

VIVALDI Cello Concertos • Roel Dieltens (vc), dir; Christine Busch (vn); Ensemble Explorations (period instruments) • HARMONIA MUNDI HMC 901745 (70:29)

Concertos: in a for Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 420; in E^b for Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 408; in F for Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 411; in d for Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 407; in F for Violin, Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 544, "Il Proteo"; in a for Cello, Strings, and Continuo, RV 421; in C for Violin, 2 Cellos, Strings, and Continuo, RV 561

The period performance movement has empowered players to experiment with novel sonorities, isolated and in combination. Their newfound variety mirrors both Vivaldi's own formal variety and the variegated textures inherent in his scores, even when performed by groups of seemingly limited timbral range. Ensemble Explorations seems to be exploring just such new territory in the Cello Concertos. For example, they alternate harpsichord and organ in a single work (starting with the one in A Minor, the first on the recording—and, according to the notes provided by Peter Wollny, also perhaps the first in order of composition, bearing both traces of the sonata and a simpler accompaniment; there's a precedent: Corelli's *Concerti grossi* represent reworkings of trio sonatas).

The energy with which they play these pieces results neither from rapid tempos nor from special buoyancy but from a sharp rhythmic sense reinforced by incisive rather than ponderous downbeats. Against this backdrop, Roel Dieltens sets solos by turns amiably crunchy and beguilingly lyrical. An occasional noisy portamento that might ruin a passage written a century later matters less in this context. Harmonia Mundi's engineers have placed Dieltens in the midst of the Ensemble, which consists only of string quartet, bass, alternate organ and harpsichord, and alternate theorbo and guitar. So nothing seems to be too far away; and the ambiance reflects what must have been the intimacy of a small ensemble performing in a room rather than in an auditorium.

Though she lacks both Dieltens's strong rhythmic articulation and his robust tone, violinist Christine Busch serves as an effective foil in the Concerto, "Il Proteo," as well as in the Concerto, RV 561, for the same forces, both of which Il Giardino Armonico has included in a collection on Teldec 4509-94552-2. The finale of "Il Proteo" (like the slow movement and finale of the Concerto RV 561) offers evidence for what can be extracted from Vivaldi's scores. Although Il Giardino plays that finale with unabashed virtuosity, Ensemble Explorations outdoes Giardino in nuance—and Harmonia Mundi's engineers have provided a more

reverberant acoustic backdrop for the Ensemble's richer, less acerbic textures. Like *Il Giardino Armonico*, Pieter Wispelwey and Florilegium sound more astringent in a completely different set of Cello Concertos (except for the slow movement of RV 407, which they amalgamate, with movements from the Concertos RV 410 and 411, to create a new Concerto) on Channel Classics CCS 10097. An even more startling contrast, however, exists between Dieltiens's performances and those of the more traditional City of London Sinfonia with Raphael Wallfisch as soloist—they included RV 407 in Volume 3 of Naxos's collection of Vivaldi's Cello Concertos (8.550909). Ensemble Explorations enjoys a strong enough advantage over the Sinfonia in both tonal weight and textural nuance to suggest analogies to an additional dimension.

Standing on the shoulders of earlier recreators of Vivaldi Concertos, Dieltiens and his ensemble seem to have glimpsed a more distant vision. For the exhilaration of that vision alone, their performances recommend themselves to all sorts of listeners. **Robert Maxham**

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AllMusic Review by James Leonard - 4 1/2*/5*

Vivaldi's many cello concertos are performed here with consummate taste and superb musicality by **Roel Dieltiens** and the **Ensemble Explorations**. Recorded in 1997 and 2001 and originally released separately by Harmonia Mundi, this 2007 lavishly packaged reissue includes both discs complete with entertaining and informative essays and more than a dozen very lovely (though very tiny) reproductions of paintings of **Vivaldi's** Venice. **Dieltiens** plays with a rich tone and a light touch and his robust virtuosity and enthusiastic sympathy for the music are irresistible. The seven members of the **Ensemble Explorations** -- five strings plus lute or guitar and organ or harpsichord -- play with a sense of cooperation, which leaves this music sounding as concertos from the period should, which is to say more like chamber music. Harmonia Mundi's sound is cool and clear, yet deep and full. Though fans of modern cellos and modern performance practices might prefer more romantic interpretations, anyone with an interest in period instruments and period performance practice will want to hear these recordings.

