

Early Music Newsletter posted by Neville Olliffe

## CD Comment

**Bach & Abel:** Shaun Ng (viola da gamba) and Diana Weston (square piano & harpsichord). Sonatas by John Christian Bach & Carl Friedrich Abel. CD Wirripang, Wirr 104

What I looked forward to in this recording was hearing the c 1820s Broadwood square piano. This instrument, housed at St John's College at Sydney University, is in remarkable condition. I had the opportunity of hearing it played a little while back but at the last minute, unfortunately wasn't able to attend. Broadwood square pianos were a popular import during the first 60 years of the colony. Although many might still be in existence locally, few are in acceptable playable condition.

In this recording of three sonatas each by J C Bach (d 1782, youngest son of J S Bach) and Carl Abel (d 1787), the compositions date from the era where the piano was a popular and developing instrument. J C, known as the London Bach, wrote around 40 piano concertos. Abel, a German and player of bass viol, composed largely for viola da gamba with continuo. However, for all this attention to the square piano, one each of both the Bach and Abel sonatas that are performed employ harpsichord. Thus, not only can we compare the compositional styles - the solo instrument with continuo and the newer 'duet' style - we have comparison between the instruments.

In the disk's opening work, the J C Bach Sonata in F Major (B 6b), the beginning allegro movement is arresting as the piano supplies a fresh, joyous attitude, quite infectious beside the regular harpsichord sound to which 18th century patrons were accustomed. The disk's booklet points out a tone distinction between the top end, middle and base of the square piano, but what I also considered was the sound likeness between the lower end of the piano and bottom end of the gamba, the instruments similarity producing a rich bass, and then their tones diverging as one or the other ascends to the higher strings.

Returning to the F Major Sonata, the allegro is the longest movement on the disk - it is light, bright and one to be savoured. The rondeaux is similar but comfortably plodding and relaxed. This is my favourite sonata of the disk.

In Bach's other piano sonata, F Major Sonata (B 15b), it is again noticeable that the parts for piano and gamba are well integrated. The work's two allegrettos are pretty, the second being more energetic but short, and leaving the listener still hungry.

Bach's remaining work, Sonata for Harpsichord and Gamba in G Major (B 4b), shows the harpsichord as producing a sound more crisp than the piano, and allowing the gamba space for appreciation of its characteristic sighing ability. In the work's second movement, the delicate harpsichord and more serious gamba provide a lovely union. The introduction of a passage using the buff stop provides a reminder of the harpsichord's alternative unique sound, its beauty and appeal.

In considering the three sonatas by Carl Abel, the first movement of each is an adagio. To our 20th and 21st century ears, sad or solemn introductions possibly don't suit our expectations. Abel however does supply some very appealing music. The allegro of his Sonata in G Major for Viola da Gamba and Basso A2-52, is delightfully skipping, the gamba versatile and cello-like in its behaviour. Again, as with the Bach, the Broadwood piano noticeably delivers the same tone integration with the gamba at the bottom end. The vivace movements in both this sonata and the A2-53 are more relaxed than one might expect, but I find life and appeal in the allegros.

If I were to pit one composer against the other, J C Bach would have to come out the favourite. As for the Broadwood against harpsichord... well, for their day, I rate the instruments evenly but I think Bach has the better understanding of the piano and it is evident in these sonatas.

The performance by Diana and Shaun is most professional and delightful, comfortably illustrating the qualities of the instruments, the composers and the works themselves. Early 19th century Australians might well have been trying out their new Broadwood square pianos with music by these composers.

Definitely recommended!