

REVIEW

Ars Longa

JOCELYN NELSON

Ars Longa: Old and New Music for Theorbo

Elizabeth Kenny, theorbo

Linn CKD 603, 2019, 1 compact disc



I HAPPENED TO SEE a dragonfly perch on my bird feeder while I listened to this album for the first time. Dragonflies famously seem far too long and complex with their four wings to be able to fly with such speed and agility. As if that isn't already enough of a surprise, they come ablaze with iridescent colors when you look at them at just the right angle. It was a lucky

sight in the moment: there is no creature more emblematic of this gravity-defying, timbre-rich theorbo performance by Elizabeth Kenny.

As one of Europe's leading lute and theorbo performers and founder of the Theatre of the Ayre ensemble, Kenny has an extensive discography, including *Shakespeare Songs*, recorded with Ian Bostridge, winner of the 2016 Grammy for Best Solo Vocal Album; and *Lachrimae or Seven Tears*, recorded with Phantasm, winner of the 2017 Gramophone Early Music Award. Kenny is also an accomplished scholar with teaching positions as Director of Performance at Oxford University and as Professor of Lute at the Royal Academy of Music. She has articles in various publications, including *Early Music* and *Renaissance Studies*.

DESPITE THE THEORBO'S ORIGINS as an accompaniment to the voice in late sixteenth-century Florentine courtly entertainments, the music in this collection offers an excellent introduction to its rich seventeenth-century solo repertoire, and with a refreshing twist, some twenty-first-century solo repertoire as well. The theorbo (also known as the *chitarrone* or *théorbe*) is a type of bass lute with an extended neck for courses that include a set of diapasons—bass strings meant to be played unstopped. “Courses” in the case of the theorbo can refer to either single or double strings.

One of the most crucial details of theorbo stringing, however, is that what would normally be the highest-sounding courses need to be lowered an octave in order to withstand the tension of the instrument's extended neck. Therefore, although the tuning varies for this instrument as it does for other lutes and for early guitars, the third course on the theorbo is typically the highest-sounding course on the instrument. The resulting re-entrant tuning creates the distinctive harp-like sound with cross-string scales and arpeggios that you'll hear in some of this disc's best moments, including the very first sounds on track 1.

THIS PROGRAM of "old and new" solo music for theorbo begins with selected works from Alessandro Piccinini (Bologna, 1566–1638) and his *Intavolatura di liuto, et di chitarrone* (1623). In her liner notes, Kenny discusses how Piccinini guides players on matters of voicing and ornamentation. All three toccatas alternate free, rhapsodic passages with imitative sections, but each of the three has its own distinct personality. Toccata III launches the recital with a splendid arpeggio that shows off the theorbo's extensive tonal and dynamic range as well as its re-entrant tuning. Toccata X is gentler, with sweet consonances at the beginning: notice Kenny's controlled sleight of hand on a deceptive cadence about two thirds of the way in. Toccata XII features dovetailing sequences in the imitative sections that unravel into rhapsodic passages with graceful, virtuosic *tirate*, or rapid scalar slurs.

The rest of the Piccinini set includes short dances and romanescas—a pair of each. Just try to listen to the Ciaccona without tapping your foot. The Corrente is a bit more subtle, with swung dotted rhythms and delicate counterpoint. The Romanesca *con partite variate* introduces a reflective theme. Kenny's voicing in this extended set of variations is outstanding: clear and balanced as it is, we never lose track of the melody. The Romanesca *folia* variations feature dance-like strumming and *tirate*.

The next "old" music set is from Giovanni Girolamo Kapsperger's fourth and final book of music for chitarrone, published in Rome in 1640. This is another valuable source with a preface that offers performance practice guidance. Kapsperger (c. 1580–1651) was a Venetian and Roman lutenist, guitarist, and composer of German descent. He was an adventurous and highly acclaimed composer, and his Toccata prima is one of the highlights of this collection. Kenny explores timbres in this work with a kaleidoscope of textures—virtuosic slurs as well as cross-string scalar and arpeggiated passages that exploit the re-entrant tuning: the theorbo as an acrobatic and colorful dragonfly. The Passacaglia is a lilting dance over a chord sequence with chains of delicately resolving dissonances. Kenny humorously dismisses the catchy, entertaining Canario-Capona when she says that "a three-chord trick is always full of possibilities."