Antonio VIVALDI (1678-1741) - MusicWeb Review of Vol. 2 Concertos for cello

Concerto in A minor for cello, strings and basso continuo RV420

Concerto in E flat major for cello, strings and basso continuo RV408

Concerto in F major for cello, strings and basso continuo RV411

Concerto in in D minor for cello, strings and basso continuo RV407

Concerto in F major for violin, cello, strings and basso continuo 'Il Proteo o sia Il mondo al rovescio', RV544

Concerto in A minor for cello, strings and basso continuo RV421

Concerto in C major for violin, two cellos, strings and basso continuo RV561

Ensemble Explorations/Roel Dieltiens

Recorded Mars 2001. Anvers, Chapelle Notre-Dame, t'Elenvld, Belgium

HARMONIA MUNDI HMC 901745 [70:29]

Harmonia Mundi have now released this their second volume of Vivaldi cello concertos. There are seven concertos here, five for single cello, one for violin and cello and another for violin and two cellos. In my collection I have the preceding volume of cello concertos, however the first set just isn't in the same league as this second volume; the accounts just do not have the same enthusiasm, immediacy and bite. Incidentally, by my last estimate, Vivaldi wrote twenty-six cello concertos plus seventeen other concertos that include the cello as a joint solo instrument. Certainly there is room for several more volumes from Harmonia Mundi.

These concertos are accomplished examples of the genre and to a large extent chart Vivaldi's development as a composer. The Concerto in A minor RV420 circa 1705 is an early piece, bearing the hallmarks of a Baroque sonata and makes sparing use of the orchestra. The more advanced style of the Concerto in D minor RV407, composed a few years later, shows how Vivaldi gives more independent treatment to the orchestra. The remaining five works most likely date from around 1718. This was really the start of an extended period of Vivaldi's supreme creative maturity and it was seven more years before he published his masterwork: the set which included the famous 'Four Seasons' known as, *Il Cimento dell' Armonia e dell'Inventione*, Opus 8. These remaining five concertos are characterised by a balanced alternation between colourful and individually structured *ritornellos* and virtuoso solos in the quicker movements. They are effectively contrasted with expansive slow central movements that feature expressive *cantilenas* on the solo instruments. The Concerto for violin and cello in F major '*Il Proteo o sia Il mondo al rovescio*', RV544 and the Concerto for violin and two cellos in C major RV561 are rare for their unusual instrumentation, richness of melody and invention. They are really worth exploring.

Countless earlier pioneering interpretations of Vivaldi's music on period instruments came across as technically mechanical, rather lacklustre, frequently insipid even sterile. In the last few years the standard of period instrument performance of Vivaldi has certainly improved by leaps and bounds. This is thanks largely to a growing number of specialist chamber ensembles such as: Concerto Italiano; Venice Baroque Orchestra; Europa Galante; Arte Dei Suonatori; Il Giardino Armonico; Academia Montis Regalis; Florilegium; L'Astrée; the Freiburger

Barockorchester *et al.* On the strength of superb recent performances I would certainly include The English Concert in this influential company now that Andrew Manze has become their director.

On the evidence of these accounts the Ensemble Explorations under direction of Belgium born cellist Roel Dieltiens are worthy of inclusion in the esteemed company of the very best period instrument groups. Like the finest contemporary period instrument consorts the players of Ensemble Explorations expertly explore and exploit the technical and expressive strengths of their period instruments rather than being restricted by the weaknesses.

Ensemble Explorations, on this recording, comprise only eight players but the magnitude and sheer quality of sound they produce is nothing short of astonishing. I particularly liked the subtle phasing which has a real sense of forward momentum often with a dancing quality. Memorable playing with admirable virtuosity and style in the *allegros* and in the slow movements the expressivity is profoundly felt. Baroque cellist Roel Dieltiens with extraordinary precision, produces a fine tone; exciting yet refined playing.

These intriguing and most revealing interpretations of splendid Vivaldi cello concertos enabled me to see them in a different light. This is one of my top five favourite Vivaldi recordings. Truly outstanding!

Michael Cookson