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**GIOVANNI SAMMARTINI Early String Symphonies** (complete) •

Danielle Ferrari, cond; Riccardo Villani (hpd); I Giovanni di Nuova Cameristica •  
NUOVA ERA 231996 (3 CDs: 175:01)

At first I was a bit taken aback to read on the cover jacket of this lavishly produced set, "World Première Recording." Could that possibly be? I would have thought that some enterprising period-instruments ensemble must have gotten around to recording the works of this very important Italian Baroque composer and crucial figure in the early development of the symphony. And indeed I was right, but only sort of. Roberto Gini and the Milan Chamber Orchestra have put out most of these works on the Dynamic label as part of a project to record Sammartini's complete symphonic output. But Dynamic's recordings are fairly recent, postdating the current Nuova Era set, originally recorded in 1994, by more than 10 years. So at the time they were made, in all likelihood Ferrari's would have been world premiere recordings. Also, neither Gini's MCO nor Ferrari's I Giovanni di Nuova Cameristica is a period-instruments ensemble. So what we have in both cases are Italian chamber orchestras and performances similar to those one hears by groups such as I Musici, the English Chamber Orchestra, and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. Not that there is anything wrong in that, but it needs saying so as not to mislead anyone into thinking these are authentic HIP productions.

One of the embarrassments of riches in having a very large CD collection is the tendency to forget what you already have. It turns out that this very set in its original incarnation has been sitting on my shelf gathering dust for years. I'm sure I listened to it at least once when I first acquired it, and then filed it away alphabetically just ahead of Satie.

Giovanni Battista Sammartini (1700 or 1701–1775) was a key figure in laying the groundwork for the Classical symphony, and he was much admired by younger composers with whom he came into contact, including Gluck (who became his student), J. C. Bach, Boccherini, and Mozart. It is said that Sammartini's role in the development of early symphonic style and form was equal to the contributions of the Mannheim school, and that he had a significant influence on Haydn. Perhaps, but compelling evidence of Sammartini's progressivism had yet to manifest itself and may be hard to pin down in these early symphonies, which, for all practical purposes are less symphonies than they are three-movement string concertos in the late Italian Baroque manner. Musically, they are closer in style of writing to Albinoni than they are to Vivaldi, which is to say their contours are more rounded, their profiles softer, and their sound more voluptuous than the similar works of

Vivaldi, which tend to be leaner, more athletic, and more masculine.

The booklet essay by Maria Daniella Villa and Danilo Prefumo does not state when these works were written—exact dates are probably not known—but speculation is that Sammartini would most likely have composed them sometime after 1728, when he began his appointment as *maestro di cappella* at Milan's church of Sant'Ambrogio, where a permanent orchestra and chorus had been established, providing him with the opportunity to experiment with a band of live musicians. This chronology, which is probably correct, places these symphonies squarely in Sammartini's earliest (1724–1739) period of known activity, and pegs them unmistakably as products of the mature Baroque, exactly contemporaneous with Vivaldi's op. 8, whence cometh *The Four Seasons*. The J-C indexing found on this release for Sammartini's works is based on the Jenkins-Churgin catalog. For those who insist on hearing Sammartini's symphonies performed on period instruments—and in music of this vintage I will not take issue with you—there is an alternative in the form of a Naxos CD with the Aradia Ensemble. I haven't heard it, but Michael Carter reviewed it positively in 29:5. On the other hand, if period instruments are not a must-have for you, and you love every drop of Italian Baroque music, as I do—even if it wasn't written by a native Italian, like Albicastro—you will adore these beautifully crafted Albinoni-like string concerto *cum* symphonies in these wonderfully vibrant, full-throated modern-instruments performances by I Giovanni di Nuova Cameristica. I would expect the set to be offered at a mid or budget price since it's already been around the block in a 15-year-old release. If so, I have no reservations in recommending it. **Jerry Dubins**

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**GIUSEPPE SAMMARTINI** 6 Solos for Flute, Violin, or Oboe, op. 13.<sup>1</sup> 12  
Sonatas for 2 German Flutes or Violin with BC.<sup>2</sup> **GIOVANNI**  
**SAMMARTINI** Nottornos in 4 parts for Flute, 2 Violins and Bass<sup>3</sup> • Ens J.  
M. Anciuti;<sup>1</sup> I Fiori Musicali;<sup>2</sup> Ottaviano Tenerani (hpd, cond);<sup>3</sup> Ens Il Rossignolo<sup>3</sup>  
(period instruments) • BRILLIANT 93365 (3 CDs: 212:41)