The last old music in the program is from French lute and guitar player and composer, Robert de Visée (c. 1655–1732/3). Likely a pupil of the guitarist Francesco Corbetta (c. 1615–1681), who was active in the court of Louis XIV, Visée succeeded Corbetta as the King's guitar teacher and was a frequent performer at court. His Suite in C Minor includes "La plainte, ou Tombeau des mesdemoiselles de Visée," about which Kenny says, "How many daughters are included in this memory is a private

detail he reserved for himself.” Given both the genre and the times, the affect of grief is paramount and gives special license to express pain. The theme is in a throaty mezzo range, and at the most intense moments Kenny purposely crosses the intonation line with her string-bending vibratos; together Visée and Kenny become funeral singers expressing this music’s excruciating path toward resolution. It’s a grief that infects the entire suite and is notably echoed in the Sarabande. The seventeenth-century French style of subtly outlining tonality within the empty spaces of broken chords is brilliantly represented throughout the Suite in C minor, especially in the preludes. In “Les sylvains de Mr. Couperin”—Visée’s interpretation of a piece from the first *ordre* of the harpsichordist’s *Pièces de clavecin*, book 1—repeated sections of simple tunes with swung dotted rhythms alternate with arpeggiated sections to build drama and intensity, only to unravel at the end.

BUT THERE IS ALSO new music on this program. From Kenny’s liner notes: “The chitarrone/theorbo, with its slippery identity—serious and comic—represents a key moment in intellectual history, but it is also just another big guitar, and I am privileged to play and record some twenty-first-century encounters with its sound.”

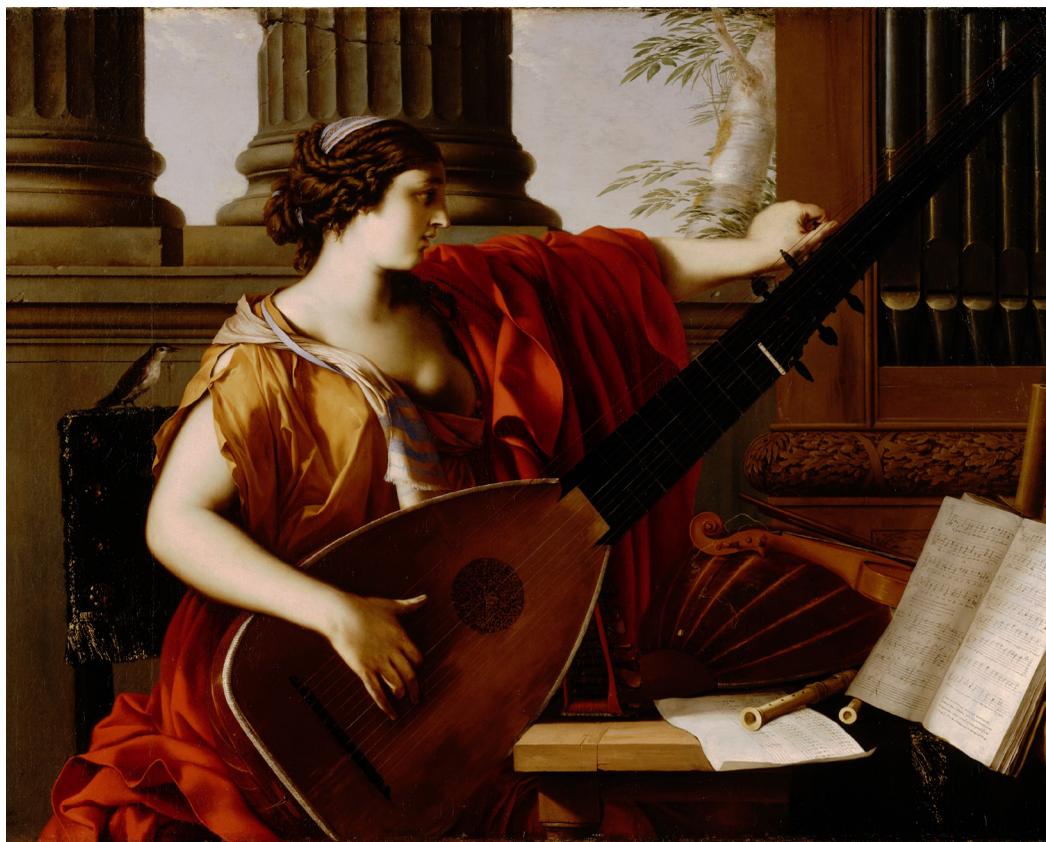
Motet 1 by Sir James MacMillan (b. 1959) is excerpted from his *Since it was the day of Preparation...* (2010–11). Composed originally for the Hebrides Ensemble, Synergy Vocals, and Brindley Sherratt, it is scored for five singers and five instruments that portray the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. In this ensemble the theorbo represents human fragility and sadness. Placed in this program among the seventeenth-century Piccinini works, Motet 1 bears brief but striking testament to the expressive timbral and dynamic power of the theorbo.

