

Balthasar Fritsch (c. 1570/80 – after 1608), ... *und weil die Music lieblich ist*: Madrigals and Dance Music, Musicke and Mirth (viol quartet) with Ulrike Hofbauer (soprano), Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 88985411952. Total time 66:51.

Very little is known about Balthasar Fritsch. He studied at Leipzig University, played the violin, and is responsible for two books of music: *Primitiae Musicales* (Frankfurt, 1606); and *Neue Deutsche Gesänge nach art der Welschen Madrigalien mit 5. Stimmen* (Leipzig, 1608). The first book contains 12 pavans and 21 galliards for four instruments together with an intrada for five instruments. Presumably Fritsch had violins in mind, but his music is playable on viols and other instruments. As far as I know, the songs are not available in a modern edition, but *Primitiae Musicales* has been published by Edition Güntersberg, and may also be found on the IMSLP website.

The first instrumental piece of the CD, “III. Padovana”, has melodic interest in three of the parts, but most of the alto notes merely fill out the harmony. The texture is constantly changing: in the first section the treble and bass dialogue briefly with the alto and tenor, the tenor and bass move in thirds, followed by some imitation between treble and tenor. For most of the second section the bass has divisions – quavers and a few crotchets – while the other parts move together in minims. In the third section the treble and tenor dialogue with quavers and semiquavers over static harmony reminiscent of Monteverdi. The alto misses out on much of the fun, and spends most of its time wearing out the third fret under the 2nd and 3rd strings (f⁷ and c⁷). In fact the changes of texture are what gives the music much of its charm. The melodic lines are nothing special, and there is a distinct lack of dissonance. Apart from an occasional brief clash of unaccented passing notes, I spot just two 4-3 and three 7-6 progressions in the whole piece. The viol quartet plays well, with gently arched phrases, and they establish a relaxed mood with pleasing concordant sounds.

In the first section of XIX. Galliarda, all parts have rising minims, and in the second half the minims descend. Thanks to a dotted minim before rising, the alto's minims end up out with the other parts by a crotchet. Perhaps in a show of solidarity, the treble kindly joins the alto's off-beat minims on the way down. In the third section the four viols take it in turns to have a bar with crotchets, and even the alto has one such bar paired with the tenor.

The quartet take XVIII. Galliarda much quicker – at about minim = 170, up from about 130 in XIX. Galliarda – and I think it is a shade too fast. In bar 6 the first time round, the treble plays g⁷ instead of d⁷, and both times through loses the two quavers at the end of the bar. Elsewhere all viols have similar pairs of quavers, and it is a bit of a scramble to get them all in.

The second section of XI. Padovana has a descending scale of semibreves in the bass. The alto has the same notes an octave higher, but parallel octaves are avoided by having two rising quavers preceding each long note. Meanwhile the treble and tenor have a motif in parallel sixths creating a predictable downward sequence. In the third section a lively motif including four semiquavers is passed around over a static bass, and the piece finishes with a passage of interlocking dotted crotchet/ quaver pairs. The performance is slick and tightly together, but I think I might feel more at ease listening to it at a slightly slower tempo.

XII. Padovana is a particularly fine pavan with echoes here and there of Dowland. The quartet play it beautifully, never losing the overriding mood of gentle melancholy, even when adding a few semiquaver divisions in the second section.

Scattered amongst the pavans and galliards are ten songs from Fritsch's *Neue Deutsche Gesänge* ably sung by soprano Ulricke Hofbauer. I like the quality of her voice, which is expressive with clear, pure notes. All the words are reproduced in the liner notes: the original German, together with

a translation into modern German and into English. There is much variety, and Hofbauer captures well the various dramatic moods, sensitively supported by the viols with impeccably good ensemble. “Was lieblich ist mich hoch erfrewt” begins with word painting – a particularly high note for “hoch” – which is lost in the English translation: “All that is lovely gives me great delight.” The other songs are a mix of sacred and secular: “Das eilend scheiden schwer” expresses sadness at parting from one’s beloved; “Alslang dich Gott hie leben lest“ advises preparing for death since any day could be one’s last. There are flirtatious changes of direction in the music of “Ach thu dich zu mir kehren” reflecting the poet’s wooing of his “schöns brauns Mägdelein”, translated as “lovely nut-brown maid”. “Daß ich nicht deines gleichen bin” consists of five separate contrasting parts, expressing different thoughts on unrequited love.

The group play four renaissance viols (treble, alto, tenor, bass) built by Robert Foster, which he based on instruments in an anonymous painting c. 1540, “Castalius der Brunn”, now in a private collection in Switzerland.

This is an entertaining CD of music which deserves to be better known.

Stewart McCoy