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 Italian (and related) instrumental
 music of the 17th century

The recordings reviewed here present a whole panoply of repertory, styles, genres and instrumentations from the Italian *seicento* (as well as Italian-inspired traditions). From violin sonatas accompanied by one plucked instrument to ensembles with a veritable menagerie of continuo instruments—and from strict interpretations of notation to improvised inventions—we can hear that early Italian instrumental music provides endless inspiration for performers and audiences alike. Although many discs reviewed here come from the familiar world (for this reviewer) of string-playing, we will begin with recordings that feature some fine performances on wind instruments.

In **Il Giardino del mondo: Giovanni Paolo Cima and his contemporaries** (Pan Classics PC 10226, *rec* 2010, 64'), the Basel Baroque Consort indulges the listener in a stimulating survey of works by Cima, Alessandro Grandi and Tarquinio Merula. With the sonorous voice of countertenor Doron Schleifer and the articulate recorders of Anna Fusek and Janine Jonker accompanied by a colourful ensemble made up of varying combinations of viola da gamba, lirone, archlute, organ and harpsichord, the beautiful recorded acoustic allows the performers to luxuriate in this sumptuous and at times quixotic repertory. Various instrumental and vocal works by Giovanni Paolo Cima, selected from his important collection *Concerti ecclesiastici* (1610), find an ideal complement in the pieces by Merula, instrumental and vocal (from his *Canzoni overo Sonate concertate*, op.12) and four vocal works by Grandi (from his volumes of motets). It is both distinctive and refreshing to hear early Italian vocal works accompanied by recorders rather than violins; these players really understand how to support and emulate the voice with their fine breath control. The ensemble work is really exemplary, with perfectly synchronized phrasing and tastefully executed ornamentation. This disc is highly recommended.

Adam Woolf's album **Songs without words** (SFZ Music SFZM0510, *rec* 2009, 60') treats us to the relatively rare and yet revelatory sound of the sackbut playing the solo lines of some popular and some less well-known works by Monteverdi, Castello, Fontana, Frescobaldi, Schütz and

others, accompanied by a lively continuo group containing harp, theorbo, viol, and harpsichord or organ. I have to admit that I was not quite sure what to expect when I first put this disc in the player; however, I was quickly won over by the astounding virtuosity of Adam Woolf in executing so deftly and cleanly the sorts of fast diminutions that challenge players of treble instruments such as violin and recorder, and by the sheer beauty of his performance in the slower works. It was wonderful also to hear the assured and rhetorical playing of keyboardist Kathryn Cok—especially on the organ, which she really makes speak. The other members of the continuo ensemble (Siobhán Armstrong on harp, Nicholas Milne on viol and Eligio Luis Quinteiro on theorbo) do a splendid job in accompanying an instrument that they would rarely support as a solo line; Nicholas Milne also contributes a stunning performance of the solo line of Ortiz's *recercada segunda* in track 6. The liner notes provide some interesting context to the construction of this programme: Woolf cleverly combines the 19th-century concept of 'songs without words' with the 17th-century conception of the sackbut (and cornett) as instruments that closely imitated the human voice. Hence there is a combination in this programme of pieces with vocal or instrumental lines played by the sackbut, and of vocal lines which he plays decorated with diminutions. In the notes, Woolf also reminds us of the close relationship of the sackbut with voices and with plucked instruments. He points out that the descriptions by Praetorius, Mersenne and others of virtuoso sackbut players do not add up when we consider the absence of extant music for the solo sackbut; Woolf convincingly demonstrates the possibilities that exist in reconstructing the repertory for this instrument, by arranging and adapting 17th-century works. In sum, this is a thoughtful and innovative disc, which exhibits not only the expressive and technical capabilities of the sackbut, but also the creativity and artistic determination of this performer.

