

Pentagram – Lee Santana  
 Compositions by Lee Santana,  
 Nicholas Vallet and J. S. Bach.  
 Deutsche Harmonia Mundi (Sony  
 Music) CD 88697851082  
 www.sonymusicclassical.de  
 CD 55:44 minutes

The most compelling aspect of Santana's expressive performances and compositions is his innate ability to communicate with the listener. He takes them on a journey which, whilst reflecting his wealth of experience in historical performance, also produces a multifaceted spectrum of attractive timbres and harmonies; ones which often reflect Santana's own musical influences and a love of an eclectic range of musical styles. Pentagram, Santana's latest disc is no exception to this. The disc has five compositions; three by Santana, a collection of dances movements by Nicolas Vallet (1583–1642), and concludes with a Chaconne, which Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) wrote for his deceased wife. For those of you who are fans of early music, yet cautious when dealing with the sometimes treacherous and often unpleasant manifestations of 'contemporary music', then this is the album for you. Santana's compositions are beautiful and uplifting. This CD comes highly recommended.

Olivia James

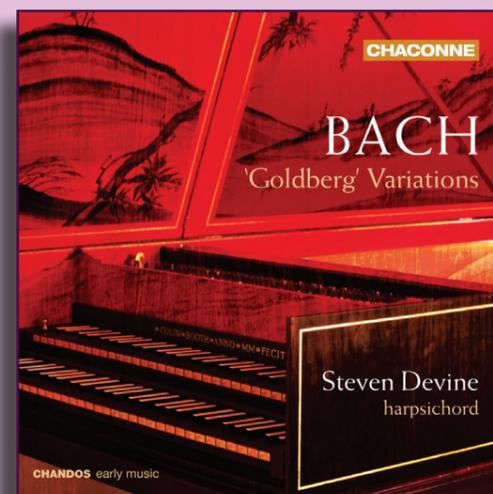


Porpora – Cantatas Nos. 7-12 to  
 Frederick Prince of Wales (1735)  
 Iestyn Davies (countertenor);  
 Arcangelo; Jonathan Cohen (cello)  
 Hyperion CDA67894

CD 78:04 minutes

Porpora is known perhaps not so much for his music as the fact that he was one of Handel's operatic competitors in 18th century London, and so I looked forward to this chance to make an estimate for myself. The cantatas featured here are intimate, domestic pieces discoursing on the pleasures and vicissitudes of love, in which the operatic world is only occasionally hinted at, notwithstanding their form of alternating pairs of recitatives and arias. Their expressive possibilities are fairly limited however, as the melodies rarely move by leaps and bounds. Iestyn Davies has a gentle, mellifluous voice that suits the cantatas' small scale, but the interpretations are subtle to the point of blandness, as though even the performers can't summon much enthusiasm for this fairly workaday music. This disc is a missed opportunity, which is a shame as Davies is sympathetically partnered by Jonathan Cohen on the cello throughout and the other musicians of Arcangelo at various points.

Curtis Rogers



Bach: 'Goldberg' Variations  
 Steven Devine, harpsichord

CHAN 0780

CD 79:21 minutes

Pitch: A=415

Performed on a double-manual instrument by Colin Booth (after a single-manual by Fleischer, 1710), the performer's craft and flair affords the 'Goldberg's a sense of lyricism that is rarely heard.

Most renowned for being the harpsichordist of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Steven Devine's weave of the contrapuntal lines accounts for some of this recording's charm; in addition to his crisp ornamentation and variety of touch, this makes for truly addictive listening.

The general pulse changes very little from movement to movement, but born out of this is a sense of organic progression that elegantly unifies the thirty variations and polar arias.

It truly is a significant feat to have made such a unique recording given that this work has been so widely recorded. Coupled with precise sleeve notes, this is the scholars' choice.

Edward Dean



Lamentarium  
 Laments by Rossi, Marazzoli,  
 Pasqualini and Mazzocchi  
 Atalante; Nadine Balbeisi (soprano),  
 Theodora Baka (mezzo-soprano);  
 Erin Headley (director)  
 Nimbus Alliance NI 6152  
 CD 67:17 minutes

In concept this disc is intriguing as it unearths a variety of vocal laments by 17th century Roman composers, interspersed with similarly doleful pieces for viol consort by Luigi Rossi. The varied subjects - ranging from Helen of Troy's pondering her vanished beauty, Queen Artemisia's grieving over her husband's ashes, and the sorrows of the Virgin Mary and the penitential Mary Magdalene - preclude monotony.

Theodora Baka expresses something of the pathos of Artemisia's situation and the impassioned grandeur of Helen but, given the contrasting dramatic roles, their characterisation could arguably be more expressive in music which is so operatic in inspiration. Nadine Balbeisi's Magdalene is humble, but perhaps not sufficiently enraged by what she deems to be the impiety of everything around her. *Atalante* give sympathetic support of the singers, and harmonious serenity in their solo pieces. Overall, a very worthwhile project.

Curtis Rogers