

Reinventing Guitar II

SCARLATTI: 5 Sonatas; BACH: Prelude, Fugue, & Allegro; Toccata in E minor;

HANDEL: Harmonious Blacksmith Variations; Chaconne in G

Smaro Gregoriadou, g

Delos 3419—61 minutes

I reviewed Vol. I of Gregoriadou's project (N/D 2009) with a mostly positive response. This one is even better. First, some word about her playing. It is superb. Her technique is flawless, no matter what demands she encounters. Her rhythm is fluid and rock-solid, and her ornaments (cross-string fingerings) burst like fireworks. Maybe some passages could use more subtlety—she is a strong player, sometimes too much so, though she is never crude and never overplays. Her tone? Well, that's what this is all about. Ms Gregoriadou is part of Kertosopoulos Aesthetics, Yorgos Kertosopoulos's research center on guitar construction and historic context. Here she uses two kinds of instruments: a single course guitar with pedals that can alter the sound box to change sonority and sustain (she uses three instruments with different tunings), and a double course instrument with a single string for the first and the rest in either single or double octaves. The set includes excellent notes that go into more detail on the instrument design and strings used. She also includes a separate track with the sounds of each instrument and a comparison of some of the works done on a standard guitar. This was very helpful; I wish she'd done that for her first release. Those notes are fascinating, if not always convincing. Her defense of gut strings as sounding "brilliant" is frankly confusing. I've never used gut, but any performance or recording I've heard has sounded dull—possibly warm, if you're in a mood, but never brilliant. Still, her overall point is to explore differences of sonority, using altered construction, strings, even systems of intonation. Her choice of high Baroque repertory is perfect for such explorations, since the concept of original intent has been beaten to death for the last 50 years. I've never been terribly partisan on the question, mainly because there is no possibility of having an original audience. Any ears that have heard not only Bach but Beethoven, Wagner, Mahler, Stravinsky, and Lennon-McCartney cannot hear Bach as his original audience did. But I've enjoyed many reinterpretations of past styles simply because of the variety of fresh sounds that the exploration has produced. I suspect the most controversial works here will be the ones she does on the double-course instruments—four of the Scarlatti sonatas and the Bach toccata. Having the single first string and the rest in octaves means that you are constantly bouncing around octave displacements of themes. Many will find that disturbing, and I'll admit it takes some getting used to. But after a while I started really to enjoy the richness of sonority. She doesn't sound

like a harpsichord, but she does sound like something else, something that seem to fit the Baroque sound world—maybe a lautenwerke, but not quite. The improvisatory character of the toccata is especially suited to this. And that's the thing about Baroque music—Bach sounds wonderful on anything, whether a harpsichord or piano or synthesizer or harmonica. It is just magnificent music. And Scarlatti? Should his music be limited in its sounds because the harpsichord was limited to two or three qualities? Gregoriadou includes that wonderful quote from Ralph Kirkpatrick (the K before Scarlatti's sonatas) that I make my students memorize: "Nothing could be more fatal than allowing the musical imagination to be restricted by the limits of two or three colors or the limitations of any instrument one is using." Her Scarlatti is high-energy playing, full of joy. If the Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro isn't up to the best (such as Jason Vieaux, J/A 2009), it is still a moving and kinetic performance. It's nice to hear the Handel Harmonious Blacksmith Variations in Handel's own setting rather than Giuliani's, and also fun to hear the G-major Chaconne. Presti and Lagoya did it as a duet, in an incomparable reading that is a reference for the kind of sound a guitar can produce. Gregoriadou's performance is very different, but still exciting, joyous, and alive. I had a great deal of enjoyment from this, and if you have a reasonably open mind, you will, too. KEATON