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C D S P O T L I G H T

Breathtaking brevity

*Music by Sweelinck
and his pupils -
reviewed by
GEORGE BALCOMBE*

'... a brilliant performance ...'



This package of disc and programme notes might well be called 'Sweelinck for Beginners'. The music is played by Gail Archer, an American organist and musicologist who also wrote the words. Sweelinck was a teenage prodigy within an Amsterdam dynasty and he irreversibly influenced the evolution of music in northern Europe including England. He taught many pupils composition and keyboard performance and himself composed for organ and/or harpsichord. When Sweelinck's students left Amsterdam for their home countries they took with them manuscript copies of the great man's organ works with the result that over seventy pieces survive today.

Organist Gail Archer identifies three strands in Sweelinck's keyboard works; a) toccatas, fantasias, and 'distinctive echo fantasies suitable for harpsichord or organ'; b) idiomatic settings of chorale melodies linked to a prelude, and c) secular songs and dances designed as themes with variations.

Sweelinck's innovations are now accepted as normal but the famous virtuoso invented, for example, the method of beginning an organ fugue with one subject only and then piling up texture and complexity until they soar to a climax of resolved harmonies. He excelled the skills even of Frescobaldi in the manipulation of fugal devices such as countersubject, stretto and sustained pedalpoint. He was also the first to give an

independent contrapuntal line to the pedals. These inventions awaited that other great dynastic prodigy, J S Bach after his birth in 1685 more than sixty years after Sweelinck died.

The organ works chosen for this disc are arranged in a sort of two-tier sandwich. Sweelinck's four-minute Toccata in C comes first [[listen -- track 1, 0:00-1:00](#)] with his eleven-minute Ricecar [[listen -- track 20, 0:00-1:00](#)] last and, in the middle, his arrangement of the dance tune *Malle Sijmen* (*Simple Simon*). Simple Sweelinck's duration for this is one minute thirty nine seconds. Wedged between the master's three bites at the sandwich are two 'echo' pieces by pupil Scheidt [[listen -- track 3, 0:00-0:33](#)] and a theme with ten variations, *Est-ce Mars*, lasting just over ten minutes. There is also some Magnificat-based music by another pupil, Scheidemann, which come in at slightly over twelve minutes. The brevity of all these pieces is breathtaking, indeed shocking, for they fire the listener like a space rocket into the early twentieth century. There is, after all, nothing new about Webern. Unlike Webern, however, Sweelinck and his pupils may have improvised on these short pieces to show off their acknowledged brilliance at the art of improvisation

Since the music around 1600 owed its existence to counterpoint, quite appropriately, the recording technique of this disc is to make the composers' contrapuntal ingenuity loud and clear. But this has been done at the expense of an aural sensation of three-dimensional space. Reverberation is doubtless the enemy of contrapuntal clarity. An organ is not only the instrument itself but also the acoustics of the architecture around it.

Surely Sweelinck and his pupils, who went from him to play fine organs in beautiful churches across the whole of northern Germany and beyond, during the metamorphosis of Renaissance music into the Baroque, would have been among the first to agree that the magnificence of the organ derives from its own sound heard in the context of the built space around it. Deprived of that space the music sounds sparse. However, Gail Archer, with this method of recording, is consistent in the emphasis on the counterpoint. She gives a brilliant performance culminating in the astounding outburst at the end of the recital with Sweelinck's Ricecar [[listen -- track 20, 10:30-11:33](#)].