

CD Review

By Neville Olliffe

J S Bach; Six Sonatas and Partitas BWV 1001 - 1006, Transcribed for Clavcembalo by Winsome Evans; Clavicembalo (harpsichord), Winsome Evans; CD Celestial Harmonies 14268-2. Package courtesy of Celestial Harmonies. Information and orders at, www.harmonies.com

Johann Sebastian's six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin form a substantial slab of music that few but the best violinists would attempt in its entirety. To "transcribe, arrange and embellish" this mountain into manuscript for harpsichord could be half a lifetime's undertaking, especially if one considers the complication of dutifully formulating it in the style and stamp of Bach himself.

This is what Winsome Evans has done. An Associate Professor of Music at Sydney University, she is not one to allow a fact or snippet of research to slip through her fingers. Enclosed with the double CD set is her 147 page miniature of the transcribed manuscript. Oh, and of course, the CDs.... you and I don't necessarily have to even look at the music - just pop a disc in the player and hear Winsome playing it all for us. How authentic we have become in our pursuit of early performance practise - 250 years ago there was no alternative to someone physically sitting down at the harpsichord and playing. Accompanying all of this is the CD booklet, giving Winsome's account of aspects of the project and research. It is interesting reading.

But the gist of this article is to assess the recording itself. In brief: It is outstanding! One of its features is that it actually has the aura of being present in a recital: not a recording studio or chapel amidst a snake pit of cables and microphones. I like the deliberate unhurriedness of the slower passages. I like the subtleties and the consistent and evenly accentuated phrasing. I like the powerful trills. I like the feeling of proportion and momentum - Winsome's playing makes me think of being behind the wheel of one of those 12 cylinder vintage tourers, where the bonnet length is more than half of the car. And I like the way this car cruises the countryside, making slight of the terrain.

The McAllister built harpsichord is based on a lone surviving 1728 double by Christian Zell. There is some explanation in the booklet of the attempt to capture a strong, live sound. One is well aware that this has been achieved.

The CDs are available on their own, or in a package with the miniature score. I believe an A4 sized score is also available. Whether or not you are captivated by Bach for solo violin, this is all brilliant work for the harpsichord, and delightful listening.

A remarkable achievement.