).

There can be no question that Buxtehude's sonatas occupy a special pinnacle among the peaks of the trio sonata repertoire. Overflowing with unflinching invention, their mood ranges from allegros and vivaces of quite staggering brilliance and ebullient energy to rhapsodic lyricism of timeless beauty, from closely argued contrapuntal wizardry to freewheeling improvisatory movements that capture all the mystery and exoticism of the *stylus fantasticus*. Absolute equality among the three instruments is maintained, with the keyboard given an independence rare at that time. Buxtehude's writing for the two string instruments is astonishing for a variety of effects that range from firing quick imitative motifs

back and forth to exploitation of the sonorities available when they are combined together. The frequent alternation between fast and slow music ensures that surprises are always lying in wait, nowhere more so than in the A-Major Sonata (No. 5), where Buxtehude follows up an ebullient Allegro in gigue form with solo movements for each of the strings. The first, for violin, is marked *Concitato*, and moves from a florid, rhapsodic passage that trespasses on Schmeizer and Biber territory into flashing passagework underpinned by a four-note ostinato figure. In complete contrast, the succeeding Adagio for viola da gamba exploits the lyrical qualities of the instrument.

The performances are outstanding. Few violinists today show as much empathy for the 17th-century violin repertoire as does John Holloway, although at the time these recordings were made he had not gone as far with his exploration of the techniques that differentiate it from that of the 18th century. Here, he is ably supported by his distinguished partners, the three combining to produce playing notable not only for its supreme technical merit, but also a rare level of empathy and integration. Unfortunately, as with the first disc, I'm sorry to have to record that the lively, resonant church ambience is far from ideal, frequently imparting a cavernous sound to Jaap ter Linden's gamba and, in general, frequently masking contrapuntal detail. But until these performances are challenged, and particularly given the new bargain price, I'm happy to recommend the disc for the sake of the indispensable music and totally idiomatic playing.

Brian Robins

This article originally appeared in Issue 29:5 (May/June 2006) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Buxtehude: Trio Sonatas Op. 2

Review by: David Vernier *Artistic Quality: 9 Sound Quality: 7*

This fine recording of the rarely-heard and very easy on the ears Op. 2 trio sonatas by Dietrich Buxtehude originally was released on Dacapo in the mid-1990s. Characterized by lively, tuneful allegros (built from expertly designed and executed contrapuntal structures) and slow movements notable not only for their harmonic and melodic sophistication but also for their rich emotional content, these pieces deserve attention commonly reserved for other more familiar Baroque chamber music, even if they may stand a few rungs down on the ladder of genius from those occupied by Vivaldi, Telemann, Handel, and Bach (listed in ascending order, of course).

The seven Op. 1 sonatas, written for the same configuration of instruments, are discussed in an earlier review (type Q9110 in Search Reviews), and these seven follow a similar path, keeping things interesting by juxtaposing fairly strict form with more improvisatory, fantasia-type passages and movements that offer

soloists a chance to show off—and that keep listeners on their toes with punchy dance rhythms and occasional chromatic surprises. One of the disc's highlights in this regard comes in the Sonata No. 5, where both violin and viola da gamba have true virtuoso solo turns in successive movements, and not surprisingly violinist John Holloway and gambist Jaap ter Linden dispatch their lines with complete confidence and no small amount of excitement. The sound is a bit swampy, depriving the performances of the clear detail we expect from today's best chamber music recordings—but it's not hard to adjust to, and the music's infectiousness soon overcomes any sonic shortcomings.

Dietrich BUXTEHUDE (c.1637-1707) - MusicWeb Review

Seven Trio Sonatas, Op. 2:

Sonata No.1 in B flat major, BuxWV 259 [8:33]

Sonata No.2 in D major, BuxWV 260 [9:06]

Sonata No.3 in G minor, BuxWV 261 [10:54]

Sonata No.4 in C minor, BuxWV 262 [8:32]

Sonata No.5 in A major, BuxWV 263 [9:15]

Sonata No.6 in F major, BuxWX 265 [8:15]

John Holloway (violin), Jaap ter Linden (viola da gamba), Lars Ulrik Mortensen (harpsichord)

rec. 9-10 February, 20-21 September 1994, Kastelskirken, Copenhagen.

