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Flour de Beauté

La Morra

Ramée label, RAM 0602

A pleasant little CD dropped into my player the other day. Recorded in 2005, La Morra's *Flour de Beauté*, is a gentle and charming exploration of late medieval polyphony from Cyprus. A quick check found the disk is still available from Amazon for about \$15.00 and if you have a discerning ear, this CD definitely worth your investment.

Due to its location in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, near the Holy Land, the island of Cyprus figured prominently in the history of the Crusades. In 1192, Richard the Lionheart conquered the Greek island on his way to the Holy Land and installed one of his knights, Guy de Lusignan of France, as its king. De Lusignan and his descendants would reign over the island for almost 300 years and during this time brought Western European society, language and culture to the island. Lacking a nobility to populate its new feudal administration, the de Lusignan's imported one primarily from their French homeland. Indeed, the style of this Cypriot music seems to be closely related to that found in France at roughly the same time period, as composed by Guillaume de Machaut and others.

All of the music on this CD comes from the single surviving source for polyphonic music in early 15th century Cyprus, a manuscript now located in Torino and known as *J.II.9*. It is in fact, the largest manuscript of late medieval music in the French style, containing a few mass movements and several motets, but primarily comprised of 166 three-part polyphonic songs in the three standard Medieval forms: 102 ballades, 43 rondeaux, and 21 virelais. Although the music in *J.II.9* owes much to French musical tradition,

interestingly all of its pieces are anonymous and no concordances can be found in any other sources from this time period. Evidence suggests that the music was created by Cypriot court musicians during the reign of Janus I de Lusignan, (1397-1432), perhaps by individuals with connections to Cambrai cathedral in France.

La Morra brings an artful approach to recreating this sensitive and mysterious polyphony. Since it's founding in 2000 at the Schola Cantorum in Basel Switzerland, La Morra has focused on recording the music of the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods. For this recording, the lutenist, Michal Gondko, and flute player, Corina Marti, act as co-artistic directors and have assembled a talented group of players. The artistic approach for most of *Flour de Beauté's* selections is to have a voice singing the superius part, which carries the text in the manuscript, supported by instruments on the two untexted parts, often the lute and another instrument. There are also a few well-placed pieces performed only on instruments, such as the gentle opening ballade, *La Belle et la Gente Rose*.

The balance between the lovely voice of Els Janssens and the various instruments is near perfect. In fact, Gondko's lute is clearly audible throughout and provides a solid foundation for this delicate music. Other instruments used on the recording, as suggested by the music of Machaut, are a vielle, a Medieval bowed instrument, and a doucaine, or soft shawm. The different textures provided by this instrumentation blend very well together. Their combinations are varied often and a warm, inviting atmosphere is maintained throughout.

The Cypriot manuscript *J.II.9* has been largely neglected by modern recording artists, perhaps because of its obscure authorship and origin. *Flour de Beauté* reveals the wealth of possibilities that await those interested in this exploring this large, remarkable late Medieval source.

Dick Hoban



Bernhard Joachim Hagen: Sonatas for Lute and Strings

Galanterie: John Schneiderman—lute

Elizabeth Blumenstock—violin

William Skeen—violoncello

Dorian sono luminus DSL-90907

One of the true musical treasures from the late Baroque era are the mixed instrumental pieces which include the lute not as a continuo instrument, but as a fully composed melodic partner in the ensemble. The Baroque music trio Galanterie has done more than its part in making recordings of this music available over the years.

Galanterie continues the service with a marvelous new compact disc containing music by the late Baroque lutenist and composer, Bernhard Joachim Hagen (c. 1720-1787).

