

MATTHEW DUBOURG: *WELCOME HOME, MR DUBOURG*, IRISH BAROQUE ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY PETER WHELAN, Linn Records (2019), (CD) CKD 532.

This recording, hopefully the first in a series, reflects an ongoing process of musical recovery. From tentative beginnings in 2014, Peter Whelan—successively directing Ensemble Marsyas and, as here, the Irish Baroque Orchestra—has encouraged audiences to experience the music of eighteenth-century Dublin in unexpected ways, with concerts that have explored the repertoire of the viceregal court of Dublin Castle, the virtuoso violin culture of the period and, most recently, music associated with the operatic celebrity of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci. In 2015, Whelan directed a revival of Johann Sigismund Kusser's serenata *The Universal Applause of Mount Parnassus* at the Chapel Royal of Dublin Castle, reconstructing a work not heard since the birthday celebrations for Queen Anne in the same castle grounds in 1711. 2017 saw the Arts Council-funded project 'Rediscovering Irish State Musick', led by Whelan, with performances (at both Dublin Castle and the Kilkenny Arts Festival) of court odes and other material associated with the Irish State Musick, the principal ensemble of Dublin Castle. Music played as part of the project, as well as at the Irish Baroque Orchestra's concert of 'Dublin's Virtuosi' the following year (Whelan's inaugural concert as the ensemble's artistic director), provided material for this present recording.

George Frideric Handel's letter to Charles Jennens (dated 29 December 1741), describing his first impressions of playing in Neale's Music Room on Fishamble Street, offers another starting point: 'as for the Instruments they are really excellent, M[onsieur] Dubourgh being at the Head of them, and the Musick sounds delightfully in this charming Room, which puts me in such [good] Spirits...'. Traditionally, accounts of Dublin's musical life of this period are dominated by the singular fame of Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. However, as even this short account suggests, the initial success of that work was due, at least in some degree, to the high quality of playing standards already present in the Irish capital at that time, a point that is rarely emphasized. Countering this neglect, and building on research done partly by Whelan himself, the present recording seeks to recover something of this world by focusing on the career of the musician to whom Handel refers: Matthew Dubourg, violinist, composer, and Master of the Irish State Musick from 1728 until his death in 1767.

Endeavouring to create snapshots of Dubourg's career, this recording includes works that aim to evoke his playing, alongside music from royal odes that he composed in the course of his duties at the viceregal court. The choice of material for the first part of the programme relies partly on imaginative connections, with the Vivaldi Concerto for two violins in A, RV519—the fifth of the *L'Estro armonico* concertos—included simply because of references to Dubourg playing it in a novel of 1771 (Francis Fleming's *The*

Life and Extraordinary Adventures... of Timothy Ginnadrake). Corelli's Sonata in A, Op. 5 no. 9 is heard in a version which preserves Dubourg's own ornamentation, while Dubourg's Concerto in D is a rare survivor from the early part of his career, fortuitously preserved in the Saxon State Library from the former music collection of the Dresden court. Standing in for Dubourg is violinist Sophie Gent, whose supple and elegant tone projects a calm detachment, negotiating rapid passagework with style, though at times one wonders if a slightly more intense approach might have been a better match for Dubourg's reportedly 'very bold' playing style. This is especially felt in the playing of the Vivaldi concerto, the lightness of which contrasts with the pungency that usually characterizes recorded performances of this work—though it is possible that this is due more to the sound recording and editing than the original playing here.

What this approach does achieve, however, is an excellent match in sound quality between the smaller items and those for full ensemble, which makes for some interesting combinations. 'Dubourg's Maggot', a smartly executed set of variations on a catchy English dance, proves an excellent prelude to Dubourg's own dance-like concerto. This in turn is followed by two of Dubourg's arrangements of traditional Irish tunes, 'Eileen Aroon' ('Eibhlín a Rún', with variations) and 'Ciste nó stór'. In her well-judged programme notes, musicologist Samantha Owens recalls the report of Dubourg's attempt to pass himself off as a country fiddler at Dunboyne fair, a tantalising detail very much brought to life in the latter tune. Played unaccompanied by Gent, deeply expressive in its simplicity, 'Ciste nó stór' makes for an intriguing pairing with the Corelli Sonata—complete with Dubourg's complex ornaments—that follows.

The second half of the programme shifts to Dubourg's public role as court composer at Dublin Castle. As a genre, the court ode is currently enjoying a period of revival and re-examination, and it is valuable to have the selection offered here. The chorus 'Hibernia's sons, your voices raise' from the birthday ode of 1753 opens the disc; this is joined by a pair of single airs from the odes of 1740 and 1743, and a complete performance of the 1739 ode, 'Crowned with a more illustrious light'. The music was edited by Whelan, working from four manuscript volumes held in the Royal College of Music, London, and is recorded here for the first time. Dubourg's stylistic idiom (comparable with Handel, Arne, or Boyce) is typical for this period, with an instrumental palette reflecting the varied ensemble that was at his disposal. The air from 1740, 'Now the mingling hosts engage', features a virtuoso bassoon obbligato, well played by Carles Cristobal, while bass Edward Grint adds a necessarily dark edge to the belligerence of this material. This makes for a strong contrast with the pastoral mood of 'Soft breathes the melting flute' that follows, with its elegant flute scoring, well matched by the singing of soprano Anna Devin.

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Anna Devin returns for ‘Crowned with a more illustrious light’, joined by the IBO Chorus and mezzo-soprano Rachel Kelly, as well as the full ensemble. Its conventional praise to King George II and British power, with only a faint reference to ‘war’s alarms’ (a possible reference to the War of Jenkins’ Ear), crystallizes in the final solo air ‘Born to glory, sprung from praise’. Anna Devin, with the obbligato cello of Sarah McMahon, brings excellent energy and drive to this material, which leads directly into a delightful closing duet with Rachel Kelly (‘Pleased with our state we gladly sing’).

The title of this release—‘Welcome home, Mr Dubourg’—recalls an anecdote about him improvising an extended cadenza, with that greeting uttered by Handel as Dubourg eventually found his way back to the original key to play the cadential trill. This harmless musical joke gives a sense of period colour, the moment memorialized in the final track, though it perhaps also raises questions about ideas of ‘home’ in the more usual sense of the word. Hopefully no longer viewed, like Dublin’s Georgian squares once were, as insignificant products of a foreign style, the reclaiming of this repertoire now provokes more curiosity than disdain. As ideas of identity become less fixed, the time is surely well overdue for Irish listeners to welcome home these ‘foreign’ musicians, artists who were themselves—and Dubourg especially—products of a fluid and uncertain culture. The achievement of this recording is not only in its contents but also in what it represents. Peter Whelan’s ongoing project to rediscover the hitherto neglected musical world of Georgian Dublin reflects an all-too-rare collaboration between performance and musicology in Ireland, one that may lead to even more enriching discoveries in the future.

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