NAXOS 8.557249 [63:13]

This recording was originally issued on Da Capo 8 224003 and thoroughly merits its reissue now. These sonatas are amongst the few pieces which Buxtehude published during his lifetime. His Op. 1, containing seven sonatas for violin, viola da gamba and harpsichord is undated but was probably published in 1694. Op. 2, recorded here, contained a further seven sonatas and appeared in 1696. The two collections were clearly conceived as complementary sets. In its dedication the Op. 1 set is said to be the "first part" of his sonatas; Op. 1 and Op. 2 each contains seven sonatas.

The excellent and detailed booklet essay by Per Bærentzen points out that Buxtehude's sonatas owe much to the *stylus phantasticus* – that is, what Sebastian de Brossard, writing in 1703, described as "a special instrumental style or manner where the composer is not subject to any formal restrictions, as the generic terms 'Fantasia', 'Ricercare', 'Toccatà', and 'Sonata' imply". The illusion of improvisation is carefully created in some passages of these sonatas, though such passages are securely based within meticulously composed musical structures and exist alongside eruditely 'correct' counterpoint. The music communicates, as a result, a joyous juxtaposition of the (seemingly) free alongside the carefully structured.

"Seven corresponds to the seven days of the week, the seven planets, seven

rungs of perfection, seven spheres or celestial stairs ... The Heavens are seven in number and so, according to Dante, are the planetary spheres ... [In the Old Testament] through the changes which it ushers in, the number seven itself possesses powers and is a magic number ... According to St. Augustine [the number seven] measures the length of history and the period of humanity's earthly pilgrimage" (Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 1996). Or, to put it more briefly, it is no accident that Op. 1 and Op. 2 each contain seven sonatas. The touchingly human quality of so much of what we hear coexists with an evident awareness of larger symbolic significances, significances which add to its - lightly carried - weight of meaning.

The music itself is lyrical and expressive, both beautifully formal and full of unexpected turns. It is sad and joyous, playful and solemn; it dances and it grieves. Take, for example, the way in which Sonata No. 4 begins with a beautiful self-contained slow introduction, which is succeeded by a brilliantly conducted fugal *allegro*, with telling switches between violin and viola da gamba, a movement closed by some lyrical writing marked *lento*. There follows a powerful dialogue, in $\frac{3}{4}$, between violin and viola da gamba, beautiful and richly emotional, and a concluding *vivace* which dancingly reprises much of what has gone before.

In truth, I find it hard to contain my enthusiasm for this music. Sonata No. 5 – the longest of the sonatas in Op. 2 – seems to me to be one of the great trio sonatas of the baroque era, full of virtuoso writing, of wonderful variational solo writing for violin and viola da gamba; of complex fugues and canons - a complex construction on a repeated four-note motif. The whole is both perfectly shaped and idiosyncratically expressive.

John Holloway and his colleagues do not give 'definitive' performances; no really great music can be reduced to a once-and-for-all definitive version. But they do provide a compelling, richly enjoyable interpretation of this brilliant, glowing, sprightly, profound music.

Wonderful music, very well performed. I have listened to the disc repeatedly since it came into my hands. It gets better every time.

Glyn Pursglove

BUXTEHUDE Sonatas: in G, BuxWV 271; **in a**, BuxWV 272; **in F**, BuxWV 269; **in D**, BuxWV 267; **in B \flat** , BuxWV 273; **in C**, BuxWV 266 • John Holloway (vn); Ursula Weiss (vn); Jaap ter Linden (vdg); Mogens Rasmussen (vdg); Lars Ulrik Mortensen (hpd, org) • NAXOS 8.557250 (52:35)

I completely agree with William Zagorski (*Fanfare* 31:4) that Dieterich Buxtehude was "Bach in the raw . . . more fanciful and improvisatory even at his most quietly reflective moments." I freely admit that I haven't heard as much Buxtehude as I'd like to, or perhaps should, but I can say that I've not yet heard a Buxtehude

composition I didn't like.

These six sonatas are a perfect case in point. There isn't a dull, uninteresting, or unoriginal movement among any of them, which we now think were written around 1684 when he was only 37 years old. Buxtehude's music is always fresh, innovative, and interesting, playing with contrasts between major and minor, improvisatory passages and tightly controlled figures, and slow and fast tempos. Only the Sonata in B \flat is really an extended work, being almost 14 minutes long, but their very brevity appeals to us. The different movements of these sonatas, by and large, are not disconnected in feeling, key, or style, but rather build on one another like a tower of building blocks. In this way innovation, expression, and structure are always completely integrated. A perfect case in point is the Sonata in A Minor, in the first section of which the ground bass is played 26 times, yet never sounds repetitive because he combines this ostinato figure with a series of violin variations on a lyrical theme that is presented during eight measures covering the first two statements of the ostinato. Buxtehude constantly shifts between concerted and contrapuntal sections in changing rhythms, thus creating a colorful and varied whole. And that's just in the first movement! In the second, a sweetly singing Adagio is played by the upper strings while the viola da gamba holds long notes; then, at about five to six minutes in, rolling arpeggio chords on the harpsichord feed a transition into a lively allegro melody while the da gamba stubbornly holds long notes, at least until it reaches a point where it gives up and joins in the fun.

