

HANK KNOX

Harpsichord

Reviews of Recordings

Frescobaldi, *Affetti musicali*

One can understand how the keyboard music of early Baroque composer Girolamo Frescobaldi anticipates Bach in its systematic exploitation of available resources, and still be left cold by the experience of listening to it. This little disc by Montreal harpsichordist Hank Knox, a student of Kenneth Gilbert, does unusually well at the task of bringing Frescobaldi alive. Knox chooses a diverse set of works, more desirable and more true to what a Renaissance keyboardist would have done in a concert in a noble household than recordings that plow through one or more of Frescobaldi's published sets. Knox brings out contrasts in the longer toccatas and hexachord pieces (pieces based on the subject *ut re mi fa sol la*), settling into an alternation of contrapuntal canzonas and dances in the middle of the program. He saves for last a work that is virtuosic both technically and intellectually, the *Cento Partie sopra passacaglia* of 1637, a large ground-bass piece with elements of both the *passacaglia* and the *chaconne*. This piece has some striking harmonic clashes that are intensified in the quarter-comma meantone tuning Knox employs. One wonders whether the equal temperament he suggests as an alternative might have been what was actually intended, but the work as he plays it stretches the ears and then lets them return partway to normal. The harpsichord itself has an interesting story. Built in 1677, the instrument somehow crossed the Atlantic, apparently came into the possession of James McNeill Whistler (it appears in several of his paintings), and ended up in a Cambridge, MA, antique shop in the 1950s. Rescued by harpsichord builder Frank Hubbard, it was acquired by Gilbert, sent back to Europe for a time, and finally returned to Montreal. It seems beautifully suited to the explosive style Knox brings to this music, which can easily be recommended as a basic Frescobaldi disc.

—James Mannheim, allmusic.com

D'Anglebert: *Pièces de clavecin*

EMCCD-7759

Quebecois harpsichordist Hank Knox makes a virtue out of the supposed shortcomings of the music of J. Henry d'Anglebert, a court composer at Versailles in the late seventeenth century. The harpsichord suite selections heard here were published in 1689, and they have neither the majesty of d'Anglebert's predecessors nor the intensity of his successor Couperin. The "clavecytherium" mentioned and pictured on the cover is a little less unusual than the imposing name suggests; it is a vertical-standing harpsichord whose purpose was unclear. Annotator Yves Beaupré dismisses without explanation the idea that it might have been intended as a space-saver, but the rooms at Versailles, despite the scale of the whole, are not large. Each of the three suites excerpted here begins with a prelude in free rhythm and a quasi-improvised style. Knox's notes go into quite a bit of detail about these, touching on such matters as how d'Anglebert's notation differs from that used by other composers. He also helps the listener put the music in context in more general ways. His portrait of evening music-making at Versailles could serve as a useful corrective for players and engineers who mike Baroque harpsichords closely and try to create a severe atmosphere of quiet: the music room, he points out, competed for attention with those devoted to dancing, gambling, and, of course, the buffet. "Those in attendance were invited to drift from room to room," he writes, "partaking of all the offerings." His playing and the associated engineering emphasize

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the lightness and melodicism of d'Anglebert's suites, which several times (at least in these excerpts) present two of the same dance in a row, in contrasting tempos and moods. The notes go into detail about d'Anglebert's influence as a codifier of ornamentation (which touched J.S. Bach, among others), and there's a certain grace in Knox's playing that comes from deep familiarity with ornamentation procedures. Not an essential purchase, but a release of plenty of interest for those whose acquaintance with the French Baroque keyboard style runs beyond the casual.

—James Manheim, *allmusic.com*, November 2008

D'Anglebert: Pièces de clavecin

D'Anglebert: Pièces de clavecin (early-music.com EMCCD-7759, rec 2003) by Hank Knox breaks new ground by using an upright harpsichord (or clavicytherium) built by Yves Beaupré in Montreal in 2002 after a late 1760s instrument of Albert Delin (1712–71). The novelty has more to do with the shape of the instrument than with the maker, as Kenneth Gilbert recorded D'Anglebert's solo harpsichord music on a 1768 Delin in 1973. Knox's performance abounds with vitality, and he extracts a range of timbres from this single-keyboard instrument, enough to bring out the different characters. I particularly admire his skill of subtly varying the speed of the ornaments and the spreading of the chords whilst maintaining a rock solid, yet bouncy, rhythm.