We hear more of this instrument on **The Renaissance trombone** (Querstand VKJK1012, *rec* 2010, 64'). This disc is the first of a four-volume set entitled 'The Historical Trombone', featuring Ercole Nisini, who is accompanied here by members of the ensemble Instrumenta Musica. I found this recording slightly less compelling than Adam Woolf's, perhaps because Nisini seems less vocal-like in his playing. Nisini's performance is both accomplished and technically assured—don't get me wrong—but to my ears it sounded far closer to the ideal of modern trombone

performance, with a heavier tone all round and a slightly more sustained and legato rendition of diminutions. The programme features works by Bartolomé de Selma y Salaverde, Diego Ortiz, Giovanni Battista Bovicelli, Francesco Rognoni-Taeggio, Giovanni Bassano and Monteverdi, alongside an impressive 'Improvisation super Ave Maris Stella' by Nisini. A special mention must be made of the splendid dulcian-playing of Monika Fischaleck; it is colourful, articulate and expressive. From my personal perspective, I found the addition of some (very metronomic) playing of percussion to certain works—especially those by Spanish composers—slightly intrusive. Still, I look forward to hearing the future volumes in the projected four-disc set (which promise to visit 'The Baroque Trombone', 'The Classic [sic] Trombone' and 'The Romantic Trombone'), and I suspect that the completed set will be a valuable addition to the collections of lovers of early brass instruments.

As an expedient segue from wind instruments to string instruments, let us turn to Theresa Caudle's impressive performance with her ensemble Canzona on **Violino o Cornetto** (Nimbus Alliance NI 6234, rec 2008, 74'). Caudle demonstrates convincingly the interchangeability of the violin and cornett as solo instruments in 17th-century Italian repertory, using each instrument alternately to play a selection of sonatas and canzonas by Cima, Frescobaldi, Fontana, Castello, Marini, Uccellini and Cazzati. She then rounds off the programme on violin with works by Stradella and Corelli. In these days of increasing specialization, it is refreshing to hear a performer who is equally adept on two utterly different instruments. And it is quite clear that her experience on one instrument informs her expression on the other: Caudle's phrasing on the violin really 'breathes', for instance, while her tonguing on the cornett is very articulate and sometimes quite pointed (rather like a good attack with the violin bow at the right moment). Obviously, though, a work like Biagio Marini's *Sonata per sonar con due corde* (op.8) needs to be played on the violin, because of the double-stopping it entails. Another work, Cima's *Sonata per violino e basso* (1610), is highly popular with recorder players and cornettists, but since it is the first known sonata specified for the violin, it has become a hallowed work for players of that instrument; Caudle performs it here on the violin. The continuo players—Alastair Ross on keyboards, Mark Caudle on bass violin and cello, and David Miller on chitarrone—provide sensitive and rhetorical accompaniment. Canzona is an appropriate name for this group, since the musicians have a real rapport with this mode of expression, and I look forward to hearing future performances.

On the disc **Con Chitarrone** (Challenge Classics CC72369, rec 2010, 75'), the Leupold Trio mixes canzonas, sonatas and a *romanesca* by Frescobaldi, Castello, Gabrielli, Bertali, Marini, Rosenmüller and Cima with two solo lute works by Gregory Howet and John Dowland, finishing the programme with a cello sonata by Vivaldi (RV44) and Corelli's violin sonata op.5 no.12 *La Follia*. The liner notes present the group as a trendy, contemporary collective of musicians who got together at an international guitar festival; and yet the writer (who is not one of the musicians in the group) seems to have missed a trick or two, claiming that 'the trio discovered a gaping hole in our harpsichord-dominated early music practice. Violin or cello sonatas with a chitarrone accompanying, who does that? Nobody. But why not?' This seems an odd point to make. I have lost count of the number of fantastic performances of a bowed string instrument accompanied by a plucked string instrument; it is a commonplace combination. Still, the writer of the notes is indeed correct in pointing out later that there is some greater flexibility in touring and performing with a chitarrone rather than a harpsichord. The notes are clearly intended for a readership that is new to early music, and the disc is likely to be marketed successfully at festivals of contemporary and popular music. The packaging aside, however, the performances are assured and artistic, and no doubt make for a great presentation of 17th-century instrumental music to audiences who are not familiar with the field.

The next disc, **Ombra e luce: Modena 1665** (Raumklang RK2905, rec 2009, 63') demonstrates how expressively and successfully violin sonatas can be accompanied by a plucked string instrument—in this case Georg Kallweit on violin with Björn Colell on theorbo and Baroque guitar. The programme opens with Uccellini's thrilling *Sonata seconda a Violino solo detta 'La Lucimonia contenta'* (from his op.4), and continues with popular and less well-known works for violin and continuo by Maurizio Cazzati, Giuseppe Colombi, Giovanni Battista Vitali, Giovanni Maria Bononcini, Arcangelo Corelli and Benedetto Ferrari, as well as a solo guitar work by Ludovico Roncalli (from his *Capricci Armonici sopra la chitarra spagnola*). A resonant acoustic, as well as deft and articulate passage-work by the violinist and crisp accompaniment on the orbo and guitar make for a satisfying listening experience.