The relatively long Sonata in B \flat uses an organ rather than a harpsichord; here, the greater sustainability of the instrument allows Buxtehude to free the two da gambas from ostinato and assign them more contrapuntal figures that might have gone to the harpsichord. In the first movement, he creates a swaggering rhythm that to my ears is the 17th-century equivalent of jazz, and this jazz feeling is furthered by the exchange between the lead violin and lead da gamba-player, much like a "chase chorus." Double-time figures by the violin at the 4:30 mark in the first movement provides what jazz musicians would call a great ride-out. The second movement fools us: the minute-and-a-half Adagio turns out to be the introduction to an Allegro, but Buxtehude also surprisingly provides an *adagio* interlude! The remaining movements, all very short, are an Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue; and here, for the first time, these later movements seem to provide more of a contrast than a continuation of mood and musical ideas.

I was rather startled to discover that these performances, recorded in September 1994, are actually a reissue of dacapo 8.224005. Well, they certainly deserve recycling. These musicians play with both an obvious love of the music as well as an understanding of style; you certainly can't fault them for lack of enjoyment in their performances. The sonics are just a shade over-spacious for my taste, yet none of the instruments gets lost in the sound space. Like so many recordings I've heard of Buxtehude, it seems almost impossible to kill his spirit no matter how reserved the players are, but in this case the musicians' enthusiasm equals the

quality of the material. Go for it! **Lynn René Bayley**

This article originally appeared in Issue 32:1 (Sept/Oct 2008) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Dietrich BUXTEHUDE (c.1637-1707) - MusicWeb Review

Complete Chamber Music Volume 3: Six Sonatas without Opus Numbers

Sonata for 2 violins, viola da gamba and basso continuo in G major, BuxWV 271 [7:12]

Sonata for violin, viola da gamba and basso continuo in A minor, BuxWV 272 [7:50]

Sonata for 2 violins, viola da gamba and basso continuo (organ) in F major, BuxWV 269 [8:00]

Sonata for viola da gamba, violone (viola da gamba) and basso continuo in D major, BuxWV 267 [7:37]

Sonata for violin, viola da gamba and basso continuo (organ) in B flat major, BuxWV 273 [13:50]

Sonata for 2 violins, viola da gamba and basso continuo in C major, BuxWV 266 [8:07]

John Holloway and Ursula Weiss (violin); Jaap ter Linden and Mogens Rasmussen (viola da gamba); Lars Ulrik Mortensen (harpsichord and organ)
rec. Radio House, Studio 2, Copenhagen, Denmark, 25-28 September 1994. DDD.
Notes in English and German.

NAXOS 8.557250 [52:33]

This very welcome reissue of Dacapo 8.224005 is yet another spin-off from the 2007 commemoration of the tercentenary of Buxtehude's death and one of many from the Naxos/Dacapo stable. If it was well worth having before, at the new price it becomes essential.

Two things about this recording are glaringly obvious: that its reissue was inevitable, since the two earlier Dacapo CDs of Opp. 1 and 2, with three of the same performers, had been reissued by Naxos, and that the very names of the performers guarantee the quality of the performances – some of the most accomplished baroque instrumentalists on the block. I need only add that the music is as well worth hearing as that on the other two discs, despite the absence of opus numbers, and that the recording is just as good – close but not too close.

In a sense, that's my job done – go out and buy this CD, plus the earlier two, if you have not yet done so. If you want to be doubly sure of the quality of those other two other reissues, please refer to the Musicweb reviews: Op.1 on 8.557248 (see [review](#)) and Op.2 on 8.557249 (see [review](#)), the latter a Bargain of the Month. The low opus numbers do not indicate juvenile works, since Buxtehude published very

little – only these two sets of sonatas, according to *Grove* – and that only when he was comparatively old.

