

# *Anna Magdalena in a refreshing old interpretation*

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At first glance one is able to see the good quality of this double CD: it is very attractively and thoughtfully produced, with the CD cover imitating the green wrapping of the original manuscript of the *Notenbüchlein*, with its gold imprinted initials AMB. This attempt on a facsimile gives the impression that considerable care was taken in the design of this production – and therefore it will be worth looking at all components of this CD in detail, before coming to the actual recording.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Das Notenbüchlein der Anna Magdalena Bach 1725 (Anna Magdalena Bach's Little Music Book). James Maddox, piano; Ingrid Schnithüsen, soprano. Recording producer: Moritz Bergfeld. Two CDs DDD, recorded Feb-Oct 2002, Johanneskirche Bonn-Bad Godesberg (piano solos) and Peterskirche Kempen/ Niederrhein (vocal pieces). Coviello Classics 20407

Upon opening the cover, one is struck by a photo of the original manuscript page with the famous 'G major minuet' on it. The same image serves as the background for the list of tracks in the booklet text. Very well chosen, it seems at first – this is a piece that probably every piano student played in his first year. In the middle of the booklet there are two further images with this minuet and the one in G minor. However, now the reader is told that these two pieces are not actually by Bach, but by a certain Christian Petzold. Further information is found in the booklet text, which reports that these minuets are from a suite by that Dresden court organist. Thus, two of Bach's most widely-known pieces are not by him! For friends of Bach's music who are not up to date with the latest scholarly literature, this is an interesting piece of information. In any case, now the selection of this manuscript page to decorate the cover and the booklet gets even a deeper meaning: by choosing a piece not by Bach, it is stressed that the *Notenbüchlein* was first and foremost a book of music belonging to Bach's wife, with the music she liked and probably played and sung herself – it was not primarily a collection of her or her family's works.

The booklet text by Wolfgang Sand is very well written and is given in the German original and in English translation. The text includes short biographical notes about Anna Magdalena, as well as a short overview of the history of the *Notenbüchlein* and editions – and most importantly it includes short and yet very informative passages on each of the pieces. The lyrics of the vocal pieces are also given in German and English.

Given such a well researched, scholarly approach to the whole production, it is slightly puzzling why the pieces are not given in the order in which they appear in the manuscript.

Instead they were wildly mixed, so that the actual number two, for instance, is the opening piece of the second disc. One may assume that the recording numbering was thought to be more appropriate from a musical point of view – if that was the case, a justification in the booklet notes would have been interesting to read. In any case, the notes on the pieces follow the order in the manuscript, and it is therefore not quite easy to listen to the CD and read the respective notes at the same time. However, the original numbering is made clear in the list of tracks, and with some effort (and permanent changing of the discs), one will be able to listen to the pieces in their original order.

Now to the playing. At first one will be very surprised – after all the facsimiles and the scholarly comments, historical performance practices might reasonably be expected. Several such recordings of the *Notenbüchlein*, played on a harpsichord and clavichord, are available on the market, notably Michael Behringer's recording in the complete Bach edition on Hänssler and Nicholas McGegan's recording on Harmonia Mundi. The present recording, however, is different: Australian pianist James Maddox, who now lives and teaches in Germany, plays on a modern grand piano, not on an original or reconstructed instrument. The acoustics more resemble a big concert hall than a little room, and the music is treated not as the intimate chamber music it is, but as great concert music. His *rubati* give the music an almost-Romantic touch, and the famous 'Prelude in C Major' (disc two, 14), which Bach later re-used in the first volume of the *Wohltemperierte Klavier*, is played with as much pedal as a Chopin *étude*.

Fifteen years ago such an approach would perhaps have been booed or at least ignored for being too old-fashioned. Nevertheless, for today it is quite refreshing. In the modern recording landscape, which is full of 'historically correct' recordings, Maddox sticks out as being unconventional. His playing is very thoughtful and well balanced – despite playing the music in a concert hall, he is able to point out all the subtleties and nuances in these miniatures. His touch is very pleasant and 'cantabile', and yet the playing could not be any clearer on a harpsichord with its metallic sound. A piece like the 'Solo per il Cembalo' by CPE Bach (disc one, 23) is played with an airiness that is missing in most of the 'historical sound reconstructing' recordings – and that is yet so essential for this kind of music. On the other hand, the opening of the 'Second Suite in E minor' (disc two, 1-6) is played with the astonishing gravity of an organ prelude. Maddox has indeed a wide range of expressions.

The renowned soprano Ingrid Schmithüsen sings the arias and songs of the collection. Thus, she probably adopts the role of Anna Magdalena, a soprano herself, who may have sung these pieces accompanied by Johann Sebastian. Schmithüsen's voice appears to be very suitable for this music – it is light and brilliant and yet full and round. It becomes obvious that she knows what she is singing about: in 'Willst du dein Herz mir schenken' (If you want to give your heart to me, disc one, 18) – Bach's only ever written love-song! – her interpretation of the different verses is individual and intelligent. This is very well supported by Maddox's improvised variations in the accompaniment.

Due to the ensemble's sensitive interpretation of the texts, it is even regrettable that four verses of the overlong choral 'Dir, dir, Jehova, will ich singen' (I will sing to thee, Jehova, disc one, 11) were cut. Schmithüsen is able to show some virtuosity in this piece, which is probably an original composition by Johann Sebastian: the wide range and trills are

mastered easily. Her projection is amazingly clear and transparent in all the pieces; little surprising since she was a student of Fischer-Dieskau. Nevertheless, it must unfortunately be said that her entries on a high note are sometimes inaccurate (so at the beginning of 'Gib dich zufrieden und sei stille', disc two, 17; and especially in 'Warum betrübst du dich', disc two, 12). She does not quite get the right note immediately, but once she does it is full and beautiful. In any case, it is audible that Schmithüsen has understood the character of the *Notenbüchlein*, which is a collection of music for private entertainment as well as for contemplation. Thus her rendition of the sacred chorales sounds equally convincing as that of the secular arias.

In sum, both Maddox and Schmithüsen give an interesting interpretation of these 'evergreens' of (classical) music, and together they make a very good team. Even though their recording may be far away from all 'historic accuracy', they produce music that is most enjoyable to listen to. This is a recording of the *Notenbüchlein* for the third Millennium.