Another successful example of a duo made up of a violin and a plucked instrument—in this case the double harp—can be found on **Le grazie del violino nel seicento italiano** (Stradivarius STR33881, rec 2008, 71'). The ensemble Arparla, consisting of Davide Monti on violin and Maria Christina Cleary on harp, perform works by

Marini, Selma y Salaverde, Merula, Giovanni Antonio Pandolfi-Mealli, Fontana, Frescobaldi and Uccellini. These are fine performances, and highly recommended. I should mention how interesting it has been to compare the many different types of continuo ensembles in these discs of early 17th-century solo sonatas; although recorded acoustics are certainly significant factors, the harp is probably the most resonant of any accompanying instrument heard in this selection of discs. Violinists respond instinctively, I think, to the idiomatic sound of plucked instruments—whether harpsichord, theorbo/chitarrone or harp—and in this recording Davide Monti produces a luxuriant and luminous sound to match Maria Christina Cleary's harp, which in turn has a very extensive range of dynamics. It has been instructive to hear such a range of interpretations, with so many different forms and sizes of continuo sections.

We go from predominantly solo works to ensemble pieces with **Stile Moderno: New music from the seventeenth century** (Acis APL72546, *rec* 2011, 74'), performed by the American ensemble Quicksilver. With the emphasis of this album being the shock of the new, the programme unsurprisingly opens and closes with exciting works by Dario Castello; we are also treated to Fontana, Cima, Merula, Bertali and Neri. Every track features two violins (Robert Mealy and Julie Andrijeski)—who match each other's tone and phrasing extremely well—and various combinations of cello, trombone, dulcian, harpsichord, organ, guitar and theorbo. The works performed here are multi-sectional sonatas for multiple instrumental parts; as such, they reflect the exploratory nature of 17th-century Italian composition. The group really highlights the emotional contrasts of this repertoire, and stylishly uses abrupt changes in tempo, mood and timbre to perform this music to its greatest expressive capacity. There is a real physicality to this ensemble's recorded performance, one that made me want to see them perform live. It has been a while since I have heard such a convincing presentation of 'old music as new music', with the shock of the 'contemporary' taking the listener by surprise; this is a terrific disc.

The next two recordings focus on Rome in the second half of the 17th century: **Roma 1670: Stradella, Lonati, Corelli, Mannelli**, (Dynamic CDS632, *rec* 2006, 60'), performed by Ensemble Vocale e Strumentale Il Concerto D'Arianna, and **Roma: Virtuosity in the Roman Seicento—Solo & trio sonatas and chamber concertos** (Myrios Classics MYR002, *issued* 2009, 69'), performed by Alte Musik Köln. The first of these provides a colourful survey of works by Carl/Ambrogio Lonati, Corelli,

Stradella, Carlo Mannelli and an anonymous composer. The pieces by Stradella are prologues for operas and a drama (for one or two voices, two violins and continuo), and are presented as premiere recordings here, with competent performances. As the liner notes point out, certain aspects of the musical life and vocal and instrumental repertory of late 17th-century Rome invite further exploration; in offering the premiere recordings of several works, this disc makes a significant contribution to the endeavour. Other groups are also working in this area: Alte Musik Köln claims in the liner notes for its disc that the majority of the programme 'has been rediscovered for this album and is recorded here for the first time'. Works by Francesco Antonio Bonporti, Stradella, Caldara, Lelio Colista, John Ravenscroft (the older musician of that name, 1650–1708), Mannelli, Lonati and Giovanni Lorenzo Lulier are given thrilling renditions. On the whole, I feel that the string playing of the latter ensemble is more assured (and the recorded sound more appropriate to the size of the group); this is an exciting disc with some excellent playing and repertory that will be new to most listeners.