These unpublished sonatas come from a large collection of Buxtehude's music in the Düben Collection, now housed in the library of the University of Uppsala. In a dedication Buxtehude referred to Düben as his *amico plurimum honorando* – the most worthy of honour of his many friends – which seems to indicate a close relationship. Though none of the music in the collection is in autograph score, having been copied by the Dübens, father and son, neither its authenticity nor its quality is in doubt.

Some may even find these unpublished sonatas more attractive, since they are for a more varied ensemble than those of Opp.1 and 2. We tend to think of such music in a secular context but it is so varied that the intended publication of 1684, which never came to fruition but probably included some or all of these works, was advertised as "suitable for performances both as Tafelmusik and in church."

One sonata here, that in B-flat, BuxWV273, exists in a different form in the published Op.1. The printed version probably represents a revision of this manuscript version and, as the notes indicate, demonstrates a move away from the conventional trio sonata. For all that, the earlier version deserves to be performed; after a 4/4 opening and a second movement, itself a miniature sonata in four sections, it develops into a suite of dance movements – in effect, a link between Corelli's sonatas and the suites of Telemann and Bach.

All six sonatas are with basso continuo, organ in BuxWV269 and 273, harpsichord elsewhere. Inevitably, therefore, the texture here is somewhat denser than on the Naxos recording of six Corelli Sonatas where I relished the spring-water-like freshness of the performances without the optional cello or gamba. (Op.5, Nos. 7-12, Naxos 8.557799 – see [review](#)). But if the textures are denser on this Buxtehude CD, they are also richer – a win-win situation for me, since both discs are likely to be frequent visitors to my CD player.

The notes by Niels Martin Jensen are extremely detailed and informative. The English translation is perfectly idiomatic: for once the reader does not have to try to wade through tortured expressions or even have to guess what is meant. The German version appears to be equally idiomatic.

Naxos seem to wish to have the spelling of Buxtehude's first name both ways – Dieterich their website and Dietrich in the CD documentation. Both versions of the German name are recorded, as well as the Danish equivalent Diderik. His probable birthplace, Oldesloe, now Bad Oldesloe, is in Germany but Denmark has at least an equal claim to him. The Naxos notes, like the [article](#) in the *Shorter Grove*

Dictionary of Music – “Danish (or German) composer” – wisely dodge the issue. The current *Oxford Companion to Music* boldly opts for “Danish composer”.

The cover painting of peasant dancers is a rather crude work in the Brueghel tradition but without the latter’s talent. With their seemingly inexhaustible supply of suitable paintings, Naxos could surely have found something better: Buxtehude’s music is far less rough-and-ready than the painting might imply.

That is just about the only unfavourable comment that I can make. Of the many Buxtehude recordings which have come my way recently from the Naxos/Dacapo stable and elsewhere, this is perhaps the one likely to be played most often. On second thoughts, perhaps the painting is not all that inappropriate, since the musicians on this recording seem to have enjoyed themselves as much as those peasants – and the listener is likely to obtain just the same enjoyment.

Brian Wilson

Dietrich BUXTEHUDE (1637-1707)

Harpsichord Music Vol. 1

Toccata in G Major [5.14]

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern [8.07]

Suite in D minor [9.28]

Fuga in B Flat Major [4.10]

Suite in C Major [9.02]

Aria in A minor [5.37]

Canzona in C Major [4.09]

Partita Auf meinen lieben Gott in E minor [4.37]

Canzonetta in A minor [1.34]

Lars Ulrik Mortensen, harpsichord

Rec: September 1998

DA CAPO 8.224116 [51.58]

Dietrich Buxtehude was a Danish composer later naturalized German who spent most of his life in Lübeck. He wrote a wide variety of music - from beautiful works for harpsichord, to masterpieces for organ, by way of vocal music. He also started a series of concerts, separate from church services, called 'Abendmusik' (Evening music), to provide musical entertainment for the town's bourgeoisie.

Da Capo has, so far, released 3 CDs of Buxtehude's harpsichord works, all performed excellently by Lars Ulrik Mortensen. This is the first volume of this series.

First of all, some general notes about the series. Mortensen is a fine performer, playing these works with passion and verve. He clearly wants to show just how rich

and delightful this music is. His touch is just and precise, and he uses all of the instrument's capacities, offering a full range of sounds through its various stops and registers. He plays a beautifully sounding Ruckers copy by Thomas Mandrup-Poulsen, which is tuned to a mean-tone temperament. (Mean-tone temperament, a type of tuning used in Buxtehude's lifetime, entailed tuning the instrument so that certain keys are tuned perfectly, but, as a result of this, other keys are unplayable. The purity of the "good" keys is much more precise, but this leaves certain notes (sharps and flats) sounding "out of tune".) It should be noted that some of the works on these recordings were originally written for organ; Mortensen has decided to include some of these pieces that are playable on the harpsichord.

