

on the passing of the old year, contains exactly 365 notes. How could anybody dare to alter that? Handel, by contrast, often left only sketches of pieces, and they require considerable additions to give them the best effect.

Further, there is the fact that this music is so complex just as it appears in the score that it already has too many notes. Many of Bach's contemporaries thought so, including his sons—especially CPE. Adding even more would make it even less accessible than it already is for many people.

I fully realize that I am simply a critic, not a policeman. There are no rules or laws to be enforced, and I would be the last to try to stifle creativity. The reader should listen and decide whether Koopman's approach works.

BLAKELY

BACH: *Solo Violin Sonatas & Partitas*

Lara St John—Ancalagon 132 [2 SACD] 126 min

Lara St John's first CD, containing Bach's Partita 2 and Sonata 3, was one of the first that I reviewed for ARG (Nov/Dec 1996). Since then I have eagerly awaited her complete set. Here it is, and she does not disappoint us.

As anyone knows who is familiar with this music, the first movement is the Adagio of Sonata 1, the most difficult movement in the whole set to interpret. St John recorded this earlier with her peerless set of Bach violin concertos (May/June 2002). Her performance here is more spontaneous, and that certainly suits the music, which I believe is written to sound like an improvisation. She begins the following Fuga in an offhand manner, giving the impression that it grows like an organic entity into one of the most dramatic movements in the whole set. She invests the Siciliano with a lovely, lullaby quality that I think is precisely what Bach intended.

In Partita 1, she plays the doubles without pause after each the movement, and I am sure this is what Bach wanted. In fact, unlike all other CD recordings of the partita that I know, she doesn't even assign the doubles their own tracks. Good idea.

St John has told us Bach is her favorite composer, and it is obvious that she has not only given his music a good deal of thought, but she has reached very different conclusions about it. A good example of this is the Tempo di Borea of Partita 1. I was surprised to hear it played in a mood that I could only describe as either grim determination or even anger. A similar mood pervades the Corrente of Partita 2. Comparing these performances with her earlier recordings of solo Bach, I see that she has chosen now to give polish and beauty a back seat to expression. The Giga of Partita 2 begins somewhat like the Fuga of Sonata 1, like

a still-vague idea has just occurred to her, and she proceeds to make it more and more elaborate and invest it with more and more feeling. There are times, like 6:23 into the Chaconne, where she pushes her instrument to its limits and does something violinists are taught never to do—forces the instrument's tone. The contrast with the section beginning at 7:27 couldn't be greater as a result, and the listener feels as if put through an emotional wringer. She forces her tone a bit again at the end of the Chaconne, and the effect is of emotional exhaustion. While I have praised Amandine Beyer's account of the Chaconne (May/June 2006), which is very subtle and evens out the emotional peaks and troughs of the piece, St John's account is the most convincing and most extreme of the opposite approach.

Comparing this set with several others, I was struck by St John's unrivaled emotional commitment. In his second recording of the set (July/Aug 2007) Christian Tetzlaff sounds almost flippant next to her. Beyer's Chaconne sounds studied next to her highly dramatic, method-actor reading. The listener is free to enter Beyer's emotional world, but St John reaches through the speakers and seizes the listener's heart. She can do that because she bares her soul as much as Bach did when he wrote this music, and at no point is there a hint of vulgarity, ostentation, or distortion of the music's character. Her effects are employed solely to convey the message of the music. Her commitment is total, and of a sort rarely heard. Her powerful personality makes itself felt all the time, but she never uses the music as a mere vehicle for her own display.

As I write this, I am listening to her performance of the Adagio of Sonata 3. No one plays it like she does. It's hard to keep typing, her performance is so compelling. She commands the listener's total attention. The following Fuga builds wonderfully, again with a simple idea growing into a grand, imposing structure. She has greatly broadened the movement's emotional range compared with her recording of 11 years ago. I simply don't know where else you can go to hear Bach played at this level of artistry. Once again she eclipses her competition.

There is so much to admire here, like the wonderful fleetness and lightness of the bowing in the double to the Corrente of Partita 1, the finale of Sonata 3, and the Prelude of Partita 3. You can almost feel the wind whip through your hair as she takes you along for the ride. That may sound a little too 21st Century for some, but St John does play with a modern bow and violin in modern adjustment, and she makes the most of what her equipment can do. By the way, there's nothing anachronistic about how she plays with her

bow slightly off the string. I've played with baroque violin bows, and they have even more of a tendency to do that than modern bows like the one she uses.

