

FISCHER *Der habile Violiste* • Antoinette Lohmann (vn); Furor Musicus; Furor Agrarius (period instruments) • GLOBE 5274 (55:34)

Among the more interesting composers of the generation preceding Johann Sebastian Bach can be found Johann Fischer (1646-1716), whose career spanned an impressive series of posts, ranging from Paris to Stockholm. He hailed from the town of Augsburg, the erstwhile Hapsburg capital and home of some important music publishers. A student of Samuel Bockshorn (that would be Capricornus), he served in Paris as a copyist for Jean Baptiste Lully, and while there he not only learned the French style, he was able to compose dances for the French court, and probably participate in the ensembles as a violinist. Thereafter followed a string of temporary appointments until 1698, when he apparently went on tour before settling into Lüneburg, where he may well have instructed the young Johann Sebastian Bach. He finally achieved the position of Kapellmeister to the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, but his tenure there was short, and perhaps difficult. Thereupon he left for Denmark and then Sweden, but with no more than temporary employment there, he decided to try his luck in England. He never made it, being waylaid in Schwedt with the offer of a post with the local court.

Fischer's music was well-regarded during his lifetime; even Bach had some of his published works in his collection, probably including the *Musikalisch Divertissement* from 1701 and the *Musikalisch Fürsten-Lust* from 1706. There is also a dance suite entitled *Der habile violiste* (also the title of the disc) from the Düben collection in Uppsala (see elsewhere in this issue for other music therefrom). The only oddity is a piece by Hans Leo Hassler, which exists in Fischer's transcription. The result is a sort of grab bag of Fischer's well deserved hits.

The first up is the *Balattae*, a group of short dances that was probably composed after 1664. In the central section of the *Allemande*, for example, the violin part is extreme in its virtuosity, while the two minuets are more sedate and have more than a little Polish lilt to them. The final *Sarabande* is quite introspective in terms of its mournful line, but it ends with a musical question mark. His arrangement of Hassler's song "Mein G'müth" is filled with a rich harmony, but his lament ("Herzlich thut mich verlangen") is a pensive and soft reminiscence, quite sentimental in content. This is followed by a suite for violin piccolo (a sort of small higher-pitched instrument) where the French style predominates. The work sneaks in with a spare wandering line above the continuo, while the sequenced *Presto* is filled with quick if succinct statements and improvisatory runs. Here Fischer (if it is indeed himself as composer, since this is not entirely secure) employs Latvian folk material, no doubt obtained during a brief sojourn at the Courland court in Jelgava (then called Mittau). The violin swirls about in fiddler style, with the actual stylized dances disguised with flourishes and roulades. His suite from the *Divertissement* of 1701, on the other hand is more conventional, for the most part. There is the stylized French overture, and a series of minuets (we are missing the usual courante, allemande, etc.) all of which are surprisingly gentle and unassuming, but tuneful (enough so that I detect their echoes in Bach's works). The next suite from the *Habile Violiste* is even more conventional, though like most of Fischer's music the solo violin weaves an intricate parallel around the continuo like a graceful dancer.

In the next "suite" Fischer has a duel between a real violinist and a folk fiddler, each alternating movements. The opening air is pensive, even a bit plaintive, but the

lyrical structure remains quite elevated in tone, only to be followed by a gigue performed by the “farmer violinist” where various chords are raw and pitch is deliberately insecure in a rather peasant manner. This reminds one of Heinrich Biber’s descriptive paraphrases. So it goes on until the final duet which matches both, and it seems an odd battle royale between the two styles, almost as if one has succumbed to the primitive music. At the end are a couple of Polish dances, which are surprisingly genteel, even as their folk rhythmic structure emphasizes the weaker beats.

The performance by the Furor groups is quite fine, They are clearly having fun with the vagaries of Fischer’s descriptive scores, but this does not diminish their attention to making this music live. The rhythms are well delineated, and the tempos outline the dance origins without excess speed or conventionality. This gives about an hour of fine chamber listening, and if one wants to hear how Bach’s music originated, this is a must have disc. The only issue that might be present is that it seems to be a numbered release (mine was 951 out of 1000), which may make it difficult to find. However, to pursue it would be most worthwhile. **Bertil van Boer**

4 stars: A finely-executed set of dances by a composer whose humor is throughout present; Both Furor ensembles create an excellent hour of Baroque violin music