



21 MAY 2009

CD REVIEW: Georg Friedrich Händel - HARPSICHORD SUITES, 1720 (Jory Vinikour, harpsichord; Delos)

Georg Friedrich Händel (1685 - 1759) - 'GREAT' SUITES FOR
HARPSICHORD, 1720 (HWV 426 - 433), & CHACONNE IN G MAJOR (HWV
435): Jory Vinikour, harpsichord [recorded at First Scots Presbyterian
Church, Charleston (SC), in 2008; Delos DE 3394]

Händel's 1720 suites for harpsichord have been at the peripheries of the performance and recorded repertoires of many of the most celebrated keyboardists of the twentieth century, players as diverse as Glenn Gould and Thurston Dart, who performed the suites on a large variety of instruments ranging from period harpsichords to modern concert grand pianos. In music for the harpsichord, questions of which approaches are and are not properly stylish are not quite so prominent as with Baroque operas: knowing that a composer intended his work for the harpsichord, the construction of the instrument and its quintessential method of tonal production dictate to a certain degree the manner of execution required of the player. Music composed for the harpsichord invariably demands great dexterity, not merely in rapid-paced display pieces but also in slower, more thoughtful pieces (which, in the custom of the Baroque, often adopt dance forms) in which articulation is an important device of interpretation. This is perhaps more true of Händel's harpsichord music than that of his closest rivals (Johann Sebastian Bach excepted). Händel's music always displays a 'public face,' as it were, but differs from the music of many other Baroque composers in that the fugal complexities and intricate ornaments are not solely sequins sewn onto the garment so that the wearer sparkles in the glare. Even the most extravagant *bravura* passages serve an emotional purpose. Whatever the context of a performance or recording of Händel's harpsichord suites, it is upon the player's realization of this elusive dichotomy that success relies.

An important lesson learned from Baroque opera is that it is no easy task to sort through the technical hurdles of difficult music in order to discern - and, hopefully, convey to the listener - the interpretive significance of the difficulties. It is in this vein that this recording achieves its greatest accomplishments. The consummate master of his chosen instrument (in the case of this recording, a copy of a 1739 Johann Heinrich Gräbner harpsichord constructed in 2001 by John Phillips), Mr.

Vinikour's technical prowess need hardly be mentioned: every requisite element of a great harpsichordist is decidedly and reliably in place. This recording is not merely the work of a great player, however, but likewise of a tremendously gifted artist.

Throughout the performances preserved on these discs, Mr. Vinikour ideally captures the inherent spirit of each movement. Passages of dazzling technical difficulty are rendered with exhilarating ease. Yet, when the cast of the piece reveals to the listener that exhilaration is not the intent, Mr. Vinikour is capable of communicating through the inflections of his playing that the music *is* difficult, frustratingly and maddeningly so, explosions of anger and temper expressed as deftly as murmurs of joy and tenderness. A popular criticism of Baroque music is that it is academic, formulaic, and emotionally void except in simplistic depictions of single emotions played against one another for basic effects of contrast. Mr. Vinikour's performances of Händel's harpsichord suites resoundingly contradict these assertions, however, and prove that these are not 'miniature masterpieces' (a term often applied contemptuously) but masterful works on any scale of comparison.

As he displays in all of his performances and recordings, it is obvious from the start that Mr. Vinikour's extensive experience as an accompanist for the finest instrumentalists and singers, as well as impressive achievements as a chamber musician, has informed his perception of phrasing. Unlike many players in music of this nature, Mr. Vinikour's playing speaks in musical paragraphs rather than in disjointed clauses. The insightful grasp of the overall structure and both thematic and emotional progressions of a piece enables Mr. Vinikour to punctuate his playing appropriately, never leaving dangling participles of notes that seem pasted on. There is a reason for every note, and Mr. Vinikour's playing reveals this in a way that never manipulates or imposes on the music, a rare experience in which the player convinces the listener that the expressive nuances of the music fully justify its formidable technical difficulties.

