

François COUPERIN (1668-1733) - MusicWeb Review

Complete Works for Harpsichord

Carole Cerasi (harpsichord)

rec. 2016 and 2017, Surrey & Hertfordshire, England

METRONOME METCD1100 [10 CDs: 694:33]

The twenty-seven Livres of François Couperin's harpsichord pieces for many mark the pinnacle of French baroque keyboard music, and this recording is certainly one of the best sets currently available. Like Olivier Baumont's recording on Erato (9029563455), Carole Cerasi here presents *l'Art de toucher le clavecin* on a single disc, whereas Michael Borgstede positions the 'eight preludes and an allemande' split throughout his set for Brilliant (95250/9). I must say that I find them much more rewarding when presented as a set, but Borgstede's performance is still very good. For the purpose of this review, I will refer mainly to those two recordings, as my other recording by Christophe Rousset, who also presents the works on Harmonia Mundi (2901442.52), has long been deleted and second-hand copies now fetch silly prices – but that is still my benchmark set.

These pieces, as Olivier Baumont states, are "often more enigmatic than one might think, but at the same time sometimes simpler than they appear... They resist traditional analysis just as much as they hold out against a poetical explanation of their titles. The harpsichordist finds himself face to face with a very real magician, a composer both conscious and certain of his ability to manipulate our sensibilities and our emotions." This leaves them interpretatively open and subject to changes of style; Cerasi, Baumont and Borgstede all present them in their own, unique way, and there are particular pieces which I prefer played by each of the players. However, as a whole, I find Carole Cerasi's set the most satisfying. For me, it has a greater sense of poise and elegance than either of the other two, although Baumont pushes her close at times.

Carole Cerasi opens the set with *l'Art de toucher le clavecin*, thereby using it as a kind of herald for the magnificence of the four Livres that follow, which means that the programme does reflect compositional order, as it was published in 1716, between the first and second Livres; despite this, it still works well. Both Baumont and Rousset place it correctly, but in my opinion, both positions work well and are preferable to Borgstede's placement. After this, Cerasi largely places the Ordres in

order, with only the short *Quatrième Ordre* being placed on disc two, between the second and third Ordres to facilitate the logistics of not splitting the Troisième Ordre between two discs, so this and the fifth Ordres fit on the following disc, which for me is preferable.

Her performance is effortlessly stylish and elegant, her well-paced tempos ensuring that she never sounds rushed, so that she can easily bring out that "enigmatic" nature of the music. I have admired Carole Cerasi as a performer for some time now; her playing on the award-winning disc of the harpsichord suites of Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (MET CD 1026) is quite wonderful, as are her CPE and JS Bach discs (MET CD 1032 and 1078) (which, sadly, I loaned to a friend never to see again - the perils of lending out discs). This present set has the same excellent quality as those earlier discs. While there are individual pieces, such as *Les baricades mystérieuses*, which have become very well known and a staple of both harpsichord and piano recital discs, as well as various other arrangements, it is the more unusual and unknown pieces which display the true art of the composer. *Le Rossignol-en-amour – Double du Rossignol* at the beginning of the *Quatorzième Orde* deserve to be better known, and here it gets a superb performance, and the much faster, dancelike tempo of *Le Linote-éfarouchée* which follows demonstrates the variety even of pieces from the same Ordre.

There are magnificent performances of individual pieces throughout this set, such as *La Lugubre*, *Sarabande* in the Troisième Ordre, the *Musétede Choisi – Muséte de Taverni* in the Quinzième Ordre, and *La Superbe ou la Forqueray* from the Dix-Septième Ordre, to name but three; indeed, every Ordre contains specific pieces which could be called highlights, but in reality the set in its entirety is a winner. Overall, this set is the strongest of the three available sets I own; although Baumont and Borgstede have their moments, it is the consistently excellent interpretation and playing of Carole Cerasi that wins the day. Nonetheless, I still find Christophe Rousset to have the edge over the other three recordings, if only slightly when compared to Carole Cerasi, not just as a consequence of his inclusion of the harpsichord version of the *Concerts Royaux* or the disc of works for two harpsichords with William Christie, but also because of the greater panache in his playing. However, as that is no longer available, it is this Carole Cerasi set which must be the top recording, especially when you take into account the excellent sound quality, the choice of the instruments, which are detailed in the booklet, and the brief but excellent notes by Nicolas Anderson.

Stuart Sillitoe

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This set from Carole Cerasi is the most recommendable of currently available recordings.

