COLLECTIONS: Early music

THE INTIMATE SONATE • Thomas Freas (clarino), dir; Fanfare Consort • CHAMPIGNON CD102 (54:03)

Sonatas by **CORELLI, BIBER, LEGRENZI, CORBETT, MARINI, FANTINI, MERULA, R. P. F. G.** , **ANONYMOUS**

This disc from New England's Fanfare Consort documents the birth of chamber music as we've come to know it: fully notated (allowing for the figured bass) instrumental compositions with each part intended (more or less) for a specific instrument, not just any old pipe or fiddle that could handle the required range. Of course, there's still lots of flexibility in this developmental stage, but assigning the lead melody line to the clarino, a high, valveless Baroque trumpet, is hardly capricious. In particular, Girolamo Fantini (1600–1675) tirelessly advocated bringing the trumpet in off the military parade field; his trumpet method published in 1638 declared that its reader would master playing not only in a "warlike way" but also "musically, with the organ, with a mute, with the harpsichord, and every other instrument." The disc at hand, although it is not arranged chronologically, surveys the development of instrumental chamber music, and specifically what would become the trio sonata, from the works of Fantini and his contemporaries in the early 17th century up through Corelli and Karl Heinrich Biber (son of the more famous Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber).

With the Fanfare Consort's Thom Freas, we've come a long way from the slapdash Baroque trumpet-playing of yore. (That was the most severe liability, aside from the occasional boy soprano, of the Harnoncourt/Leonhardt Bach cantata series in the 1970s.) Freas delivers exceptionally secure playing. For starters, he hits every note on target and in time; there's no mere approximation of pitches, no scrambling through fast passages. The clarino is a tough instrument, so just having his technique in place puts Freas ahead of many other players. Beyond that, he is capable of a fairly warm tone—or at least he avoids the iciness inherent to upper brass instruments other than the cornet—and, as Fantini might observe, he plays "musically, with . . . the harpsichord, and every other instrument." True, in the items for clarino, two violins, and basso continuo, the trumpet does sound a bit recessed compared to the other instruments (the harpsichord actually has the greatest clarity and least reverb), but if you don't demand an up-close perspective, all the instruments balance unusually well. I do wish the violone, the Baroque contrabass, used here instead of the usual cello or gamba, were just a bit more forward in the ensemble; as played by Peter Hoyt, it's rich and smooth, and never subjected to old-fashioned continuo sawing.

Tempos tend to be measured, but they never drag. If the interpretations are cooler than the current Mediterranean norm, most of these scores do predate the High Baroque sonatas and concertos that lend themselves to more fevered presentation. Violinists Jorie Garrigue and Mary Hostetler Hoyt may resist playing exhibitionistically, but they always play beautifully and sweetly, even while minimizing their vibrato. Harpsichordist Margaret Irwin-Brandon completes the ensemble with taste and discernment. She's the one player to participate in every work, and even takes a solo turn in a highly chromatic sonata by Tarquinio Merula.

A couple of textual notes: the Fanfare Consort restores the "Corelli clashes," the little dissonant anticipations of cadences, in the sonatas by Corelli and the anonymous composer who may have been a Corelli student, or even Corelli himself on a slightly off day. Also, the composer identified only by the initials R. P. F. G. is quite a mystery; we know more about his or her little C-major sonata itself, for the Archbishop of Kromenzi affixed to the manuscript a seal with the date April 5, 1660.

The Fanfare Consort's excellent new disc should appeal to anyone with a taste for a mellow, lyrical, refined approach to this distinctive repertoire. **James Reel**