

GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

EARLY KEYBOARD RARITIES

Philip Kennicott listens to a trio of recordings of Baroque keyboard works played on period-appropriate instruments



Yago Mahúgo presents French music from around the turn of the 18th century

The strongest of three recent releases from Brilliant Classics, all devoted to keyboard music performed on historically appropriate instruments, turns out to be the recording that documents the least well-known composer. Sebastian de Albero (1722-56), whose career overlapped with both the older Domenico Scarlatti and the younger Antonio Soler, is proved here worthy of comparison to both. Harpsichordist **Alejandro Casal** focuses on one of two of Albero's keyboard collections, the novel and engaging *Obras para clavicordio*, in which the composer mixes free-form recercatas, extended fugues and binary-form sonatas into substantial and historically self-conscious tripartite suites. The recercatas are unmeasured and improvisatory, the fugues dense and sometimes astonishingly long (some lasting 10-12 minutes), the sonatas engaging and spirited, and all of this is colourfully infused with many of the 'Hispanic' touches and rollicking virtuosity that make Scarlatti's sonatas so infinitely pleasing.

Casal is a fine player, vibrant, sensitive and idiomatic, and not at all afraid of the more bumptious irruptions of ornamental dissonance and sharply snapped rhythms that characterise Iberian keyboard music of the time. He brings fluent rhetorical order to the unmeasured ruminations of the recercatas, rigour to the fugues and imagination and colour throughout, especially in the sonatas that complete each of these six hybrid works.

Yago Mahúgo's pairing of suites and miscellaneous short works by Clérambault and Marchand brings together two composers whose major harpsichord works were written just before or after the turn of the 18th century. They prefigure the rising generation of François Couperin, and later Rameau, with detectable echoes of Louis Couperin and d'Anglebert. Neither was a prolific composer for the instrument: Clérambault is best known for his cantatas and only composed the two harpsichord suites included here, plus a short prelude also attributed to him; Marchand was one of the premier organists of his day and wrote only two suites plus a handful of character pieces for the harpsichord.

There is a somewhat severe metrical regularity throughout Mahúgo's playing, even in unmeasured preludes. In the Marchand suites, this is felt as an occasionally appealing stateliness but it often borders on the rigid. Mahúgo's instrument is a modern reproduction based on the 1638 Ruckers, with a very sweet upper manual and a warm but piquant overall tone. His ornamentation is proper and well executed but lacks the fluidity and character of other harpsichordists in this repertoire, most notably Christophe Rousset, whose pairing of Rameau and Marchand (Ambronay, 10/12) offers exceptionally appealing performances of the latter's suites. Rousset's ornamentation is never cluttered or rushed, though it is sometimes combustible; and it serves a more integral and organic purpose,

propelling musical ideas forwards rather than merely underscoring or highlighting them. Andreas Staier has also recorded the Clérambault suite in C minor on his exploration of Baroque melancholy (*Harmonia Mundi*, 5/13), and that reading is also more satisfying than Mahúgo's.

Finally, **Andrea Coen** gathers together the complete keyboard variations of CPE Bach, ranging from pleasing small-scale sets for didactic purposes to larger, more ambitious collections that explore the brilliant extremes of the composer's musical range. Beyond the 12 Variations on the hit tune 'Les folies d'Espagne', most of these works remain relatively little known and few of them have the currency of the 'Prussian' Sonatas of 1742 or the 'Württemberg' Sonatas of 1744. But there are riches aplenty (the 'Folies d'Espagne' set is justly popular with players), and the endearing and sometimes shocking idiosyncrasies of CPE are evident throughout. This recording follows important releases during or close to the 300th anniversary of the composer's death in 2014, including Ana-Marija Markovina's suave (sometimes too much so) traversal of the complete keyboard works on modern piano (*Hänssler Classic*, 3/15), which included the variations interspersed rather than gathered together.

Coen is sympathetic to the mix of control and wilfulness that makes CPE's music so thrilling but his *fortepiano*, a modern reproduction based on the Gottfried Silbermann instrument of 1749, wants a bit of taming. Coen's accentuation of musical extremities is admirable but the instrumental palette isn't quite sufficient to ensure that all of them will be beautiful. Long immersion in this double-disc set mitigates the impact of some of the more jarring contrasts and the cumulative effect is a sense of wonder at Bach's range and daring. But this is the rare CPE Bach recording where you may feel the performer's sense of the music needs to be shrunk to fit within the parameters of what is possible on his instrument. **G**

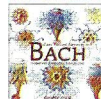
THE RECORDINGS



Albero Keyboard Works
Alejandro Casal
Brilliant © 95187



Clérambault. Marchand Kybd Wks
Yago Mahúgo
Brilliant © 94790



CPE Bach Complete Kybd Variations
Andrea Coen
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