

## Fanfare 9/10 2007

**L. COUPERIN Harpsichord Suites: in d; in A; in F; in G; in a. *Duretez fantasia* • Bob van Asperen (hpd) • AEOLUS 10094 (Hybrid multichannel SACD: 72:05)**

This is the first in what is planned as an *intégral* of the harpsichord works of Louis Couperin (c. 1626–1661), potentially a valuable undertaking by Dutch harpsichordist Bob van Asperen, especially given that Davit Moroney's groundbreaking 1983 Harmonia Mundi set has long disappeared. Since then there have been a few individual selections, two notable examples being those by Richard Egarr (*Fanfare* 19:6) and Byron Schenkman (27:4).

To return to Louis after lengthy exposure to nephew François (see the review of his complete harpsichord works in 30:4) is immediately to enter a very different world, an ambiance that, rather than representing a highly personal response to the theater, nature, and the men and women who inhabited that world, is the more impersonal world of 17th-century courtly life as seen through the mirror of highly stylized dances. In keeping with many similar collections of such dances, Couperin made little formal attempt at arranging these movements into suites, largely leaving it to performers to make their own choice of a suitable sequence, and thus creating a nightmare for catalogers. Both Egarr and van Asperen include, for example, suites in F (Egarr two of them) and A Minor, but they differ not only as to content, but also as to the number of movements. Van Asperen has been pretty free with his choices, but I would query only the inclusion of a second chaconne to conclude the F-Major Suite, something Couperin would surely not have expected, and even more questionable since the piece in question is not firmly ascribed to the composer.

As has been often suggested, it is the chaconnes and the unmeasured *préludes* (i.e., pieces in free time) that are the true glory of Couperin's keyboard works. The D-Minor Suite opens with one of the most imposing of them, its tripartite structure consisting of a florid, ornament-encrusted fantasia that the composer follows with a fugal section including chromatic passages, as if to provide a dramatic, strict contrast with the opening. To complete the movement comes another free quasi-improvisatory passage. The other *préludes* are briefer, but similarly impressive in their fantasia-like arpeggiations. In addition to the Suite in F, those in D Minor and G also finish with chaconne movements, each demonstrating the variety the composer found in an ostensibly rigid formula. The allemandes are notable for their contemplative nobility, thoughtful yet at the same time courtly, while the sarabandes exude an air of grandeur and breadth belying their brief time span.

The instrument used by van Asperen is worthy of special note, being an anonymous two-manual French instrument of the 17th century housed in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. Magnificently decorated, the instrument has exceptional power and sonority, with a long reverberation period. The basic sound is unusually mellow, particularly in the middle register, but the meantone temperament also allows for some wonderfully piquant sounds, particularly in the Suite in A, a rare key at this time. Van Asperen's playing is throughout extremely persuasive. He gives the unmeasured *préludes* just the right degree of freedom, while also judiciously admitting a degree of rubato in the allemandes and sarabandes. As one would expect from such an experienced and accomplished player, van Asperen's fingerwork is well-nigh impeccable, with finely articulated and fluently played ornaments, while he brings a strong sense of rhythmic purpose to the courantes and gigues. The SACD sound is as richly detailed as the instrument it is reproducing, leaving us with an issue that can be strongly recommended on all counts. An auspicious start to the series. **Brian Robins**