These suites are indisputably special for they represent Händel composing for a solo instrument of which he was an acknowledged master. It is therefore easy to view these suites as remarkably significant works, and it is beyond doubt that they exhibit Händel's extraordinary ability for challenging the boundaries of the musical idioms he knew so well. Listening to Mr. Vinikour's performances on these discs, every idiomatic challenge met head-on and won heroically, the essence of Händel's musical sensibility seems lovingly revealed. Even amidst the continuing revival of interest in Händel's music in the world's concert halls, opera houses, and recording studios, this recording is exceptional in equally confirming the statures of the composer, his music, and the player who has chosen to explore it, and in reminding the Baroque-saturated public that music published in 1720, when entrusted to the right hands, is no less inventive and moving than any music created in the three centuries that have followed.

july/august 2009

American Record Guide

HANDEL: *Harpsichord Suites*

Jory Vinikour

Delos 3394 [2CD] 127 minutes

Although Handel's eight suites (1720) are, on the whole, not as popular as they ought to be, there's been a steady stream of releases over the course of my ARG tenure. Mr Barker's review of Ludger Remy's CPO release (Nov/Dec 2003) includes a relatively comprehensive overview of the discography.

Until now, only Ottavio Dantone on Arts (July/Aug 2005) has fully captured my attention. I'm not sure why this is, except perhaps that the recordings before his have been a bit too safe and straightforward. Mr Barker praised Scott Ross's set (Erato, deleted) in his 2003 review and was warmer about Paul Nicholson's than I (Hyperion, Mar/Apr 1996). I didn't own the Ross in 1996 but do now. Returning to it for this review, I found it virtuosic but marred by less-than-ideal sound. All in all, it's no better than Nicholson's—which, while good, is easily dislodged by Dantone. I haven't heard and don't own Remy's CPO release, but Mr Barker, who certainly knows his Handel, called it admirable but middle-of-the-road.

Vinikour's release equals Dantone's in every respect; in fact, I devoured the performance on first hearing and can confidently claim it as my new first choice for this music. For one thing, Vinikour has the dash, spontaneity, and French-inspired playing style that I called for in 1996. Prelude movements such as the one in the A-major Suite now *sound* like unmeasured preludes, as they should. Allemandes (and allemande-like movements) *sound* like Allemandes (for instance, the Andante from the G-minor Suite), with careful staggering of left and right hands, a wealth of articulation and nuances of timing, and all the repeats.

Vinikour's fiery dexterity works to good advantage in the overture to the G-minor Suite, the first Allegro from the F-major Suite, and the second Presto from the D-minor Suite; but in tender, slow movements he shows a refined lyricism and exquisite rubato (the first Adagio from the F-major Suite and the Sarabande from the G-minor Suite are the best I've heard—*ever*). Those who know and like Dantone's release will no doubt miss the breathtaking embellishments in the repeats, which are on the whole more extravagant than Vinikour's—but I prefer hearing the text of Handel's music more clearly and so prefer Vinikour's more nuanced variants. Delos's sound aims for the ambience of a concert performance—Dantone, Nicholson, and Ross are all more closely miked. Vinikour plays a John Phillips instrument based on a 1739 model by Johann Heinrich Graebner with an extended bass range, which Vinikour employs with remarkable taste and restraint. The tuning—the sweet, untroubled Bach- Lehmann temperament—works remarkably well for Handel (certainly better than it does for Bach). All in all, this is a fabulous release and a sure sign that Jory Vinikour is an artist to watch.

HASKINS

RECORDING **reviews**

Harpichord Suites (1720)

Jary Vinikour, harpsichord
Delos DE3394 (2 CDs)
www.delosmusic.com

"I have been obliged to publish some of the following lessons because surreptitious and incorrect copies of them had got abroad. I have added several new ones to make the Work more usefull..." Handel thus began the preface of his collection of eight harpsichord suites, published in 1720. It seems that even then, composers had a tough time protecting their copyrights.

Most likely, Handel wrote the keyboard works as teaching pieces (some of them were probably penned back when he lived in Germany) and did not intend for them to be published. But some were making the rounds in corrupt copies, and in 1719, London publisher John Walsh, in collaboration with his Amsterdam colleague Estienne Roger, published a pirate edition. Handel felt he needed to set the record straight.

The eight suites in the book have become known as the "Great Suites," although musicologists do not agree on how great they are. Most of them do not conform to the strict suite form, either. Sonata-form movements, preludes, and fugues pop up between the dance movements. The first suites have a distinctly German character, somewhat echoing the sonorities of an organ. By the time we get to the seventh one, though, they are sounding more and more French.

For this recording, American

and Variations in D Minor into the Suite in D Minor and tacked on the Chaconne in G Major at the end—purely for his own pleasure, as he freely admits.

The CD turns out to be a pleasure all around. Vinikour's playing is crisp and muscular; he plays with a lot of energy, yet is always sensitive and precise. It's a testament to Vinikour's fine work—and Handel's—that this music sounds per-



fectly realized for this instrument.

