

JOHANN CHRISTOPH PEPUSCH
CONCERTOS AND OVERTURES FOR LONDON
The Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen / Robert Rawson
Ramée RAM 1109, 2012; one disc, 59 minutes

When attempting to explain why it is that much of Pepusch's music has been undeservedly overlooked, many will cite Sir John Hawkins, who found him to be 'a learned, but a dry composer, and was apparently deficient in the powers of invention' (*A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, volume 5 (London: T. Payne and Song, 1776), 404). What they will not cite are Hawkins's favourable comparison of Pepusch's cantatas to the works of Scarlatti, his assertion that he was 'one of the greatest theoretic musicians of the modern times' or that he was remembered on the continent primarily as a fine composer of concertos. The Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen, who intend 'to explore the neglected repertoire of public concert life in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', here present six of Pepusch's concertos, which until now had remained unrecorded. Framed by Pepusch's well-known overture to *The Beggar's Opera* and his less well-known one for *Venus and Adonis*, these concertos succeed in showing why it was that Pepusch was so highly regarded as a composer in this field. Written in the opening two decades of the eighteenth century, these works demonstrate strong influences from the Italian styles of Corelli and Vivaldi in addition to more English pastoral shades. Though not hugely innovative, Pepusch's music is by no means lacklustre; still less so as a result of the invigorating treatment it receives from these tickle-fiddling players. The ensemble has excellent proportions and there is a wonderful delicacy to the recording, with one player to a part creating an intimate character that is perfectly suited to music such as this, written for such small-scale and relatively personal settings as Thomas Britton's public concerts. The

continuo playing is intuitive and well balanced, though it is a pity that it was not enhanced by either a theorbo or archlute, which was common practice in this period and would have added greatly in a percussive way to the general sonority.

The earliest of the concertos here presented is that in B flat; composed most likely before 1707, it stands as a likely candidate for the earliest extant example of a concerto composed in England. It is also the only one that can be associated with Thomas Britton's concerts at 'The Small-Coal-Man's Musick Club', whose participants, fittingly, were described by Ned Ward in his *Compleat and Humorous Account of all the Remarkable Clubs and Societies in the Cities of London and Westminster* as a 'Harmonious Society of Tickle-Fiddle Gentlemen' (7th Edition (London: J. Wren, 1756), 299). Though labelled as a 'Concerto Grosso', it is in truth a solo violin concerto. It is no surprise to discover from Robert Rawson's illuminating booklet notes that all but the first movement are rearrangements of an earlier violin sonata. The influence of Corelli is evident throughout. Soloist Tassilo Erhardt performs admirably, providing delicious graces in the slow movements and showing a fitting and lively manner of attack for the Vivace and Allegro. The other two violin concertos – in A major and A minor – seem to be from a later period (Rawson speculates 1713 and 1715 respectively) and have a more virtuosic solo part. These both demonstrate a much more Vivaldian flavour. Especially notable is the solo part in the third movement of the A major, written as plain chords and treated to a rapid and exhilarating *arpeggiando* by Erhardt. Both of these concertos are of the well-known northern Italian three-movement design with opening and closing fast movements in ritornello form (though it is rather less recognisable in the first movement of the A major, which develops its opening motto theme heavily, disguising it beneath the shifted beats of slurred stepwise motifs). The treatment of

ritornello form in the first movement of the A minor is strikingly Vivaldian, with ascending scalar patterns in the *tutti* of the opening bars leading to characteristic sequential passages of semiquavers on alternating strings in the episodes.

The four-movement *Concerto à 5* with solo oboe is of a different breed to the violin concertos, Rawson speculating that it could be the work that was composed at Cannons for the Dutch virtuoso Jean Christian Kytch. Though in G minor, it is a surprisingly playful work, especially with the sprightly dialogue between the soloist and the wonderful imitative ritornello of the closing Allegro. The slow movements owe much of their attraction to Mark Baigent's tasteful performance and are evocative of the English pastoral style, both supported by pulsing accompaniment. There is a similar Handelian pastoral beauty to the slow movements of the *Concerto à 6* in D major with solo trumpet. The faster movements could in general have benefitted from a brisker tempo, though that chosen is judicious given the obstinate nature of the Baroque trumpet. Crispian Steele-Perkins performs admirably throughout, though the articulation of faster semiquaver passages is audibly difficult.

