



Great Wonder: John Dowland and his Contemporaries
Well-Tuned Words:
Amanda Sidebottom, soprano;
Erik Ryding, lute
Quill Classics QC 1012

No matter that John Dowland spent most of his life on the European mainland. His essential Englishness remains, and his connection with his contemporaries represented on this recording is unmistakable. Clarity and transparency are telltale hallmarks of English music in any epoch. Dowland's compositions are complex and intricate, but his music never fails to be direct, honest, and unpretentious. A case in point is the use of hemiola in "His Golden Locks": contrapuntal rhythmic texture never obscures the text or the melodic arc. Dowland did himself no good by hobnobbing with continental Catholic intriguers and was never welcome at English courts. Regardless, the respect of his British peers, including the two represented here, is well documented. Thomas Campion is as important for his poetry as he is for what may seem somewhat tame musical settings. John Danyel is considered lugubrious, but the choices here reflect a far lighter and optimistic composer. Well-Tuned Words has culled the more unaffected ayres of these composers and complements them with solid, conventional performances. Little interpolated ornamentation and unusual vocal color or lute technique is present. Erik Ryding provides strong support with a clear, smooth rhythmic profile. Soprano Amanda Sidebottom reveals her excellent training, much in the mold of Julianne Baird, and one expects that as she matures, she will become more adventuresome. Here, she holds tightly to homogeneous vocal color and technique. The high laryngeal placement is appropriately non-operatic and speech-like, but it does pose the danger of seeming slightly under pitch in sustained passages and in the upper range.

— Clara O'Brien/Lance Hulme



Jarring Sounds
Danielle Reuter-Harrah, mezzo-soprano; Adam Cockerham, lute, theorbo, and guitar
Self-produced
JarringSounds.com

Jarring Sounds consists of two San Francisco Conservatory graduates whose wide-ranging programming and excellent stylistic interpretations clash in the sense that we are challenged by their novelty and variety. Like similar ensembles, such as *Mélomanie*, the programming reflects a continuing trend of bookending the common practice period with repertoire predating 1700 and postdating 1950. On their debut album, early music is represented by three airs de cour from French composers Pierre Guéron (1570?–1620?), Antoine Boësset (1586-1643), and Gabriel Bataille (c.1575–1630) that form a lovely set displaying Adam Cockerham's masterful lute technique. Danielle Reuter-Harrah's polished and pleasing "*seconda prattica*" ornamentation makes the lone madrigal by Monteverdi a particular highlight. Madness and piety polarize two songs by Purcell. The other bookend begins with *Songs from the Chinese*, which contains Benjamin Britten's hallmarks: ascending melodic lines and hanging dominant/tonic harmonies in a framework of dance motives. The final selection is a 1990 cycle set to Dylan Thomas poems, *Under Milk Wood Songs*, by British composer/guitarist Stephen Goss (b.1964). The eclectic compositional mix of styles and genres is well matched by elastic and colorful performance techniques. The variety of material shows the versatility and range of both performers. Cockerham demonstrates clear and fluid fingering with admirable rhythmic control on all instruments. Reuter-Harrah's light and agile lyric mezzo voice is reminiscent of Jan DeGaetani, with lithe, colorful expressivity and close attention to text. As a team, their success in navigating the jarring juxtapositions of styles and genres is admirable.

— Clara O'Brien/Lance Hulme



Franz Xaver Richter: String quartets, Op. 5
casalQuartett: Corinne Chapelle, Rachel Späth, violins;
Markus Fleck, viola;
Andreas Fleck, violoncello
SoloMusica SM 184

Although it sometimes seems as if early musicians are repeatedly tilling the same fields in the early 18th century, for the century beginning in 1750 there remains vast terrain, even for the string quartet, seemingly our most popular touring ensemble. Austro-Moravian composer Franz Xaver Richter (1709–1789) may be best known to flutists for his two sets of keyboard trios with flute, flute duets, and flute solos. Camerata Köln released a disc devoted to the first of these in 2000. His early symphonies—two sets published in Paris in 1744—have been recorded on Naxos by the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra and are well-worth getting to know. The casalQuartett has a notable discography of modern works (e.g., a disc of quartets by Czech composers Erwin Schulhoff and Viktor Ullmann). Here, playing instruments by Jacobus Stainer, the group makes an excellent case for Richter's sole set of quartets, published both in London (1768) and Paris (c.1772), but probably dating as early as the mid-1750s, which would make them among the very earliest works in the genre. (The set recorded here includes seven works, since the Paris edition contains an alternate No. 5 in G minor, and in an unusual four movements. The London edition is available at IMSLP). To my ears, there is not a trace of the baroque among these works, all but No. 5b in three movements, with the minuetti the most retrospective feature. The casalQuartett makes this charming music their own, with soft-spoken readings on period instruments that bring out all the nuances. There has been one previous disc of the first three quartets, but to my knowledge this two-CD box is the first recording of all seven. Delicious!

— Tom Moore