Staying with a city theme, there are two discs related to Venice: **I Mercanti di Venezia** (Atma ACD2 2598, *rec* 2008, 54'), performed by the Bande Montréal Baroque under the direction of Eric Milnes, and **Rosenmüller, Legrenzi, Stradella: Venezia** (Ambronay AMYO28, *rec* 2010, 82'), featuring the Rare Fruits Council under the direction of Manfredo Kraemer. The first disc features works by 'Jewish musicians and Marranos in London and in Northern Italy'—in this case Salomone Rossi, Giovanni Bassano and Augustine Bassano—the musical sources of which are publications from Venice between 1585 and 1622 (except for the two works by the London-based Augustine Bassano, which are sourced from manuscripts). For this programme, the Bande Montréal Baroque is made up of a relatively large group of instrumentalists playing wind and bowed string instruments in a variety of colourful combinations. Alongside various sonatas, we hear some interesting instrumental adaptations of Rossi's Hebrew-language motets (published in Venice, 1622), diminutions by Giovanni Bassano on works by Cipriano da Rore, Thomas Créquillon and Clemens non Papa (from Bassano's published collection of 1591), and two tastefully performed solo diminutions from Giovanni Bassano's treatise of 1585.

On the next disc, which moves us forward to the late 17th century, works by Johann Rosenmüller, Giovanni Legrenzi and Alessandro Stradella are presented by Kraemer's Rare Fruits Council. The programme hinges on the year 1677, around which time the three featured

composers—all from different backgrounds—came to Venice. The Rare Fruits Council's characteristically fine ensemble-playing, crisp articulation, dramatic expression and flawless intonation make for an excellent performance of contrasting works that represent the wide range of styles present in the city.

We hear some more Italian (and Italian-influenced) works on **Flights of fantasy: early Italian chamber music** (Avie AV2202, rec 2009, 79'), performed by Monica Huggett and the Irish Baroque Orchestra Chamber Soloists. This has been one of my favourite discs in the present group, and one that has made for repeated listening. With composers including Castello, Carlo Farina, Francesco Cavalli, Marini, Biber, Legrenzi, Bertali and Frescobaldi, the programme treats us to a diverse selection of repertory. The Irish Baroque Orchestra Chamber Soloists demonstrate a real affinity with ensemble music of the 17th century, displaying a fine sense of phrasing and bringing out dance-like rhythms to their greatest expressive capacity. One of the most interesting works on the disc is Carlo Farina's *Capriccio Stravagante*, which imitates a variety of sounds (such as wind and string instruments, and animals including the hen, rooster, dog and cat) with great dramatic effect. The ensemble plays with precise intonation and rhythm, and there is real energy in their performance. Highly recommended.

I have saved another of my favourite discs till last. The Antipodean ensemble Latitude 37 (named after the latitudinal line that connects Melbourne to New Zealand, representing the origins of the group's members) presents a diverse programme of works on the disc **Music of 17th-century Italy and Spain** (ABC Classics 476 4525, rec 2010, 72'). Besides making a trans-Tasman connection between musicians, this production also links the *stile antico* with the *stile moderno*, and Italy with Spain. The idea of improvisation underpins the programme, with old notated diminutions being juxtaposed with improvisations by the performers; the modern style of the 17th century is also represented. Composers include Diego Ortíz, Alessandro Piccinini, Selma y Salaverde, Fontana, Marini, Merulo, Caccini, Fabritio Caroso, Frescobaldi, Palestrina, Castello and Kapsberger. The core group is made up of Julia Fredersdorff (violin), Laura Vaughan (viol and lirone) and Donald Nicolson (harpsichord and organ), and features guest artists playing theorbo, guitar, percussion and rackets, as well as the solo soprano Siobhán Stagg (who gives a beautiful rendition of Caccini's *Amarilli mia bella*, the performance of which includes some artistic instrumental diminutions too). This is an attractive, well-balanced programme that

brings together many of the most interesting aspects of improvisation in ancient and contemporary practice, with informative and accessibly written liner notes that outline some of the theoretical texts on diminution and traditions of performance from the 17th century. From all the discs reviewed here, it is clear that 17th-century Italian music is as broadly influential and inspirational in our times as it was in its own.

Websites

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Venus, Adonis and Orpheus in England: sacred and secular music from the fairest isle

Dame Emma Kirkby and Jakob Lindberg's disc of music by John Dowland and Henry Purcell, **Orpheus in England** (BIS BIS-CD-1725, rec 2008, 75'), featuring a selection of 28 short songs and lute pieces, displays the artists and composers to great advantage. Kirkby and Lindberg offer a delightful programme that is likely to enchant and entertain many English song enthusiasts with both the familiar and unfamiliar. Hauntingly beautiful renditions of Purcell standards such as 'Music for a while' and 'From silent shades' lie side by side with Dowland's devastatingly miserable 'In darkness let me dwell' and the more optimistic 'By a fountain where I lay'.