The idea of devising a set out of three entirely different recordings of two different Sammartinis is a find. Both Giovanni Battista and Giuseppe Francesco Gaspare Melchiorre Baldassare are fine composers who have slipped between the cracks of musical history and deserve more attention from musicians and audiences alike. To assemble these CDs in one group is a wonderful way to introduce the listener to this talented family. Nowadays, the names of the two composers are often

confused, as well as with that of Pietro Sammartini, another contemporary Italian master who, although he shared their last name, was not even related to them. The brothers, whose father was an important oboist in Milan, did well: as dutiful sons, Giovanni and Giuseppe both played the oboe, and in fact Giuseppe achieved fame as one of the very best interpreters of this reed in Europe. Grumpy J. J. Quantz visited Milan in 1726 and wrote a severe assessment of the orchestra, particularly of the wind-players, which he regarded as rather pitiful. He made an exception to Giuseppe Sammartini, whom he considered outstanding. The older Sammartini also received high praise from Frederick the Great's flute teacher: as a composer, he was deemed "not bad." In fact Giovanni Sammartini was more than just not bad: Milan's most celebrated composer, he actively influenced the course of occidental music, gathering the admiration of artists such as J. C. Bach and Haydn. As concerns posterity, he had the bad luck of being a transitional composer, and as such never really received the gratitude deserved for being one of the figures to establish the foundations over which the Classical composers came to build their castles. According to contemporary sources, he was also an accomplished organ-player, and if perhaps not as extraordinary as his brother as an oboist, his abilities were more than passable on that instrument as well. Appropriately, when playing Giuseppe Sammartini's Six Solos for Flute, Violin, or Oboe, op. 13, Ensemble J. M. Anciuti made sure the oboe was well represented, featuring Paolo Pollastri, an oboist with a sweet tone and an engaging musical personality. But they also decided to alternate the solo instruments (flute, violin, and oboe each play two sonatas) on this CD, an interesting option well justified by the title of the collection, and which works in favor of the listener. The sonatas retain their unity, while the change in instrumental color brings a new flavor to each successive work. Besides Paolo Pollastri, Claudio Rufa (flute), Stefano Montanari (violin), Gaetano Nasillo (cello), Alberto Santi (bassoon), and Giovanni Losco (harpsichord) show their intimacy with the style and their good rapport with each other. I was only sorry that there was not a bonus work, including all of the musicians playing together. Maybe in the next CD? Anyway, the six musicians involved are accomplished artists, with consistent, clean tones. Intonation is sometimes less than perfect, but overall there is imagination in their playing, with good inflections, nice contrasts, excellent characterization—the switches from minor to major passages are beautifully solved, as are the oppositions between pride and lyricism, enthusiasm and sorrow. The music itself is full of delightful moments, and shows a composer who knew his trade inside and out. By the way, Joanes Maria Anciuti is certainly a curious choice for the group's name, one that would be thought of only by true "insiders." He was a mysterious Italian instrument-maker who got his reputation by making woodwind instruments of a very good quality, many in ivory. But almost nothing is known about his life, and even his name is probably a pseudonym. More is known about Giuseppe Sammartini's career, which flourished in London, where he achieved great success as a player and composer and reached financial

stability. His chamber music enjoyed immense popularity and outlived him considerably. His set of 12 Sonatas for Two German Flutes (or Violins) with Basso Continuo can be heard in the second CD, performed by ensemble I Fiori Musicali (Maria Giovanni Fiorentino and Marcus Rosa Salva, recorders; Paolo Tognon, bassoon; Pietro Prosser, calichon; and Roberto Loreggian, harpsichord). The choice of recorders over transverse flutes (indicated in the collection's title) is justified by the musicians on the basis of the prevailing tonalities (eight of the 12 sonatas are in F Major, the most characteristic of recorder tonalities, and one is in B<sup>b</sup> Major, again more idiomatic for recorder than flute). Even so, to my ears the timbre suffers. Perhaps I Fiori Musicali could have followed Ensemble J. M. Anciuti's idea of alternating the solo instruments in the CD, as they did with the ones assigned to the bass. In that sense, it was a good option to use the calichon as soloist in the Ninth Sonata, as well as doubling the bass in some of the other ones. The variation in tone color is certainly nice, and the calichon (or mandora, a sort of lute—don't feel ignorant; I did not know it, either) really does add special spice to the mixture. In the long run, however, two recorders (especially, as is the case, when playing only major modes, and almost all in the same major mode) become hard on the ear, and the listener would welcome the respite of the more flexible flute tone (especially in the slow movements), or even the more incisive bite of a violin. Still, the sonatas are well played, with good ensemble phrasing and lively inflections.

