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An Italian in Dresden

Aurelio Bianco, ‘Nach englischer und frantzösischer Art: Vie et oeuvre de Carlo Farina (avec l’édition des cinq recueils de Dresde)’ (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), €60

The place of Carlo Farina (c.1604–1639) in music history has long been defined by reception of his most famous work, the Capriccio stravagante, renowned for its pioneering inclusion of virtuosic violin techniques, which the composer used to imitate the sounds of other instruments and of animals. For many 20th-century scholars, the Capriccio was a stain on Farina’s reputation; in The history of violin playing (London, 1965, p.132) David Boyden wrote that ‘such pieces cannot be considered seriously except in so far as they advance the technique of the instrument’ and Willi Apel’s Italian violin music of the 17th century (Bloomington, 1990, p.72) suggested simply that the work was ‘best forgotten’.

Forgotten, instead, was the rest of Farina’s music. With a few noteworthy exceptions (such as the comparative references in Peter Allsop’s Cavalier Giovanni Battista Buonamente: Franciscan violinist (Aldershot, 2005)), scholars and performers alike have largely neglected the compositions of this early violin virtuoso. Reliable modern editions of his music have also been in short supply. All these circumstances have been regrettable, as Farina’s music is both important as a witness to the early 17th-century musical traditions of Italy and Germany, and also beautifully expressive.

Aurelio Bianco’s new biography, which includes a critical edition on CD-Rom of Farina’s five extant publications, is thus a welcome addition to the literature on this composer. Bianco has undertaken exhaustive archival research, gathering sources on Farina’s life, career and professional milieu; he also offers close analysis of Farina’s entire surviving compositional output, situating it within the context of the styles of his day.

Although the title-pages of Farina’s publications call him ‘Mantovano’ or ‘von Mantua’, there is little evidence concerning his early life or career there; Bianco suggests a familial link with one Luigi Farina, a member of the concerto delle viuole at Mantua, and in any case the Gonzaga court was home to a rich culture of string-playing during the first years of the 17th century. That Farina received a recommendation to the Elector of Saxony from the court in Prague indicates that he had been working in the latter city for some time after leaving his native Italy, and in assuming the post of Konzertmeister at the Dresden court Farina followed a route taken by many of his Italian contemporaries to places of employment north of the Alps. Farina worked at the court of Elector Johann Georg I (under the supervision of Hofkapellmeister Heinrich Schütz) from 1625 until 1628, when Saxony’s entrance into the Thirty Years’ War led the elector to reduce his musical establishment considerably. Bianco traces Farina’s career through a series of journeys through Italian- and German-speaking musical centres (Bonn, Parma, Modena, Lucca, Danzig and Vienna); at each stop he no doubt composed as well as played. That all of Farina’s extant compositions—over a hundred dance pieces, ten sonatas, the Capriccio, and a handful of works in other genres—date from his brief Dresden period serves as a reminder of how much music from the early 17th century is lost.

The title of Bianco’s book highlights the convergence of national styles represented in Farina’s music. Although the Italians were apparently at the forefront of violin virtuosity in the early 17th century, and German patrons seem to have been particularly interested in the composition and publication of works that exploited virtuosic violin techniques, Farina and many of his Italian colleagues...
working in German courts were required, to greater or lesser extents, to accommodate their native musical language to the idiom of their host region. The overwhelming majority of Farina’s music is for four-part string consort—a texture favoured by German courts under the influence of what Bianco calls a musical ‘colonization’ of Central Europe by English trends (p.91). Some of Bianco’s most illuminating analysis comes in his comparison of the dance-consort music of Farina and his German colleagues (Michael Praetorius, Johann Hermann Schein, Samuel Scheidt and others) to that of English composers such as John Dowland, Thomas Morley and Thomas Simpson. Although none of Farina’s publications is dubbed ‘nach englischer und frantzösischer Art’, that phrase graced the title-pages of anthologies of dance music by other composers, and Bianco suggests that it helps to contextualize and explain the compositional choices of Farina and his colleagues in German regions (p.14). And although Farina’s titles-pages indicate that his music is best suited for the violin consort, Bianco rightly notes that most of his compositions work equally well for a consort of viols, a medium in use in German cities and favoured by English composers.

