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Reference Recording: The Avison's Captivating Corelli Sonatas - David Vernier
ClassicsToday Artistic Quality:10 Sound Quality:10

Although the Op. 6 concerti grossi get all the attention on disc, Arcangelo Corelli's Op. 1 and 3 trio sonatas deserve equal respect. And if you're looking for an ensemble and recording that deliver respectful, not to mention reference-quality performances, you'll find them on this excellent new release from The Avison Ensemble.

The rhythms are appropriately–necessarily–taut, the tempos suitably bright and compatible with their particular movements, the bowed-instrument timbres delightfully tangy and reedy, the plucked strings of the archlute pleasingly snappy. Sonically, the result is a vibrant, full-bodied quality that really lets us feel the special harmonic resonances, particularly scintillating in keys such as F, A, D, and G major (sound clip).

Adhering primarily to the structural formula Slow-Fast-Slow-Fast, Corelli seems to possess an unlimited capacity for invention, especially in the way he so engagingly writes for the two violins, separately but equally in dialogue or sometimes in uniform rhythm, and joined by the cello either in imitation or with a line of its own (sound clip). Hearing these sets of sonatas it's easy to understand why they were so widely popular–"remaining in print throughout the 18th century"–and were so styistically influential and freely imitated.

If you're a violinist, you really want to play them, as they are so perfectly conceived for that instrument, so irresistibly fun and fanciful, musically and technically substantive; and for the listener, it's hard to imagine more agreeable ensemble writing, highlighted by the ever-stimulating conversational interplay. Beyond the trio of primary players, The Avison Ensemble keeps the continuo interesting with a combination of archlute, harpsichord, and organ, and the sound, from a Cambridge church, is representative of this label's best. There are a few other recordings of these works, but in all respects, this one just does it better.

FANFARE REVIEW

CORELLI Concerti grossi, op. 6 • Pavlo Beznosiuk (vn, cond); Avison Ens (period instruments) • LINN 411 (2 CDs: 129:37)

VIVALDI *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione,* op. 8 • Pavlo Beznosiuk (vn, cond); Avison Ens (period instruments) • LINN 365 (2 CDs: 114:10)

HANDEL Concerti grossi, op. 6 • Pavlo Beznosiuk (vn, cond); Avison Ens (period instruments) • LINN 362 (3 CDs: 160:38)

I am covering these three releases in a single review for the following reasons: (1) They arrived together in the same package. (2) They feature the same performing forces. (3) They trace the history of the concerto in the 18th century from its beginnings to its end and are representative of its three phases of development. And (4) while each of these sets is of relatively recent vintage, none of them is literally brand new. The Corelli dates from July 2011; the Vivaldi, from December 2009; and the Handel, from October 2008.

These releases are coming to us as "new" because distribution of the Linn label has been taken over by Naxos of America. I reviewed the Corelli in 36:4 in its SACD format and gave it an urgent recommendation. This time it was sent as a standard CD. The Vivaldi was reviewed by Robert Maxham in 35:4, again as SACDs, the sound of which Maxham found to be one of the more recommendable aspects of the set. Here again, it was sent in standard CD format. Finally, the Handel was reviewed by Ron Salemi in 34:3, also as an SACD set. He gave the release a rave notice, even including it later that year on his Want List.

My only guess as to why these sets are now being sent as regular CDs is that they appear to be selling at greatly reduced prices at ArkivMusic—$16.99 for the two-disc Corelli and Vivaldi sets, and $24.49 for the three-disc Handel set. According to Amazon, the SACD versions are currently unavailable, but the recordings can be had in a variety of high-res download formats direct from Linn. The higher the res, the more you pay.

You could say that chronologically the Avison Ensemble worked its way backwards, for Corelli's 12 Concerti grossi, op. 6, date from circa 1712; Vivaldi's 12 Concertos of op. 8, from 1725; and Handel's 12 Concerti grossi, op. 6, from 1740. Everything of importance that happened within the sphere of the Baroque concerto happened within those approximately 30 years.

Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) is often cited as the first composer of record to establish the concerto grosso as a new musical genre. But Corelli no more came up with the idea solely on his own than Haydn "invented" the string quartet. In both cases, there were precedents. It's just that Corelli and Haydn happened to latch on to the respective ideas of concerto grosso and string quartet and advanced them to a point where they were seen as having the potential for greatness.

In Corelli's case, precedents for concerto grosso-type works are usually attributed to Alessandro Stradella (1639–1682) and Giovanni Lorenzo Gregori (1663–1745). But I strongly suspect that the real antecedents for the concerto grosso lie in the alternating vocal choirs and brass ensembles of Gabrieli and the late Renaissance Venetian school. Already this laid the foundation for the stereophony of a smaller group of players pitted against a larger group, separated spatially, and dialoging back and forth with each other.