—David Chung, *Early Music*, November 2005

D'Anglebert: Pièces de clavecin

Hank Knox has a well-cultivated feel for his repertoire and there is a real sense of enjoyment in his playing, this understanding and enthusiasm being also communicated in his helpful notes.

—David Hansell, *Early Music Review* (United Kingdom), March 2004

Handel Domestic Opera

Arrangements of Baroque opera for home use remain a little-explored field, but, as with opera in other eras prior to the advent of recording, they appeared in substantial numbers. One British publisher, Walsh, issued 11 volumes of Handel arrangements for solo keyboard, wrote Canadian harpsichordist Hank Knox in his excellent booklet notes (in French and English) for the present release, and many of those went into multiple printings.

This disc gives a sampling, although it's not clear how many of the pieces are those issued by Walsh. Several come from suites (charmingly misspelled "suits" in the original publication) by one William Babbell, combining versions of Handelian opera arias (many from the highly successful *Rinaldo*) with preludes of his own composition. Other arrangements may have been done by Handel himself.

The entire program is both entertaining and uniformly fascinating. The revelation is the degree of ornamentation that appears in these arrangements. Sample the famed "Lascio ch'ia pianga" from *Rinaldo* (track 4), which seems to get an extra "i" in the track list, at least as far as one can tell with the evil reversed type. The stately melody is not just varied in repetitions, it is heavily encrusted in ornaments from the start. What this means about vocal practice isn't clear. Perhaps the ornamenta-

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tion is specific to keyboard music, and perhaps it's even specific to Babel, who was the recipient of a magnificently snarky critical evaluation from Charles Burney (reproduced in the booklet). But it shows at the very least how flexible the conception of a basic Baroque melody could be. Most extreme of all is the 11-minute elaboration on "Vo far guerra" (track 19), also from Rinaldo. This is not just a keyboard adaptation or ornamented version of the aria, but a full-fledged virtuoso fantasy that, as much as any other surviving piece of documentation, supports the old saw about Baroque music and jazz having a lot in common.

Babell uses the aria merely as a point of departure for cadenza-like displays based on the melodic material. Knox makes the intriguing suggestion that this piece could have inspired the unexpected harpsichord cadenza in J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, with J.C. Bach the conduit for the publication.

Another intriguing aspect of the album is the collection of harpsichords used, all drawn from a single English collection. The instrument by Swiss-English builder Burkat Shudi and Johannes Broadwood, from 1770, would soon face competition from the up-and-coming fortepianos produced by their own firm and others. It included various devices for generating dynamic contrasts, several of which are employed here in Knox's colorful, kinetic performances. An excellent job all around from Knox and the early-music.com label, which has been successfully drawing on the large pool of top-notch talent available in the Montreal area.

—James Manheim, allmusic.com

Domestic Opera

Early-Music.com EMDC 7770

Anyone who has had the pleasure of perusing the Hall Handel Collection at the Princeton university Library knows the vastness of the musical world spun off of the original works from the master's pen, including various volumes of opera arias arranged for flute and continuo. Canadian Hank Knox offers listeners a view into various opera arrangements (from Rinaldo, Il pastor fido, Semele, Radamisto) for solo harpsichord, an area that has been little explored on disc. The most striking items are certainly those arranged by William Babell (c.1690-1723); Burney says these solos are "showy and brilliant," but at the same time, idle and vain. I go with the former — any translation from one medium to another should take advantage of the positive qualities of the new medium, and Babell certainly does so, particularly with the six pages of flashy arpeggios and runs that climax "Vo' far guerra". It would be difficult for the most capable castrato to match this for sheer vulgar display.

Knox, founding member of Ensemble Arion and director of the early music program at McGill University, has a few prior solo outings to his credit, including recitals of Frescobaldi and D'Anglebert. He is brilliantly fleet of finger and presents charming performances of these morsels. An added bonus is the chance to hear three different English harpsichords from the second half of the 18th century belonging to the Benton Fletcher collection of Fenton House, London: a 1752 Kirckman, a 1761 Shudi, and a 1770 Shudi and Broadwood.

—Tom Moore, Early Music America