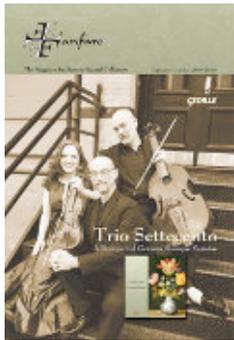
The other pleasure is the harpsichord itself, based on a

Dresden instrument first made by Johann Heinrich Gräbner in 1739 and re-created by John Phillips in Berkeley, CA. Both instruments were church commissions and were meant to be played along with an organ. They are large, with an extended bass range. The harpsichord here has a big, warm sound that is never tinny.

—Beth Adelman

Fall 2009 Early Music America

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Harpsichordist Jory Vinikour— from Handel to Horovitz



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Written by **James Reel**

Monday, 27 July 2009

Harpsichordist Jory Vinikour—from Handel to Horovitz

BY JAMES REEL

Despite the early-music boom of recent decades, the harpsichord remains something of a marginalized instrument in America. And despite George Frideric Handel's status as one of the two greatest composers of the High Baroque, his harpsichord music is also marginalized, at least compared to the keyboard works of Bach, Couperin, and Rameau. So as an American recording Handel's harpsichord suites, Jory Vinikour is doubly tasked with working his way in from the edges.

Not that Vinikour himself is an obscure figure; since the 1990s, he's had quite a full career in Europe. Serving as harpsichordist and coach for Baroque productions at various opera houses (Zurich, Salzburg, Paris, Glyndebourne) provides him a steady income. He has also collaborated in concert and recording with the likes of vocalists Anne Sofie von Otter and David Daniels. (Perhaps so much work with singers has influenced his playing style; the words "sensitivity" and "lyricism" frequently pop up in his reviews, adjectives not commonly applied to harpsichordists.) Vinikour also appears regularly as a recitalist and concerto soloist. And he's not exactly unknown in America; he has participated in several festivals and individual concerts here, and he has appeared as conductor with Musica Angelica, the Baroque orchestra of Los Angeles. Still, it's Europe where most of the work is for a harpsichordist, and the Chicago-born Vinikour was happy to stay there once a Fulbright scholarship landed him in Paris

Handel: Harpsichord Suites (1720)
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to study with Huguette Dreyfus and Kenneth Gilbert.

“There are more harpsichord-players than work,” he acknowledges, “but there’s a glut in every profession. Think of all the pianists coming out of big conservatories and universities with their doctoral diplomas, looking for appropriate work.” And among young American students, there are more aspiring harpsichordists than there are available harpsichords. As a child, Vinikour was captivated by recordings of Wanda Landowska on her monstrous 20th-century Pleyel; in his late teens he became familiar with the more historically informed playing and instrument choice of Gustav Leonhardt. But it wasn’t until he was a student at the Peabody Conservatory that Vinikour actually got his hands on a harpsichord. This is less of a problem in Europe, he has found. “Here, there’s more of an opportunity for young conservatory students to begin on the instrument they want. When I was teaching here, I had students on the harpsichord starting at age six or seven.”

Neglected stepchildren—that’s the status of Handel’s harpsichord suites, compared to those of his leading contemporaries. Partly this is a problem of finding accurate editions. In 1719, the opportunistic publisher John Walsh put out a book of Handel keyboard works; the composer himself responded the following year with an authorized collection of eight suites, commonly known as the “Great Suites.” Many of them are in the standard format for this sort of thing, a prelude followed by a series of dances; others, though, follow the more abstract slow-fast alternating patterns associated with church sonatas. Handel was in his early thirties when he wrote these works—assuming he composed them during the years immediately preceding publication—and in many respects they are less Handelian than pieces paying tribute to an earlier generation of German composers, notably Dietrich Buxtehude. “These are great pieces, wonderful music,” Vinikour declares. “Whether or not they maintain such consistent and coherent a level as Bach’s partitas and suites may be another story.

“Over the last 10 years I’ve been lucky enough to work on a number of Handel operas. One cannot just divide this composer into several compartments, and the keyboard music is as much an outpouring of his brilliance and virtuosity as are the operas. Having a grasp of his vocal music provides a greater appreciation of the keyboard music, and the best of these pieces are marvelous.”