Giovanni's music is tackled on the third disc, featuring Ensemble Il Rossignolo (Marica Testi, flute; Maria Paola Cavallini and Raffaele Tisco, violins; Raffaele Sorrentino, cello; and Otaviano Tenerari, conductor and harpsichord). Celebrated during his lifetime, Giovanni Battista was one of the most important figures in Italian music, occupying truly eminent positions in Milan (he was director of music in 11 of the town's churches!). His nocturnos are invariably lovely and full of musical invention, in a style that was frankly modern for his epoch, with Classical features such as syncopated passages and gallant ornaments, fast binary movements and minuet finales. Ensemble Il Rossignolo is a solid group, and the music is performed with enthusiasm and good ensemble fluency.

The occasional raspy tone is not enough to put a damper on the results, nor do the few not-quite-sublime breaths from the flutist (such as the awkward moment 40 seconds into the andante of the Fourth Notturmo). I would have been happier, frankly, with a more daring interpretation, emphasizing the surprises and musical oddities of the compositions. But that is my own idiosyncrasy. Anyone who buys this set will still be able to enjoy the vigor and humor of these works, well projected by Il Rossignolo. And considering that Giovanni apparently had a non-tortured, successful trajectory, and his writing is mostly cheerful and unworried, the more straightforward approach music might well be the best.

In short, the three CDs give a very good panorama of a repertoire that is rarely played. Visual presentation is also good, and the liner texts (respectively by Mariarosa Pollastri, Maria Giovanna Fiorentio, and flutist Marica Testi) are

informative. As has happened before with Brilliant releases, I miss having more information about the musicians involved and mainly about the instruments played. Otherwise, this is definitely recommended! **Laura Rónai**

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**GIOVANNI BATTISTA SAMMARTINI Symphonies: in A, JC 62; in C Minor, JC 9; in D, JC 16; in F, JC 36; in D Minor, JC 23; in C, JC 4 • Kevin Mallon, cond; Aradia Ens. • NAXOS 8.557298 ( 60:23)**

The junior partner of a pair of Milanese Sammartini brothers, Giovanni Battista's symphonic output of 67 works must have served as, at least, a challenge if not an inspiration to Joseph Haydn (who flatly denied the latter). This six-opus period-instrument sampling (pitched, as Naxos is kind enough to inform us, at A=415) opens and closes with late scores that include trumpets and horns respectively, flanking four earlier works for strings and continuo only. *Pace* Schmieder, Köchel, and Deutsch, it apparently took two musicologists to do a proper job of cataloging Sammartini; hence, the JC prefix, denoting, respectively, Newell Jenkins and Bathia Churgin.

These unassuming three-movement rococo works, with typically bracing triple-meter finales, range in length from 6.5 to 14 minutes; they're not profound by any stretch, but they do demonstrate a quality of imagination that transcends the textbook. As one who often finds occasion to tax Vivaldi with want of harmonic originality, I don't find myself having the same difficulty with Sammartini— check out, e.g., the surprising cadential figure that closes the central Andante of the F-Major. (The apparent four-movement complement of the A-Major, by the way, is deceptive; the performance includes two alternate finales derived from different manuscript sources.) u

Given the reported fact that the Aradia Ensemble's 25 (!) previous Naxos releases "all... have received international praise," I hesitate to report that I detect an occasional hint of blattiness to the trumpet attacks in the leading A-Major Symphony. Well, I do; but I'm perfectly willing to write this off as an inherent hazard of the period-instrument territory. In all other respects, I find these renditions commendably stylish. I especially like the extra timbral variety introduced by a reduced instrumental complement in the repeated sections of the D-Minor's central movement; and the solo violin work in the Andante of the D-Major (presumably by Mallon himself) is just delicious. Notorious "repeatophile" that I am, I'm a tad puzzled by the absence of a first-movement exposition repeat in the A-Major; but not having any Sammartini in my meager score collection, I can only infer from the other performances that the said repeat would indeed have

been observed if it were there. The recording acoustic is satisfyingly reverberant without being smudgy; Naxos 's house annotator Keith Anderson does his usual thorough job.