Not surprisingly, Farina’s Italianate genres are better suited to the violin family; the violin was increasingly taking a leading role in the instrumental stile moderno of the 1620s and 1630s. The virtuosic techniques—seltzsamen Inventionen (strange inventions)—found in Farina’s Capriccio mirror the curiose e moderne inventioni (curious and modern inventions) in the 1626 Sonate of Biagio Marini, another Italian violinist and composer employed at the ducal court at Neuberg, and those techniques exploit the violin in the most idiomatic ways. (On the dating of Marini’s volume and its possible relationship to Farina’s Capriccio, see my “Esprimere la voce humana”: connections between vocal and instrumental music by Italian composers of the early 17th century’, Journal of Musicology, xxvii (2010), pp.181–223.) In contrast to Marini, who scored his ‘inventions’ in the Italianate soprano-bass texture (that is, for soprano instrument or instruments with basso continuo), Farina wrote his Capriccio in the same four-part consort texture as his dance pieces, and he interspersed his virtuosic mimetic episodes with Germanic dance-sections and fanfares. This contrast in scoring—together with the fact that Farina published his ‘inventions’ in Dresden, and not in Venice, as Marini did—highlights the extent to which Farina was immersed in the musical culture of his host court. And indeed, as Bianco shows, Farina’s investment in the German musical milieu evidently paid dividends in terms of influence: Bianco points out striking similarities between the Capriccio and works penned subsequently by German composers—Johann Vierdanck, Johann Jakob Walther, Johann Paul Westhoff and Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, among others—who also used virtuosity in the service of mimesis.

Bianco devotes fewer pages to Farina’s Italianate genres—the sonatas, canzonas and sinfonias—and perhaps rightly so, since those seem to have occupied Farina less than the dance genres. Nevertheless, as Bianco points out, Farina’s ten sonatas, which appear in his first, fourth and fifth Dresden publications, are apparently the first substantial works in that genre to be printed in Germany, and on those grounds alone merit attention. Bianco situates Farina’s sonata idiom nicely within the context of the stile moderno of Italy in the 1620s and 30s, comparing his contributions to the genre to works by Dario Castello, Giuseppe Scarani, Marini and others. Farina’s sonatas are among the longest exemplars of the sonata during this early period, and Bianco elucidates many of the compositional techniques that Farina relied upon to extend his works. If Bianco offers a taste of the analytical techniques that can be applied to works like these, one wishes, perhaps, for more: I wonder if, as a community of scholars and performers, we still have not confronted fundamental questions about what prompted this turn to extended abstract instrumental composition and to a full exploration of instruments’ capacities to be expressive. The fact that such questions remain unanswered—indeed, that they have not yet been fully articulated—speaks to the difficulties inherent in the study of pre-canonical, untexted music, which even in its own day was under-theorized. (One study that starts down this path is Andrew Dell’Antonio’s Syntax, form, and genre in sonatas and canzonas (Lucca, 1997).) Still, such questions surely lie outside the scope of a life-and-works project such as Bianco’s, and I mean only to point towards a possible direction for future study.

A word remains to be said about the fine edition of Farina’s music that accompanies Bianco’s book. As noted earlier, Farina’s works have largely escaped the attention of performers, a situation that Bianco’s edition will undoubtedly go a long way towards rectifying. It seems a simple but ground-breaking idea to make critical editions of music affordable for both publishers and purchasers by distributing them in digital format. The CD-Rom includes every work published in the five Dresden books; the only other pieces—seven short works preserved in a manuscript in Darmstadt—appear in the book itself. The title-pages for the five collections of music appear both in the book and on the disc; included in both places, too, are
the famous and elusive performance instructions for the *Capriccio stravagante*, preserved in a lone Cantus partbook in Dresden but missing from the otherwise complete Kassel exemplar. With the exception of a few typographical errors (on p. 221 of the book, ‘tremuliten’ should be ‘tremuliren’), the edition and verbal transcriptions are accurate. Bianco deals with issues like the transcription of slurs—difficult for early music-printers to notate accurately—adeptly and honestly, indicating clearly where his own editorial voice comes into play. Those familiar with early German printing will appreciate the fact that Bianco maintains the distinctions between *Fraktur* and Roman font.

The publisher could have exploited the digital format of the edition more fully; it would be nice, for example, to be able to print out individual parts (as Farina’s first printers did) in addition to the full score. But this is surely no fault of the author, whose thorough research, clear prose, lucid editing and dedication to the subject of his study will undoubtedly help to present Farina’s music to a wider public.

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