If it's facetiously said that Vivaldi wrote one concerto 500 times, along similar lines it could be said that Corelli wrote and rewrote his 12 concerti grossi over and over again until he felt he had polished them to perfection. Born into a wealthy family of

landowners, Corelli took up the violin and became quite proficient at it, up to a point. It has often been observed that due either to a personal distaste for virtuosic exhibitionism or to limitations of his technical abilities, or some combination thereof, "Corelli used only a limited portion of his instrument's capabilities. This may be seen from his writings. The parts for violin very rarely proceed above D on the highest string, sometimes reaching the E in fourth position on the highest string" (Wikipedia). A story that has been repeatedly told is that he refused to play an A on the E string, two octaves above the open A, in the overture to Handel's oratorio, *The Triumph of Time and Truth*, and that he (Corelli) was deeply offended when Handel showed him how it was done.

I don't know who makes these things up, but the story is patently preposterous on the face of it. To begin with, I was very suspicious of the notion that Handel ever wrote such a high note for the violin, especially in an orchestral context. And sure enough, I've just examined the score of the overture online, and the highest note Handel writes for the violins is a D, two octaves above the open D-string, which is exactly the high note (fourth finger in third position on the E-string) that was Corelli's comfortable upper limit. The A above that, which this made-up story speaks of, is already pushing into seventh position territory, and would be rare to find in any orchestral, as opposed to solo, parts of the period.

In any case, the story does serve to portray Corelli as a rather prissy perfectionist and musical pedant, resistant to and disdainful of anything that violated his narrow sense of propriety. Aside from the 12 concerti grossi, which he tinkered with over an extended period, he wrote very little else—three sets of 12 trio sonatas each for two violins and continuo, 12 sonatas for violin and continuo, and a handful of other works. None of them strains the players' technical abilities. To the extent that Corelli retains a place of honor in the pantheon of composers, it's more for his importance as an historical figure than for the profundity or stirring character of his music.

The solo concerto—i.e., a single instrument pitted against an orchestra—was born practically a twin of the concerto grosso—i.e., a small group of instruments (sometimes only two), the concertino, pitted against a larger group of instruments, the ripieno. Giuseppe Torelli (1658–1709) is generally credited with writing the first solo concertos around 1698. Once the idea took root, however, it proliferated like weeds, threatening to crowd out the Corellian model, and no wonder. The solo concerto provided the vehicle players and audiences wanted, giving them precisely the opportunity for brilliant displays of virtuosity that Corelli eschewed. Thousands of solo concertos by 18th-century composers from far and wide soon littered the landscape. Vivaldi alone contributed around 350 for one solo instrument and strings. The solo concerto proved to have the staying power that the concerto grosso didn't, surviving with thousands more throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and right up to the present day.

Vivaldi's set of 12 solo concertos for violin and strings, with the fanciful title of *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione* (The Contest Between Harmony and Invention) is best known for the first four concertos in the set, having their own

title, *The Four Seasons*, which is hands down the composer's most popular work, and one of the most popular "classical music" works of all time. The fifth concerto in the set has also gained its own popularity, thanks to its title, *La tempesta di mare* (The Storm at Sea). As for the remaining seven concertos, they're all choice Vivaldi but probably not as widely known.

As to the performances by the Avison Ensemble, I think I have to agree with Robert Maxham that the playing is a little raw and rough around the edges, and I'm not a big fan of some of the embellishments and interpolations that Pavlo Beznosiuk, in his role as solo violinist, adds to his parts.

I'd have expected to find more versions of *Il cimento*, complete, than are currently listed by ArkivMusic under the collective title of the set. Not counting this one, there are only four others, and they're all with leading period instrument groups. But that's deceptive because if you drill down under the individual op. 8 concertos, you will find wonderful old modern instrument versions by I Musici with Felix Ayo and I Solisti Veneti with Claudio Scimone. Of course, nowadays anyone who would purchase those has to request that they be shipped in an unmarked, brown paper mailer for fear of the HIP police.

Handel's 12 Concerti grossi, op. 6, represent the end of the trail for the concerto grosso in the 18th century. They also happen to be the most inventive, most vibrant, most glorious, and most enduring examples of the genre ever written, period. (I leave out of this judgment Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, which are concerti grossi of a different order and apart from the line of development that led from Corelli to Handel.)

At this point, I must make a confession. Handel's op. 6 sits near the very top of my list of all-time favorite works. I find no music as perennially invigorating and revitalizing as these concertos. I never tire of listening to them. They are so full with ever fresh ideas, every concerto, and every movement of every concerto, holding such a wealth of shapely melodies and the cleverest twists and turns in harmony and rhythm.