The *Concerto à 6* in F major, which features prominent parts for bassoon and cello, is one that showcases Pepusch's contrapuntal skill. Following a vivacious opening allegro movement reminiscent of Telemann, we are treated to a delicate Adagio. Rather than simply doubling the bass as is typical, the bassoon, operating in the tenor range, opens with the theme, which is then picked up by the cello in the second bar, leading to a string of Corellian dissonances that recur between first and second violins later. This is the crowning jewel of the entire album; the adeptly interwoven lines reveal Pepusch to be a composer of considerable flair and technical ability. It is interesting that such a serious movement occurs in an otherwise light and

carefree concerto; the Presto that follows, for example, is a cheerful echo movement, and the closing Allegro is a light-hearted *minuetto*.

Pepusch's overture for *Venus and Adonis* – a masque that according to its preface intended to produce an 'Entertainment [that] will want nothing of the Italian but the Language' – breaks new ground in its departure from the French type typical of the genre. Staged as an afterpiece to the Beaumont and Fletcher play *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* at Drury Lane in March 1715, it stands as Pepusch's first major composition for the theatre. In both style and instrumentation, this overture is remarkably similar to the *Concerto à 6* in F major that precedes it on this album. Pepusch opts for an overture in Italian tripartite form, opening with an animated Allegro, with descending scalar ritornello motifs that can only have drawn inspiration from Vivaldi. The intervening sections for oboes and bassoon lend a concerto grosso flavour to the overture, with tightly-knit movement in thirds and thematic development in the upper parts carefully propelling the bassoon-led return to the ripieno sections. The Adagio that follows contains a similarly Vivaldian flavour, with a pulsing crotchet rhythm in the strings and continuo supporting emotive intertwining oboe lines. The structure and concertante-style emphasis on the two oboes in this overture is similar to that of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. Both composers were at Cannons for a time and these works seem indicative of the great extent of cross-influences among the works of the 'Club of Composers' at Cannons (which also included Nicola Haym and John Arbuthnot). Though tasteful overall, the performance of this overture could have benefitted from a slightly faster tempo in the opening Allegro.

It is ironic that the overture to the hugely popular *The Beggar's Opera*, merely assumed to have been by Pepusch, remains his most well-known instrumental work

today. It was Pepusch's last successful contribution to the London theatre scene before he withdrew to focus on musical pursuits of a more academic, pedagogical and directorial nature, surely propelled by his increased involvement in The Academy of Ancient Music from 1726. The overture is an interesting contrast to that of *Venus and Adonis*, its closing section being written in a galant style and based on the air 'One evening having lost my way', which appears in the third act of the opera.

This recording succeeds in its intention to explore the neglected repertoire of public concert life in England and in doing so brings to our attention another side to a composer who has been tarred both with the brush of *The Beggar's Opera* and the pen of Hawkins. The accompanying booklet notes, which contain many contemporary anecdotal references as well as an in-depth and well-supported account of the composer's time in England, give a more balanced account of the reception of Pepusch's works. There are but a couple of slips, such as the assertion that Pepusch's works were 'advertised in *The London Stage* in April 1704' (presumably an anachronistic reference to *The London Stage*, edited by William van Lennep (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960–1970), which is actually a modern multi-volume compendium of source materials. In addition, Rawson is responsible for editing the parts used for the recording from the surviving manuscript sources, an endeavour that adds to this group's integrity. Here their enthusiasm and conscientiousness conjures an atmosphere that one can imagine is as spirited as that of the eighteenth-century concert rooms and theatres for which these works were composed. They present us not only with music that exemplifies Pepusch's mix of Continental styles and experimentation with a range of concerto subgenres, but also with intriguing possibilities regarding his music's influence on Handel. This first album has but scratched the surface of the neglected concert repertoire of eighteenth-

century England and leaves one itching for more. One can only hope that there will be further fiddling from these gentlemen (who do, incidentally, admit several ladies into their harmonious company).