Not so marvelous is the accuracy of many of the editions that have circulated over the years. According to Vinikour, even major facsimile publishers have been reluctant to print the manuscripts or a facsimile of the original edition. Meanwhile, Vinikour complains that even some fine modern editions are “filled with wrong notes.” Vinikour is interested in accuracy, but he doesn’t want to get so bogged down in his own research that his performances are overwhelmed by scholarship. “A lot of getting it right comes down to common sense,” he says. “When there’s an obvious false note, I correct it in my copy without going so far as to write a complaint to the editor of the book. I just compare editions; I have a shelf at home in Paris devoted to Handel keyboard music.” Often, Vinikour will prefer an old standby edition, as in the case of the G-Major Chaconne (HWV 435) that concludes his two-disc Handel set. “Terence Best, a British musicologist who edited most of Handel’s available keyboard music and so knows it very well, came up with four or five extant versions of the Chaconne,” he says. “His final version is different from the usually played version in terms of the order of variations, how many variations there are, and the content of the variations. After I looked at that, I came back to the version that everybody’s been playing for a century or so because I just like the rhythm of the thing, how one variation falls after another. For example, in the usual edition we have the seventh variation appearing again toward the end of the piece, which the editor finds superfluous, but I find this reappearance dramatic.”

Handel wrote his organ concertos for a very specific, fairly modest sort of organ; what’s the right sort of harpsichord for his keyboard suites? “It’s very clear that we

need some type of High Baroque two-keyboard instrument,” says Vinikour. “What precisely is that instrument is much to be debated. The instrument I chose is a German type of instrument that Handel would have been familiar with.” The instrument used in the recording was built by John Phillips in 2001; it’s based on one constructed in Dresden in 1739 by Johann Heinrich Gräbner. The original, according to Phillips, seems to be the sole surviving example of large instruments with extended basses that occasionally became available during the 18th century, with a range of DD (the lowest D on the modern piano) up five octaves to d”, allowing for octave doublings of the bass that are not available in normal harpsichords. This can easily accommodate the four-and-a-half-octave range of Handel’s suites.

The Handel double CD has been released by Delos, the label that earlier issued Vinikour’s recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. Vinikour isn’t yet sure whether his next projects will go to Delos or be independently released, but he knows the contents: music by Pancrace Royer (already in the can) and Jacques Duphy. “Royer, even more than Duphy, has already been visited by a number of fine harpsichordists, including Christophe Rousset and Bill Christie,” Vinikour notes. “He’s a composer of Rameau’s time who left a very small output; only 15 pieces have survived, and several suites were lost. This is music of a very high standard and great virtuosity, so it attracts a certain type of performer. There are also more poetic works that are absolutely charming. The music suits my personality, and I wanted to record it when I had the opportunity.”

Vinikour also loves contemporary music, and several pieces have been written especially for him. When we spoke, he was gearing up for a recital at Paris’s Théâtre de Châtelet that would include the three harpsichord works of Ligeti, which Vinikour calls “perhaps the three finest works of contemporary harpsichord music.” Right now, he’s beginning to seek financing and scout collaborators for a proposed disc of 20th-century British concertos. Not many years ago, Desmond Scott, son of composer Cyril Scott, heard Vinikour playing Michael Nyman on the radio and introduced the harpsichordist to a concerto his father had written for the instrument. “It had been performed to critical and audience acclaim in 1937, but ended up on the shelves,” Vinikour says. “I procured a copy of it, and it took me a year to realize that the manuscript would not be usable by musicians in 2009. Musicians today are more demanding in terms of requiring legible parts than they were in 1937, so it would seem. So I began to reset the concerto, which took a year. I finished my ‘typing,’ as I think of it, and performed it last September with a British ensemble, the Orion Chamber Orchestra, directed by Toby Purser. The audience loved the piece, and now I’d like very much to do a recording centered on that, with three other pieces I adore and that are highly contrasting. One is a concertino by Walter Leigh, the most exquisite little Vaughan Williamsy piece. He died tragically at the onset of the Second World War; I don’t think he was much more than 35. Then there’s a work by Joseph Horowitz, a very quirky British composer, an absolutely delicious jazz harpsichord concerto; I don’t think it’s been performed in 20 years. The final work on my hypothetical CD is Michael Nyman’s concerto. I daresay the CD will happen, but I’m not quite sure of the venue and with whom.”