Although reputedly a fine lutenist and a published composer for the instrument, Bernard Hagen was a violinist by trade. In 1737, he became employed as a violinist in the court orchestra at Brandenburg-Bayreuth. His employer, the margravine Wilhelmine, younger sister of Frederick the Great of Prussia, was a great patroness of music. She had personally heard and admired the lute playing of the great Sylvius Leopold Weiss and was a lutenist of some ability herself. Even though, by this time, the lute had begun its passage into historical obscurity, she continued to employ lutenists in her court, including Adam Falckenhagen and, later, Paul Charles Durant. Despite his obvious accomplishment on the instrument, Hagen appears to have played no significant role as a lutenist in Wilhelmina's court. She died in 1758, and with the death of her husband the Margrave without an heir in 1763, the House of Brandenburg-Bayreuth merged with the House of Brandenburg-Ansbach. Hagen moved with the court to Ansbach in 1769 where he lived and worked until his death in 1787.



Composing in the twilight years of the Baroque era and well into the early years of the Classical age (he died the year Mozart's Don Giovanni was premiered), Hagen fits into that small group of composers who continued to write for the lute, despite how the "Spanish" guitar was increasingly to serve the musical language of the new musical style. Many aficionados today hold the opinion that Rococo lute music seems oddly out of place, the instrument seeming to have just too many strings for a musical style that doesn't offer enough notes for it to play. After listening to this terrific compact disc, however, listeners holding such an opinion (such as myself) will be happily enlightened.

Although deeply indebted to the Gallant age, Hagen's music does not merely continue the same old, same old. While not as musically adventurous as the music of a J.J. Quantz or C.P.E. Bach, he none the less includes elements of the *Empfindsam* style in his music. These include the addition of extended lute cadenzas, frequent rhythmic changes, a high level of chromatic shading, are evidence of this. The wonderful balance between the lute and violin parts in these sonatas are no doubt due to Hagen's dual mastery on both of these instruments. Experience certainly provided Hagen a complete understanding of the expressive possibilities made available with this unique instrumentation.

Of course, the best musical encounters happen when performer and composer contribute equally to the experience. Such is the case here. The success of this recording is equal parts the imaginative musical ideas and considerable variety of moods created by Bernard Hagen blended with the and highly expressive performances contributed by each member of Galanterie. The ensemble features on the lute. Together, lutenist John Schneiderman, Baroque violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock and 'cellist William Skeen have produced a triumph of a recording. This is one CD that belongs on the shelf of any lutenist who has even the slightest interest in this repertoire.

With their exquisite sense of style, phrasing, and endless cache of seemingly off-the-cuff articulations, violinist Blumenstock (playing *con sordino* throughout) and lutenist Schneiderman are interpretively joined at the hip, playing together as if musical brother and sister. Baroque 'cellist William Skeen is deftly supportive of Blumenstock and Schneiderman's subtle "conversation," and yet his own musical personality is a welcome force in the mix. Each performer's dazzling technical and musical abilities are well matched. Although Schneiderman's touch has occasionally been a bit edgy on a few of his past recordings, it is not the case here. Quite the contrary. Schneiderman produces a full and focused sound from his lute, first note to last. Although by no means is he short on verve or energy and willing to push the envelope when necessary.

The recording was engineered by the early music specialist Peter Nothnagel and once again proves his mastery in capturing the complex sounds of early instruments. The engaging program notes are by Peter Danner. As any reviewer of this CD must acknowledge, it turns out that Danner's notes are not just helpful, but essential. After a quick search for Bernhard Joachim Hagen in the online *New Grove Dictionary*, it seems that this marvelous composer is, inexplicably, omitted as an entry.

Phillip Rukavina



(Plucked Notes - continued from page 4)

The Transcendental Lute

Although this is not strictly a new story since it came out last year, it has recently come to my attention that on April 22 of 2010 National Public Radio aired a story about the Dutch lute player **Jozef van Wissem** and the new music that he has composed for the lute. The interview was conducted by **David Garland** for the WNYC program Spinning On Air. During the conversation Jozef talks about his compositions and plays some examples on a baroque lute made by Michael Schreiner. A recording of the interview can be accessed through the WNYC web site at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126147314> **Dan Larson** ❀