F. Couperin: Complete works for harpsichord - EarlyMusicReview

Carole Cerasi with James Johnstone harpsichord & Reiko Ichise gamba
Metronome METCD 1100 (10 CDs in a box)

To record and release the whole of Couperin's seminal Harpsichord oeuvre is an astonishing act of faith and dedication. The lock-down times give amateurs (in the French sense) the chance to get to grips with and reappraise this amazing corpus of music which more than any that I know gives us a feel for what makes French music of the late seventeenth century so very distinctive.

Apart from *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin* (1716), Couperin's pieces are arranged in twenty-seven Ordres, each grounded in a particular key, but avoiding the tight structure of the Bach suites, where the formal series of dances provide a recognised structure. With Couperin we are in a looser, more wayward structure of movements with a more programmatic feel: the fascinating titles given to some pieces reveal the background in a theatrical imagination where reality is miniaturised, life-changing experiences immortalised in particularity and the trivial glimpse turned into an epigrammatic memorial. While *Les Languettes-Tendres* in the Sixième Ordre is a classic bit of descriptive mood music, no-one really knows to what *Les Baricades Mystérieuses* refers. *La Triomphante* that opens the Dixième Ordre could not rattle the sabres more, while *Le Petit-Rien* is just what it says – a few insouciant bars of delight, ending the Quatorzième Ordre, with its birdsong pieces and the softly jangling bell-like notes of *Le Carillon de Cythère*.

Some of the most evocative pieces are written in the resonant tenor range which is so characteristic of Couperin's style, like *Les Ondes* that concludes the Cinquième Ordre. But what makes or mars any recording of Couperin's music are two factors: first, the player's familiarity with the keyboard style of the period, where ornaments and their languid execution as well as the conventions of notation are so important for whether the playing feels French and second, the choice of instrument(s). For those who would like to sample Cerasi's skills and sensibilities, I suggest they turn to CD 9.7-11, where they will hear not only *Le Point du jour*, *L'Anguille* and the *Menuets Croisés* but also her skill and immaculate sense of timing in the halting, sliding *Le Croc-en-jambe* and the magician's sleight of hand in *Les Tours de Passe-passe*. I was brought up on Kenneth Gilbert's recordings of Couperin, made in the 1970s, and it is largely his editions of the Ordres that I still use. But Cerasi's playing has a grace, a flexibility and a subtle freedom, devoid of tiresome and faddish mannerisms, that I admire greatly. Cerasi is ably partnered in those pieces requiring two clavecins by her producer in this outstanding enterprise, James Johnstone.

For the instruments, she chooses a series of harpsichords, beginning with the Ruckers of 1636 that underwent a makeover by Henri Hemsch of Paris in 1763 in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands and ending with a splendid Antoine Vater of 1738 that seems to live in a private house in Ireland – now there's a ray of hope in a

dark world! The instruments – including the modern ones by Philippe Humeau (1989) after Vater 1738 and Keith Hill (2010) after a Taskin of 1769 – are all suitably French sounding and are all pitched at 415. I haven't wearied of the wonderful sounds she coaxes from each harpsichord – so different in the languorous slow movements and so bright and fiery at times in the rondeaux, even after listening to the 10 CDs several times, and I don't think they could be bettered: they certainly sing out better than those used by Kenneth Gilbert in the 1970s. Each instrument is illustrated in the accompanying notes, although ideally I would have liked more information on a website if not in the booklet, particularly on the 1738 Vater from Ireland, which sounds quite wonderful. Nor is there information on the temperament used: the keys are delightfully differentiated – the Eb and C minor are particularly dark and velvety, so my guess is that it is a sixth or fifth comma meantone system. But I trust Cerasi's scholarship and research to know what was likely in Paris in the first quarter of the 18th century.

The main content of the booklet is an excellent essay, 21 columns long, by Nicholas Anderson, in both English and French. It manages to set Couperin's oeuvre in its historical, visual and theatrical context, alert us to some of the more recent scholarship and writing and give us a feel for the distinctive nature of each Ordre – no mean achievement in this highly condensed format.

Each CD has a card sleeve with the content and timings of each piece listed on the back, and I am amazed and delighted in equal measure that it has been possible to issue the whole of this project for under £45.00. I don't expect ever to hear a more thoughtful and intense yet playful and elegant version of Couperin's great works, and Carole Cerasi has us all in her debt. Buy it at once, even if you've never heard more than a handful of these works before. This is all pure gold, and I know no better introduction to the French style than this.

David Stancliffe