HANDEL Harpsichord Suites, HWV 426–433. **Chaconne in G**, HWV 435
 • [Jory Vinikour \(hpd\)](#) • [DELOS 3394 \(2 CDs: 127:47\)](#)

Jory Vinikour’s traversal of Handel’s eight so-called “Great Suites” published in 1720 falls interpretively between the smooth and stylish work of Sophie Yates on Chandos and the more aggressive approach of Ludger Rémy on cpo, generally but not always leaning toward Rémy’s more highly inflected readings. To say that you can learn everything you need to know about Vinikour’s Handel from the first Suite in A Major, is an exaggeration, but it’s a good start. Vinikour gently

elasticizes the Prelude without stretching it out of shape, which is true of his approach to many of the other slow movements in this set; in this particular piece, he actually takes the trouble to phrase the arpeggios. His approach to the inner movements, the Allemande and Courante, is rather French, gentle and flowing (here Vinikour is more similar to Yates). Vinikour doesn't come down hard on the downbeats, thereby banishing all hints of stodginess while still keeping the melodic phrases well defined. The concluding Gigue is perky, but again Vinikour avoids bearing down on the rhythmic element once past the introductory phrase (and its repeats).

So far, Vinikour seems to have more in common with Yates, but later—as in the first Allegro of HWV 427—he seems to take special delight in the quick, perky, note-cluttered movements, and he absolutely revels in the bravura aspects of the Passacaglia that concludes HWV 432. Vinikour makes it clear that the mighty trills are what the second Adagio of HWV 427 is all about. He takes a lovely, lyrical approach to the slow music of HWV 430, and his ornamentation of the so-called “Harmonious Blacksmith” movement is generous but not overbearing. Some of his slow playing, as in the Prelude of HWV 431, would benefit from just a bit more freedom, but this is not a major issue, and it would be worse if Vinikour were so wayward that he let the music fall apart, which is never a problem here.

Vinikour imports into the middle of HWV 428 the famous Sarabande from HWV 437, from Handel's 1733 keyboard collection, which suggests that he is not planning a follow-up album. Too bad, for what Vinikour offers here is first-rate. It's well recorded on a recent John Phillips instrument, based on a large 1739 Johann Heinrich Gräbner model.

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Handel

Keyboard Suites – Set 1, HWV426-433.

Chaconne, HWV435

Jory Vinikour *hpd*

Delos [®] ② DE3394 (128' • DDD)

Suites – selected comparisons:

Nicholson (*HYPE*) (6/95[®]) CDD22045

Dantone (2/05[®]) (*ARTS*) 47698-2; 47699-2

Intelligent, impulsive and passionate performances certainly impress



A teaching colleague who formerly played the harpsichord shuddered when he recalled an old professor who assigned him Handel's keyboard suites, and expected nothing less than strict, metronomic tempi. Happily, Jory Vinikour knows better. He's no less a scholar than many of his harpsichordist colleagues, yet he's unleashed his heart and imagination upon these scores and truly allowed them to blossom, abetted by the rich timbre and augmented bass register of his instrument based upon a 1739 Dresden model after Heinrich Gräbner. Just listen to the D minor Suite's low notes kick in and resonate; I suspect that Vinikour smiled first (the ample room ambience plays no small part). His improvisatory flourishes in the A major Suite's Prelude flow with unpressured proportion, while the closing Gigue's moderate gait allows for plenty of lilt, in contrast to, say, Ottavio Dantone's relentless drive. The E major Suite showcases Vinikour's arguably idiosyncratic approach to executing uneven rhythmic patterns, yet his sense of grand gesture and long line always win you over, especially in the celebrated "Harmonious Blacksmith" variations. Vinikour's keen ear for harmonic tension pays intense expressive dividends in the F minor Suite's Prelude, while his conductor's instinct for theatrical pacing and unified tempo relationships informs the G minor's concluding Passacaglia (better known, perhaps, via Halvorsen's virtuoso duo arrangement for violin and cello) and the imposing G major Chaconne. While less unfettered interpretations may hold more appeal for some listeners (Verlet on Auvidis, or Nicholson on Hyperion), Jory Vinikour's grand manner exudes joy and musicality in every bar.

Jed Distler

Midlife Music Musings

SUNDAY, JULY 05, 2009

Handle on Handel

Kemer Thomson

Handel is no Bach, but I mean this as a good thing! I find it amazing that these two giants, who were born almost within a month of each other and barely 100 miles apart, were so unique. For some reason, George's solo keyboard works have not fared as well as Sebastian's. They offer a welcome respite from an over-played and over-recorded mainstream.

Handel favored the English spelling of his name. He so dominated England in the first half of the 18th century that I have chosen to identify his harpsichord music as "Harpsichord - English" in my iTunes schema, which includes the genres "Harpsichord - French," "Harpsichord - German," and "Harpsichord - Italian." I just don't think of him as a German composer.

