

Spiritato

3-5 February 2023

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne, Church of St Lawrence, Upwey

To quote the printed programme notes: “Spiritato is a period instrument ensemble with a love for little known- composers … producing unique, research-based performance projects, avoiding well-trodden paths, wherever possible.” That ambition is bold and laudable. The fulfilment of the ambition requires technical skill, scholarship, understanding, experience, careful selection of pieces and programming from those who participate. However, the final arbiters of achievement will be those who elect to be part of an audience. For most listeners, the territory of little-known Baroque period music will largely be an unknown experience.

The ensemble attracted good audience numbers in the four concerts given by Spiritato as part of the first tour of a new season for Concerts in the West. This review is primarily based on the concert that took place at the church in Upwey, Dorset.

The programme was brilliantly presented by Kinga Ujszászi (violin and director). It was a balance of appropriate information and guidance and peppered with humour. A concert of short length pieces will invariably be a challenging matter of careful judgement. Spiritato are to be congratulated on finding a balance of pace, structural progression and variety of sentiment. From the wilting shape of an old German chorale melody that provides the core upon which Johannes Fischer hung an elaborate fantasia to his *‘Lamento’* andJohann Kerll’s Earlier-Baroque *Sonata á 3’* with its ‘finger-busy’ phrases and more austere cerebral attraction of ‘call-and-response’ between the instruments, there was always an interesting assortment of musical mood and styles in this programme.

The popular Baroque structure of the so-called Ground Bass was the basis of Pachelbel’s *Ciaccon*a. A beautifully designed piece, the players of Spiritato – Kinga Ujszászi (violin), Magdalena Loth-Hill (violin), Joanne Miller (viola), Jacob Garside (viola da gamba), Nicholas Mendoza (organ) – were at their best in matching perfectly their honed phrasing and dynamics. The ebbs and flows of the melodic elaborations were wonderfully managed.

One of the criteria in programming choices was to demonstrate something of the changes and developments that took place during this period of music. The Andreas Kirchhoff *Sonata* exhibited how violin players were developing new technical abilities. The Buxtehude *Trio Sonata* revealed how composers of the later Baroque could rouse. the more intimate and passionate side of our senses. Whereas the Thieme *Sonata* reminded us that this period brought the formal dance suite to the society of the time.

Perhaps inevitably, J.S. Bach would make an appearance. Even in a programme about the largely unknown, the inclusion of Bach can be rightly justified as a culmination of the Baroque style developed by the many earlier lesser-known names but important innovators. Spiritato selected two arrangements, an organ chorale prelude and the G minor Prelude and Fugue Book 2 of the Well-Tempered Clavier. One could have wished for tighter and greater consistency from the dotted rhythms in the Prelude. However, the carefully considered inflexions of the Fugue theme shared between the instruments more than offset any qualms.

With such a varied and diverse programme of styles, the question was how best to start and conclude the concert. Spiritato had the answers. Scheidt’s *Ludi Musici* provided a very acceptable introduction ensemble with its variety and quick changes of mood, allowing each instrument and player to establish a presence. The Krieger *Sonata á 4* was a brilliant choice for ‘signing off’ piece, permitting each of the players space to say *adieu,* individually and collectively.

Spiritato left an indelible memory of tonal blend, sophisticated phrasing, well-focussed energy, and a highly developed sense of collective playing. They rewarded their audiences tenfold for stepping into the world of unknown Baroque composers and pieces.

Andrew Maddocks February 2023