St John has chosen to go first class on the second release on her personal label, so she has recorded herself in SACD (hybrid). The sound doesn't have the spit polish of her earlier recordings, but it's warmer and much more natural, as if she and the listener are in the same room together. She has also resisted the temptation to edit together different takes of each movement and presents only complete takes, thus maintaining the emotional continuity.

The booklet notes are a model of what they should be, with a long, superb essay by Graeme Skinner. He devotes a good deal of space to the theories of Helga Thoene, who sees the sonatas as each representing one of the major celebrations of the church year—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. (This explains why I think the lullaby quality is so appropriate for the *Siciliano* of Sonata 1—I believe it's a lullaby for the baby Jesus.) Skinner also explains the numerological significance of the number 5 in Partita 2, the only work in the set with five movements. Five is the sum of the digits that make up the number 14, which in turn is the sum of the numerical values of the letters of Bach's name: B=2, A=1, C=3, H=8. Five is also the number of wounds of Christ on the cross, so this could also refer to the death of Bach's first wife, Maria Barbara, which occurred while Bach was visiting Carlsbad in the summer of 1720. The concluding Chaconne is likely a *tombeau*, or musical memorial, for her, as Christoph Poppen and the Hilliard Ensemble demonstrated in their *Morimur* release (Nov/Dec 2001).

Lara St John has presented us with another outstanding release.

MAGIL

BACHE: *Piano Concerto*; see BENNETT
BALAKIREV: *Piano Pieces*; see MOUSSORGSKY

BANTOCK: *Celtic Symphony; Witch of Atlas; Sea Reivers; Hebridean Symphony; Pagan Symphony; Fifine at the Fair; Cuchullan's Lament; Kishmul's Gallery; Cyprian Goddess; Helena Variations; Dante & Beatrice; Sappho; Sapphic Poem; Song of Songs Prelude & Excerpts; Prelude to Omar Khayyam; Camel Caravan; Caristiona; Processional; Thalaba the Destroyer; Overture to a Greek Tragedy; Wilderness & the Solitary Place; Pierrot of the Minute*

Elizabeth Connell, s; Susan Bickley, mz; Kim Begley, t, Julian Lloyd Webber, vc; Royal Philharmonic/Vernon Handley—Hyperion 44281 [6CD] 7-1/2 hrs

We don't hear much from Granville Bantock (1868-1946) these days. Before World War I, he

competed with Elgar in England's musical world. As a conductor, he helped establish Strauss, Rimsky-Korsakoff, and Sibelius in Britain, while Elgar led mainly his own works. As successor to Elgar at the University of Birmingham and later at Trinity College in London, he made a more significant contribution to music education. As composers, both fell out of favor after World War I. Elgar's reputation returned to the front rank later in the century; Bantock has remained in near-oblivion.

The extremely prolific Bantock composed until his death and wrote in all forms but the concerto. This collection of orchestral music was issued separately from 1990 to 2003 (Sept/Oct 1991, May/June 1993, Jan/Feb 1998, May/June 2002, July/Aug 2004). It presents Bantock as a painter of beautiful tone pictures and a lavish orchestrator, with plenty of burnished brass, melodic woodwind solos, and liberal use of the harp. This is indulgent, heady, and atmospheric stuff, full of melody and bristling with power. Bantock's harmony is mostly diatonic, and he displayed little Germanic adherence to form and structure—his symphonies are that in name only—and he generally avoided the complexities of counterpoint. The main influences are early Wagner and Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Mendelssohn, and Elgar. His warm, glowing sound reflects his love of nature painting, Greek and Eastern literature, and folk music and legends of the Celts, Scots, and Hebrideans.

So why did Elgar eventually thrive while Bantock faded into the backdrop of British music? I can think of several reasons. Bantock's music is powerful, but it lacks Elgar's bite and contrast. It is beautiful, but in some ways it is beauty for its own sake, luxuriating where Elgar would drive from the inside and propel forward. Elgar's harmony is fresher, his tunes are more memorable, and his orchestration is more subtle. He also exhibited greater discipline and understanding of form. Both composers have their own "sound", but influences are more apparent with Bantock. Bantock's backward-looking style remained ensconced in the 19th Century, though he lived halfway through the 20th. As Mr Tiedman pointed out (July/Aug 2004), *Celtic Symphony*, a lush work for strings and harp, could have been written in 1910 as easily as in 1940. Elgar was always leaning forward, and his style evolved slightly in his last major works and when he resumed composing toward the end of his life.

All of which is really no matter when it comes to deciding whether to buy this collection. If you like romantic, beautiful, dramatic, and engrossing orchestral music, get it. I love it all.

For a big dramatic work, start with the