Most amazing is that Handel's keyboard oeuvre is so under-represented, beyond *The Harmonious Blacksmith*. It has the best of Handel embedded in it: a strong vocal line, along with some really marvelous counterpoint. One harpsichordist friend shed a little light on this mystery: Handel's keyboard style is far less playable than Bach's. It is full of thick textures and difficult reaches. This fits: I believe he was both physically big and also one of those larger-than-life personalities. I picture Sebastian Bach as more compact, and we know he favored the smaller keyboards of Mietke. Actually, one would think that the challenge of Handel's keyboard pieces would make them more attractive.

I have had harpsichord collections by Sophie Yates and Blandine Verlet for some years and just couldn't get passionate about the music. It was *nice*: damning it with faint praise... Verlet's recording suffers from a less-than-ideal sound. Yate's has a fine sound and there is nothing wrong with the playing, except that it just fails to excite me. Neither recording really has drawn me back with any frequency, so I am guilty of listening to "too much" Bach.

I think this music has a very masculine quality to it, and it is music well suited to

a virtuoso touch. My favorite recording has been by Keith Jarrett on the modern piano – an energetic and nicely articulated performance. Murray Perahia also has a recording of Handel and Scarlatti in combination on the modern piano that I actually find just a little too sensitive to sustain interest.

Although Jarrett makes the music work pretty well on the piano, even it is missing the sparkle that the harpsichord could bring. Fortunately, Jory Vinikour has released a 2-CD collection that I am forced to admit I had ignored simply because I had given up on the music itself. However, Jory is a true virtuoso (I mean this in the best sense of the word), and has the right handle on Handel.

First of all, the recording was done on exactly the right kind of harpsichord: an instrument built by John Phillips after the 1739 Gräbner. Phillips is generally considered one of the top American harpsichord builders. I generally find his instruments to be bland – never bad, but just not an instrument that pops out and grabs me by the ears. Not so this instrument: it has a big, rich sound with a great deal of character. I would almost go so far as to describe it as "organ-like," which coincidentally would be ideal for Handel's music. This particular instrument has a rather extraordinary range of DD-d"', extending a fourth lower than most harpsichords that would be used for this music; it sounds like Vinikour occasionally uses those lower notes, perhaps accounting for the "organ-like" sound. The recorded sound is just a bit live, but not offensively so: clearly the church the recording was done in was quite resonant.

The temperament used is the so-called "Bach-Lehmann." I wouldn't normally mention the temperament, but I found this interesting for at least two reasons. First of all, the "Bach-Lehmann" temperament is a rather controversial synthesis, based on interpretation of squiggles Bach made on a manuscript. It's actually a very nice temperament, but I refuse to believe it has any direct association with Bach, let alone Handel. It is strange to see it popping up with increasing frequency, when there are so many other fine temperaments with a stronger historical claim. There is a rather well documented "Handel Temperament" that I have tuned with many times does have a more authentic claim to Handel. Any argument over temperaments is just asking for a fight in the wrong circles, and I find most listeners could hardly care if it were Vallotti, Weckmeister, or "Bach-Lehmann"!

The second reason I mention the temperament is that a couple of the suites wander into more "remote" tonalities that will bring out the "color" in a non-equal temperament. In particular, the suites in E Major and F-Sharp Minor on the

second CD will either delight the connoisseur of HIP (historically informed performances) or cause those too comfortable with the pabulum of equal temperament to occasionally cringe. Often recordings will "adjust" the tuning to smooth out the rough spots, but not so on this recording. I say, bravo! I fail to see what good different keys serve if they all sound the same!

Enough about the unimportant things: what is important is the performance itself. The 2-CD set includes the eight "Great" Suites of 1720. Not all of these are the French style suites we are so familiar with, often diverging from the standard dance movements. The suite in F Major, by far the shortest of the bunch, consists of only four movements, *Adagio-Allegro-Adagio-Allegro*: not a single dance there! As I stated earlier, Vinikour is a real virtuoso, and I can't help but recall his San Diego recital almost four years ago, notable for his performing from memory (unusual with harpsichordists) and with astonishing command and bravura. What I find interesting is that Vinikour actually plays many of the movements more broadly than either Verlet or Yates, yet manages to breath life and excitement into everything.

