

"Giants"

"Giants" is an experience conceived on the model of the old master instrumentalists and improvisers, who were capable of adapting all kinds of music to the needs of the moment. A remarkable fact is revealed straight away – that the transposition removes from these pieces none of their original importance or their evocative power.

As for the title "Giants", we have chosen it because the composers which we have selected are truly musical giants. Monteverdi indeed began the Baroque era, and Bach brought it to an end 150 years later, and both of them have left us masterpieces of immense artistic value.

The "divine" Claudio largely composed vocal music, his favourite domain. His capacity for probing the depths of the human soul in musical terms (having a complete knowledge of the "*affekts*") had no limits. A virtuoso manipulator of emotions, Monteverdi could move immediately from laughter to reflection or to tears. This expertise is supported by a perfect mastery of counterpoint, by the richness of the ornamentation, and the choices which always combine the most original sound with the incredible abundance of masterpieces of the highest quality (which can certainly be compared to Bach).

We have transcribed here a few pieces from his most celebrated work, L'Orfeo, of which the ritornellos and the instrumental sections lend themselves better to transcription than is usual for this kind of composition. The two choruses "Ahi! Caso acerbo" and "E la virtute un raggio", stripped of their words, acquire a remarkable clarity and transparency, displaying Monteverdi's knowledge of counterpoint. The aria "Qual honor di te sia degno" is treated as a small madrigal; the lute takes the vocal part, which is progressively developed with virtuoso variations, while the harp, as well as assuming the traditional basso continuo rôle, answers the lute with brief ritornellos.

On the other hand, the work produced from the two masterpieces of Bach are from a completely different genre. These works were meant to be played on a hybrid instrument, the "Lautenwerk" (or lute-harpsichord), a kind of large lute with a keyboard and strung with gut, which, Bach thought, should combine the technical facility of the harpsichord with the deep sonority of the lute. The result of the experiment is not known, as no example of such an instrument has been saved. It only survives in the sketches and plans of the organ builder Hildebrandt.

These works can only be performed on the lute with important modifications. Moreover, in some parts (such as the double of the gigue BWV 997), the treble line is mysteriously notated (figured) outside the register, with octave chords which the lute does not possess. We have distributed such voices between the lute and the harp, making completely clear the transparent structure of these compositions. This combination of sounds indeed assures a correct balance between virtuosity and expressiveness, combining the warmth and tenderness of

the lute's middle register with the brilliant treble sounds of the triple harp. The doubling of the bass also creates an excellent harmonic support.

In the end, it is not a question of exact transcriptions, although the notes written by Bach are all retained and remain in the register which the composer wanted. Let us allow the listener, who is free of preconceptions, judge the value of the experience. We think that this is not only worthy of interest, but also that it provides a clarity as revelatory as a text, and that it is very gratifying from the artistic point of view.

Let us come now to the third genius on this disc: Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa, with his aura as a mad nobleman and as an assassin. He is without any doubt one of the most interesting and most extreme experimenters in the history of music. His attempts to break away from the formal limits of the madrigal in order to increase expressiveness often borders on a surprising eccentricity.

In the "Canzon Francese del Principe", the first of two instrumental compositions recorded here, the quite regular contrapuntal sections alternate with fioriture bordering on "panic", that is to say which abandon the metric, melodic and harmonic structures which govern composition (moreover in a very unstable way). This results in a sort of written out improvisation, which certainly reflects the melancholic and profoundly depressive spirit of the composer (let us remember that Gesualdo also took his own life while still young, plagued by a mysterious delirium and self-destructive tendencies)

The "Gagliarda del Principe" is only a sketch, a brief *canovaccio*, but it does not lack unusual chromaticism. This forms the basis for the improvisation realised on the lute, while the harp performs the score in a conventional fashion.

The two madrigals ("Beltà poiché t'assenti" and "Ahi, disperata vita") have become here songs without words, which reveal – as with Monteverdi – some structural aspects, which inevitably the song tends to evade with expressive declamation.

Our version in no way pretends to be a substitute for the original. Rather it constitutes an inventory of it, a kind of "scan", which helps us to understand the tormented and despairing personality of the composer better.

Luca Pianca, March 2009

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