If what you want from a symphony is a meditation on the inexorability of fate or the evils of Stalinism, Sammartini is not your cup of tea. If, on the other hand, you're sufficiently taken with early Haydn to have extended your explorations to, say, Michael Haydn or the sons of Bach (the SOBs, as fondly dubbed by your writer's composition prof), then Sammartini belongs near the top of your look-into-next list. I can claim no listening acquaintance whatsoever with the other Sammartini symphony releases available on the current market (three of them); but I *can* report that two-thirds of them are vastly more expensive than this one, and that all three in aggregate overlap the selections in Mallon's collection by only 50 percent. Thus, if the repertoire piques your fancy, the purchase indicator is green.

**James Carson**

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### **Sammartini Concertos - MusicWeb Review**

#### **Giuseppe SAMMARTINI (1693 - 1751)**

Concerto C major for violoncello piccolo, strings and b.c.

Trio F major for 2 recorders and b.c.

Concerto E flat major for oboe, strings and b.c.

Concerto F major for soprano recorder, strings and b.c.

#### **Giovanni Battista SAMMARTINI (1698-1775)**

Sonata D major for transverse flute, 2 violins and b.c.

Trio D major for 2 transverse flutes and b.c.

Camerata Köln: Michael Schneider / soprano recorder, alto recorder, transverse flute; Sabine Bauer / alto recorder, harpsichord; Karl Kaiser / transverse flute; Hans-Peter Westermann / oboe; Mary Utiger, Ursula Bundies / violins; Hajo Bäß, Claudia Steeb / viola; Rainer Zipperling / violoncello, violoncello piccolo; Nicholas Selo / violoncello; Dane Roberts / violone; Harald Hoeren / harpsichord, organ  
Rec. Germany 2002

**RCA VICTOR CD 05472 77852 2 [59:26]**

I will get the gripes out of the way at the start. The front cover of the CD bears the title *Sammartini Concertos* - two words - each of which is misleading. The first word the - composer - turns out to be two composers for there are works by Giuseppe and Giovanni, the Sammartini brothers (although I have known musicians who thought they were one composer known as G. Sammartini!). The second word which describes the works is wrong (or half right if you like) for there are three concertos on the disc, two trios and a sonata. What could confuse the issue is that

in the 18th century the word *sonata* was sometimes used in its old fashioned sense of ensemble piece and was therefore interchangeable with *concerto*. The notes in the booklet say nothing of this and anyway, the *Sonata in D for flute, two violins and continuo* by Giovanni is indeed just that and his *Trio in D* a straight trio sonata. Another problem is that the works of both brothers were sometimes published in different arrangements. For example, some of Giuseppe's chamber sonatas were re-arranged by the Italian composer, Fernando Barsanti, into concertos. So, already suspicious, I tried to cross reference the works with listings in the Grove Dictionary of Music but was not able to do so with confidence since there is little in the booklet notes to go on.

The notes, poorly translated from German, refer to soprano and alto recorders which would confuse the British (a smallish part of our international readership) who would know these as descant and treble respectively. Also, readers might be led to believe that the concerto for "violoncello piccolo, strings and b.c." has a missing comma and is a piece for cello and piccolo (there's a thought!) rather than for a rare single instrument which is a species of small cello. There is nothing about this instrument nor about what kind of cello is used in the recording.

Having got that out of the way, we have an enjoyable disc of a range of music from two talented and influential brothers who inhabited a transitional period between baroque and early classical. Their career paths were quite different, Giovanni being born and then dying in Milan while Giuseppe eventually settled in bustling London for the last twenty or so years of his life. Giuseppe's more cosmopolitan existence is reflected in his music on the disc which displays a pragmatic ability to adjust his style. The violoncello piccolo concerto, for example, is very italianate, clearly influenced by Vivaldi whereas his delightful oboe concerto, excellently played by Hans-Peter Westermann, is more Handelian in style. His recorder concerto is also very tuneful and is a standard repertoire piece for skilled players. Michael Schneider is a distinguished performer and I thought his playing one of the best things about the disc which otherwise contains renderings that are highly competent but not particularly special. He features also in Giuseppe's *Trio in F major* for 2 recorders which for me was the most enjoyable work in spite of its three movements lasting little more than five minutes. The slow movement with the recorders' clashing semi-tones and tones is exquisitely intense.

Giovanni died a quarter of a century after his brother and his two chamber works here (he does not get a concerto on this disc of "concertos"!) were probably written after his brother's death and are understandably more classical in feel. Both involve transverse flute and I liked the spirited playing in works that I found neatly formed but relatively dull compared with brother Giuseppe's contributions.

**John Leeman**