The music on this disc covers a full range of Buxtehude's compositional styles for the keyboard. It opens with a Toccata, which is a brilliant work showing Buxtehude's more impetuous nature. In this piece, at just over 5 minutes, Buxtehude shows a wide variety of keyboard techniques and styles, from a flamboyant opening, through a brief passage of ostinato variations, reminiscent of Pachelbel's canon.

The second work is a curiosity. *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* is a choral setting, featuring several variations on the main theme. It is broken into several distinct sections, and there is a striking similarity between parts of this work and several of the variations in Bach's Goldberg Variations. In particular, about 2½ minutes into the piece is a brief section that is very similar to Bach's variation 26. This work shows, in 8 minutes, a wide variety of styles and forms, and is a perfect example of Buxtehude's compositional repertory. Curiously, although this was written for organ, the harpsichord allows better expression of its subtlety. Comparing it with an organ recording (Olivier Vernet, Ligia Digital), I find that the organ stifles some of the subtle effects that the harpsichord highlights perfectly. The two suites on this recording, the D minor and C major suites, are beautiful works in the French style. Buxtehude's suites differ from those of later baroque composers. Each containing only four movements (allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue), they are all based on the themes presented in the allemande. This gives them a more restrained tone than suites by other composers, such as Froberger or Bach. There are no flamboyant preludes to open these suites, but rather more introspective allemandes, full of melodies and emotion. The suites all have a slow-fast-slow-fast construction, and their French sound recalls that of Louis Couperin, in their subtle melodies and balanced ornamentation.

Another work worth noting on this disc is the *Aria in A minor*. Buxtehude liked works with variations. What he called an aria, for keyboard, was a piece containing an initial exposition and several variations. This aria is short, with only 3 parts, but it foreshadows his great aria *La Capricciosa*, with its 30 variations. This piece begins with a slow, almost melancholy movement, the second variation is a subtler restating of the initial tone, but the final variation is a toccata-like piece with great

energy.

Closing this disc is a beautiful little work, the Canzonetta in A minor. Just over 1 1/2 minutes long, this remarkable piece, written for organ, uses the very highest notes on the keyboard, as it zips through virtuosic runs at breakneck speed. A perfect closing piece for this excellent selection of Buxtehude's keyboard works. An amazing recording, containing some beautiful harpsichord music by a composer who deserves to be better-known. Excellently performed, perfectly recorded, and played on a delightful instrument, I could not recommend this with more enthusiasm.

Kirk McElhearn

BUXTEHUDE Suites: in A, BuxWV 243; **in F**, BuxWV 238. **Canzonetta in d**, BuxWV 168. **Prelude in G**, BuxWV 162. **Aria in G**, "La capricciosa" • Lars Ulrik Mortensen (hpd) • NAXOS 8.570581 (54:28)

This, Volume 3 of the complete harpsichord music of Buxtehude, continues the superb series for Naxos by the excellent Lars Ulrik Mortensen. I suppose, since this composer's harpsichord music is not as well known as his organ music is, that I should break down and describe each piece here as I've done in my previous Buxtehude reviews, but my esteemed Editor-in-Chief has begged our indulgence in shorter, more terse reviews, and so I shall capitulate and draw the curtain on my proposed lecture of Buxtehude's genius. Perhaps I could summarize his style, bold and innovative as it was, by stating that despite his Dutch genesis and German training, his music was very heavily influenced by the Italian style, particularly the style of Monteverdi—though I'm sure that other researchers could find other influences (Stradella, perhaps?). Buxtehude's use of rubato, ritornello, inverted variants, and, above all, of *bel canto* lyricism, is indicative of his music's Italian roots. No wonder his vocal music took seed and was performed for so many decades in Italy. I'm sure that some of these harpsichord works had at least some influence on Domenico Scarlatti in addition to J. S. Bach, who admired him greatly. Mortensen continues to impress as one of the most musical and *truly* historically informed performers of his generation. I wasn't at all surprised to discover that he was a pupil of, among others, Trevor Pinnock, who is also one of the better harpsichordists today, though I personally find Mortensen's playing even more fluid in style and sensitive to color. You simply must hear this disc to believe it.

Lynn René Bayley

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