Handel isn't caught up with *dance*, but rather with *song*. This should come as no surprise, given his focus on operas and oratorios. This is exactly why these suites are such a refreshing change. Also, Handel was a showman, and his solo keyboard works are more extroverted. Bach, of course, is the ultimate introvert. It may be that the Handel is actually more difficult to perform, not just because of the notes, but because in the wrong hands the music can lapse into banality. Vinikour has a clear vision for the music and makes it compelling. This is a recording not to be missed!

<http://kemer.blogspot.com/2009/07/handle-on-handel.html>



UESDAY, JULY 21, 2009

Veni, Vidi, Vinikour: Handel's Harpsichord Suites on CD

George Frideric Handel: *Harpsichord Suites* (1720), *Chaconne in G Major* (1732-3)

Jory Vinikour, Harpsichord

Instrument by John Phillips, 2001, copy of Johann Heinrich Gräbner of 1739, Dresden

Recorded: First Scots Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina

Recording: Delos DE 3394 (2009)

Review by Rodney Punt

Music lovers know the Handel of extravagant operas, their cousins the oratorios, and certainly the orchestral *Water* and *Royal Fireworks* music. We are less likely to have encountered his eight *Harpsichord Suites* of 1720, though by now there are many recordings on both harpsichord and piano. Far more famous in the genre are the nearly contemporaneous *English Suites* of J. S. Bach of 1725. Where the suites of Bach often seem like serene, internalized contemplations on dance forms, those of Handel brim over with exuberant impetuosity. If the Bach suites are best appreciated in the evening, those of Handel seem designed for our morning constitutional - as bracing as an ocean spray or the first rays of a dawning sun.

The suites derive some of their heady atmosphere from Handel's free use of musical form and technique, with few strict fugues and many darting changes of pace and motif. It has often been noted that Handel composed for the ear, not the eye, and these suites are no exception. In many cases the individual pieces have an

improvisational quality, and may well have originated as such. We also often hear in them music borrowed from or used later in other works; listening for examples is half the fun.

We have enjoyed harpsichordist Jory Vinikour's virtuosity in the Los Angeles area before, most notably in his April 2007 outing with Musica Angelica, where he gave a brilliant performance of the Bach *Concerto in d minor*. Here he surpasses that performance with an instrument fully up to the sonorous demands of these suites. The Gräbner harpsichord is particularly rich, with a deep bass buzz adding a pleasing cushion for the soprano sparkle of the upper registers. In the many dialogue moments between soprano and bass lines, this equality of timbre pays off nicely. The instrumental placement in the recording is just right – not too close, nor too distant.

Vinikour's performance is propulsive, his rhythms nicely gauged with just the right hesitations at cadences and phrases. His ornamentation is fully integrated into the musical fabric, which is to say it is natural and unselfconscious. In every sense, Vinikour, an extrovert performer by nature, has fully realized this music. It's as if the composer himself were performing for us.

The two-CD set of Delos is a model of its kind. In addition to the eight "Great" *Suites*, there is a bonus inclusion of the *Chaconne in G Major*, HWV 435, a work in many guises over the years; Vinikour performs the traditional version. Vinikour's own intelligently written liner notes aid the listener with important details of the works offered.

Atlanta Audio Society, April 2009 : Handel: Harpsichord Suites (1720)

Chicago native Jory Vinikour went to Paris in 1990 to study harpsichord with Huguette Dreyfus and Kenneth Gilbert. Somewhere along the line, he fell in love with the city (not a hard thing to do, that) and has resided there ever since, soaking up the local musical culture and working on his keyboard technique. It seems to me, Vinikour adds a uniquely American zest and passion for rhythm to his playing, which makes him, for my money, an ideal interpreter of Handel. He has it all on display in Handel: Harpsichord Suites (1720).

These are the so-called Eight Great Suites, for reasons that will be abundantly clear to the the most casual listener as well as the well traveled Handelian. This is Handel at his best, taking the received French suite, with Italian influences added, and adapting its conventions to his needs. His primary purpose, which Vinikour understands very well, was to entertain his listeners. Without necessarily sacrificing learned technique, he wore it lightly, As Vinikour observes, “Handel is not as strict a polyphonist as Bach, and is more interested by the gesture and the overall effect of each movement.”

Handel leaves much to the performer, marking arpeggio in front of chordal passages expressed in long note values to indicate the performer may take liberties as his judgment leads him. (Vinikour obviously goes in for this sort of thing.) Discretion is also left to matters of decoration, as in the Air in the D Minor Suite, HWV 428, which Vinikour embellishes imaginatively in a manner which Handel's mentor in Rome, Arcangelo Corelli, would have approved.

