

The corpus of Handel's violin sonatas is not so straightforward as once accepted: until recently, it was thought to comprise six. Then doubt was cast on the attribution of no fewer than four of these: HWV 368, 370, 372 and 373. To the two remaining another three - presumably authentic - sonatas were added. Handel's publisher in London, John Walsh, began the confusion by making available versions of the composer's works for instruments other than those intended by the composer. He also obscured originals with corrected texts and misnamed some of them.

So the small and dedicated group, Ensemble Vintage Köln, which was formed in 2009 and whose only CD to date this appears to be, decided to record the now canonical HWV 358, 359a, 361, 364a and 371 [trs. 1-19]. They have the listener take a short break with the *Andante* (HWV 412) and *Allegro* (HWV 408) [trs. 20,21] and then end the generous CD (at nearly 70 minutes) with the less inspiring perhaps - there is greater stiffness, repetition and even awkwardness - four 'questionable' sonatas [trs. 22-37]. Their claim to presenting the complete sonatas is thus a good one.

If the standard of playing is high enough, this is the best of both worlds. It is. A leading 'competitor' recording would be that by Richard Egarr with the Academy Of Ancient Music on Harmonia Mundi (907465), although that two-CD set uses woodwind where Ensemble Vintage Köln here sticks to the violin throughout. Yet one never tires of the sound or the interpretations from the specialist colleagues at the Hochschule für Musik Köln. Even during the probable 'interloper' sonatas, the sinuousness, flexibility and deft weaving of melodic ideas is presented with much more than mere charm. Each line is taken at face value yet rarely fails to make the required impact. Though without shouting. There's much subtlety in their playing. The balance between violin and continuo is clean and supports this emphasis on melody and invention well. Tempi are not so brisk as on the Egarr set. On the other hand nothing ever drags, hangs or leaves us wishing for the next movement. In fact, the members of the Ensemble have as good a grasp of contrast as the composers would have had. Listen to the *allegro* of the E Major, HWV 373, [tr.35] for an illustration of this well-conceived and equally well-executed approach.

At the same time, each movement is played with decisiveness, positive attack and real sensitivity to the subtleties of whoever composed it - as well as its place in the largely *sonata da chiesa* (four movement: slow-fast-slow-fast) format. Of these last four sonatas only the F Major (HWV 370) lasts more than ten minutes; only the D major (HWV 371) of the accepted corpus more than a minute more. Even so, the Ensemble far from treats them as miniatures. They somehow find a whole world - albeit a suitably restricted one - in them: stand back and explore it to the full.

The acoustic is not particularly resonant; and some will find Ariadne Daskalakis's violin perhaps a little too bright, as much a workhorse as a fine quill. This doesn't quite add to the excitement, the thrill which these pieces inspire in other recordings - that by the Locatelli Trio again on Hyperion (CDA66921/3) from 1995, for example. However Ensemble Vintage Köln does not disappoint. Listen to the *allegro* of the G minor, HWV368 [tr.27], for example: interest never wanes from first note to last. The emotional strength is made the stronger by Daskalakis' underplaying of any tugging from minor realms - especially when set against the relief of the surrounding slow movements.

With rather minimal notes in the booklet, this is a release that will satisfy and stimulate if not actually inspire. While there are other recordings of these works by the dozen, Ensemble Vintage Köln has something interesting to say about them ... and says it with style, enjoyment and insight.

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Read more: http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2011/Dec11/Handel_vnsonatas_8572245.htm#ixzz1ltE6FERB