

Yes, there were other composers beside Handel entertaining the music-hungry hordes of London during the reigns of the King Georges. One of these artists was Giuseppe Agus, who was born in Cagliari, the largest city on the Italian island of Sardinia, c. 1722. Though talented as a violinist in the land of his birth, Agus sought his fortune in London. While never reaching the heights of popularity of German immigrants Handel and Johann Christian, the “London Bach,” Agus made a living teaching, performing, and composing in London and later Paris, contributing an original style in a host of compositions, notably these sonatas published in the mid-18th century.

Quartetto Vanvitelli performs these six delightful violin sonatas and six Allemands (German dances) as part of its exploration of the Neapolitan influence on Europe in the 18th century. But rest assured, this is not dry pedantry. Agus’s sonatas spring fresh and lively from an ensemble composed of solo violin, cello, archlute, and harpsichord. Overall, I found each sonata a distinct and palatable treat, though I remain unmoved by the six bits of terpsichorean fluff at the album’s end.

Unlike the sonata form that emerged in the late 18th and throughout the 19th century, each of these compositions begins with a slow movement, a kind of overture, to establish the mood and key. With one exception (Sonata V in F Major), each sonata has three movements. But while form may be consistent, the attitude and spirit of each petite work has individual flair. The brilliance of Agus’s writing is reflected in the sweeping arches of the playing of soloist Gian Andrea Guerra, who performs on an 18th-century Italian violin made by an anonymous craftsman. In the Largo that opens the first sonata, Guerra’s violin takes off on a solo cascade of virtuosic waves. This line careens into a free-spirited romp, partnering with cello, archlute, and harpsichord. The cheerful sounds, spangled with Baroque ornamentation, ease into a graceful third movement Andante, where we are treated to a gallant theme with several elegant variations. Except for the fifth sonata, which has four movements, this pattern continues, offering many opportunities for the members of the quartet to shine.

I was especially taken by the dark whimsy of the archlute (played by Mauro Pinciaroli), whose low, loose strings add a touch of sly humor and the flavor of a long-gone age. In the third sonata, this avuncular instrument tosses in a few twangs and gurgles for good measure as it sashays from an Andante into the Allegro ma non troppo of the next movement. But it is Guerra’s violin which is the unfailing star of this production, always graceful and inventive. And what unexpected surprises! In the fourth sonata, we can almost hear a foreshadowing of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto until the quartet in full ensemble reminds us of the charms unique to a musical era nearly three centuries in the past. The album concludes with six German dances from 1767, designed to please the public, which I’m sure they did. © 2024 Fanfare