This same D Minor Suite will illustrate Handel's stylistic genius, and Vinikour's interpretive prowess, as well as any. It begins, not with a stately overture, but with a toccata-like Presto with arpeggiated figuration uncharacteristically written in detail by the composer. Vinikour follows it to the letter, taking the arpeggios at speed, although he admits “a case can certainly be made for a rhythmically free interpretation.” A freely handled, robust fugue follows. Then a charmingly graceful Allemande is followed by a very exciting Courante. At this point, Vinikour interpolates Handel's famous Sarabande and Variations, HWV 437. Though Vinikour gives this justly famed, soulful beauty all the attention it deserves, it must compete for pride of place with the afore-mentioned Air, with its two “doubles” and a thrilling Presto which he takes up-tempo to conclude the suite in splendid style. Jory Vinikour here plays an instrument perfectly suited to his purpose, a harpsichord made by John Phillips (2001), based on an original by Johann Heinrich Gräbner (Dresden, 1739) and remarkable for its clarity in all its well defined registers and its clean articulation. The recordings, made by producer Katherine Handford and engineer Lund in the First Scots Presbyterian Church, Charleston SC, have the well-balanced perspective that is vital when capturing the harpsichord for home listening.

IONARTS

SOMETHING OTHER THAN POLITICS IN
WASHINGTON, D.C.

14.4.09

Happy Anniversary, G. F.

by Charles T. Downey | Tuesday, April 14, 2009



Handel, "Great" Harpsichord Suites
(vol. 1, 1720), J. Vinikour
(released on March 31, 2009)
Delos DE 3394

This lovely disc of all eight of the "Great" harpsichord suites, published by Handel as a set in 1720, is performed by American harpsichordist Jory Vinikour, on a grand instrument tuned to Bradley Lehmann's Bach tuning. Handel's keyboard music is underplayed considering just how rewarding it is for the listener -- we have reviewed any of these suites live only once in the history of Ionarts. There is not really a pre-existing favorite recording

to my ears, but Murray Perahia's take on some of these suites on the piano and Glenn Gould's flirtation with half of them at the harpsichord would also be recommended. As for complete versions, harpsichord over piano (like the quirky set by Andrei Gavrilov and Sviatoslav Richter, now digitally remastered) is a must, and Vinikour has the dexterity and interpretative sparkle to do a fine job of channeling the theatricality of Handel the performer. Most piano teachers tend to assign Bach and not much else for the Baroque portion of their students' repertory. It was not until I had some more freedom in choosing what I played as a graduate student that works by Handel, Rameau, Couperin, and Byrd found their way into my practice sessions. The Handel suites are even more varied in tone than those of Bach, since Handel was much freer with the form of the suite and his suites do not consist only of dance movements. So do yourself a favor and listen to this economically priced 2-CD set, and better yet print out some of the scores and give them a whirl at your own keyboard.

127'47"

INFODAD.COM: Family-Focused Reviews

(++++) *Handel: Harpsichord Suites Nos. 1-8 ("Great"); Chaconne in G Major.* Jory Vinikour, harpsichord. Delos. \$19.99 (2 CDs).

Jory Vinikour offers more than two hours of Handel's wonderfully varied harpsichord music in the two-CD Delos set of all eight "Great" harpsichord suites, plus the Chaconne in G and its 21 variations. Handel is not well known as a keyboard composer – he is famed for oratorios, operas and orchestral music – but he was a harpsichord and organ virtuoso, and it is clear from these suites that he knew how to get the maximum effectiveness from a keyboard. Interestingly, five of the eight suites are in minor keys, including one in the unusual key of F-sharp minor (which Haydn used for his "Farewell" symphony, No. 45). The generally big sound of Vinikour's harpsichord (a 2001 copy of a 1739 instrument built by Johann Heinrich Gräbner, with an unusually large range), so apparent in the A major, F major and E major suites – and in the Chaconne – becomes far more intimate and inward-directed in the minor-key works. Vinikour fully explores the different tempos and moods of the suites' various movements, bringing forth lyricism and brilliance in equal measure and handling ornamentation and balance with ease and skill. Handel's harpsichord suites are far less well known than the harpsichord works of Bach, but on the basis of this recording, they are as deserving of a place in listeners' collections and – for those who can surmount their technical difficulties as elegantly as Vinikour does – a place in harpsichord recitals as well.