Modern instrument recordings on CD by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, both the Marriner and Iona Brown versions, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the English Chamber Orchestra with Raymond Leppard, I Musici, and the Munich Bach Orchestra with Karl Richter sit on my shelf. On LP, I still have a three-disc set on Epic with the Handel Festival Orchestra, Halle, conducted by Horst-Tanu Mrgraf, which must be pretty rare. And on reel-to-reel tape, I just relistened to the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis led by August Wenzinger. But I haven't overlooked period instrument versions either. I have Pinnock conducting the English Concert and Simon Standage conducting the Collegium Musicum 90.

I have to say that I find something to love in all of them, but this one by the Avison Ensemble is truly special. I'd not heard it when it was first released and originally reviewed by Salemi in 34:3, but I can hear now why he put it on his Want List. The playing of the Avison Ensemble is terrific. The ensemble of 4-4-2-2 with reinforcing string bass and harpsichord sounds even larger and fuller than the 14 players might lead one to expect. That might be due to the capacious sounding

acoustic of the Jubilee Theatre, St Nicholas's Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne, where the recording was made. But that notwithstanding, we are not dealing here with a one-to-a-part realization. The forces are quite adequate, and there are zero telltale signs of the consumptive, aspirating sounds so often associated with period instruments.

What particularly struck me about these performances, however, was Beznosiuk's highly imaginative but not eccentric readings. If you never realized what a sense of humor Handel had and how wickedly funny he could be, just listen to the concluding *Allegro* of the Concerto No. 6 in G Minor. Until I heard the Avison play it, it never occurred to me that it's almost a parody of Rameau's *La poule* (The Hen). The way the players turn the triplet, da-da-da, followed by the long-short, dah-da, with an accent on the "dah" and a diminuendo on the "da," you can just see the pullet scraping at the ground. But Handel's hen is a classy chick compared to Rameau's, a proper English bird unknowingly on her way to the King's table. I couldn't help but laugh out loud. Of all my Handel op. 6s, I think this shall be my favorite.

For the Corelli and Handel sets, I doubt you will do better. The Vivaldi set I'm not so keen on, especially since you're apt to find the *Four Seasons* part of it better done in other versions. **Jerry Dubins**

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CORELLI Concerti Grossi Op 6

The Avison Ensemble play the most famous Op 6 set of all - GRAMOPHONE REVIEW

Corelli's reputation as one of the presiding geniuses of the early Baroque is extraordinary for being based on such a small output of work, all of it written for instruments, consisting of just six opus numbers, each of which contains 12 works. Few works of the period can match Corelli's Op 6 Concerti grossi in popularity, something of which the composer was clearly aware: beginning in his twenties, Corelli obsessively worked and reworked them throughout his lifetime, refusing to allow them to be published. It was only one year after his death that they were finally brought out in Amsterdam; subsequently they went through more than 10 editions in some 20 years, not to mention innumerable adaptions and rearrangements in the course of the 18th century. Often styled as the foundation stone of the concerto grosso medium, the pieces of Op 6 are structured around the opposition of solo concertino and larger ripieno groups of instruments, an arrangement that was already established in Rome by the time Corelli arrived there.

The hallmark of Corelli’s style in these pieces is seemingly endless invention and variety of expressive means, and this is the main challenge in performance. In terms of recordings there is stiff competition here, with the now quite old if iconic recording of Trevor Pinnock and the English Concert well ahead of the field, but these new performances are certainly part of the competition, supple and elegant, perfectly in harmony with the suave if at times austere character of the music and, above all, architecturally shaped with subtlety and finesse. Improvised ornamention has been added with discretion and care, and the sense of ensemble is faultless and, in the faster movements, breathtakingly impressive.

Corelli: Concerti Grossi Op. 6 Review by James Manheim - AllMusic - 3 1/2*/5*

London's Avison Ensemble, true to its name, has devoted itself mostly to recording works by lesser-known composers of the Baroque era. Arcangelo Corelli does not fit that classification, but his Op. 6 Concerti Grossi (not really a set, for they were composed at different times, for different purposes, and only published together) are better known in parts than as a whole, with the so-called "Christmas Concerto," Op. 6/8, and its singsong pastoral idyll the best known of all. The Avison Ensemble has undertaken to record all of Corelli's small-ensemble music. Some might prefer these pieces in smaller doses, but there's also a lot to be gained by working one's way through the whole group, which was popular enough to influence both Vivaldi and Handel, several decades later. Corelli's writing is more contrapuntal than that of either of those composers, with many examples of his characteristic chains of suspensions. The Avison Ensemble under leader Pavlo Beznosiuk avoids the energetic attacks of contemporary Italian groups, with Beznosiuk cultivating a sweet, fluid sound. He makes the counterpoint clear but minimizes the solo-group contrast that is at the heart of the concerto grosso form. The end result is an hour or more of pleasant listening that doubtless possesses many of the virtues that made Corelli popular among the English in the first place, faithfully captured by Linn's Super Audio recording.