The two newest works in the recital are both composed for Kenny and both are by composers born in 1981: Benjamin Oliver and Nico Muhly. Placed between the Kapsperger and Visée sets, Oliver’s *Extending from the Inside* is for me another highlight of the album. Oliver describes the form as “six sections that contain three main musical materials. These materials are presented in their simplest forms in the opening page and are then gradually elaborated and extended as the work develops.”

A sharp-edged rhythmic and motivic ostinato in the bass line moves throughout the work as an anchor, but a contrapuntal treble melody frequently interrupts. This work explores the theorbo’s dynamic range with whispers and shouts. Kenny exhibits impressive control, especially with voicing: even during the imposingly forceful strums, the single melodic line stands out brilliantly. By the end, the anchor motive has changed into something gentler, with bell-like harmonics.

Kenny describes Muhly’s *Berceuse with Seven Variations* as “constructed around a cycle of twenty-four chords, spaced with maximum distance between the lowest and highest notes. Each variation explores various paths through this cycle, but always keeping the idea of a cradle-song, a berceuse, in the background.”

I think of Muhly’s work as more of a chain of sections connected by textures and motives than as a set of discrete movements. Some of these sections move right into the next without pause, and they reference or sometimes even prefigure each other, despite their contrasting characters and textures. The first berceuse (the second



Laurent de La Hire (1606–1656), *Allegory of Music* (1649). Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

movement) features short-long rhythms and resolutions that recall baroque style but with decidedly modern tonality. “Scattershot” (the fourth movement) increases tension with arpeggios that include hints of harmonics, prefiguring the following movement, “Lilt,” which highlights harmonics. The last movement, “Coda,” begins with tremolos (referencing “Stutter,” the sixth movement) but continues to unwind and decay in a final section that recalls the first movements. It’s a sophisticated work that rewards multiple listenings.

ARS LONGA is a splendid collection of seventeenth- and twenty-first-century music, which Kenny performs with power, virtuosity, and imagination. Her performance was beautifully captured in Cooper Hall, Frome, UK, in late 2018 by Philip Hobbs, with Julia Thomas in charge of post-production. The well-designed CD booklet uses details from de La Hire’s *Allegory of Music* on its cover. Lady Music is playing the theorbo, of course.



About the Reviewer

Jocelyn Nelson holds a DMA from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and MA and BM (*magna cum laude*) degrees from the University of Denver, Lamont School of Music. Dr. Nelson has taught music history, music appreciation, lute and guitar literature, early guitar and lute performance, opera history, and Indigenous music and culture in Eastern North America at East Carolina University's School of Music. *Ma Guiterre je te chante*, a 2010 recording of sixteenth-century French guitar and vocal music with vocalist Amy Bartram, garnered favorable reviews in the United States, United Kingdom, and France. Recent work includes authorship of a music appreciation textbook *Gateway to Music: An Introduction to American Vernacular, European Art, and World Musical Traditions* (Cognella, 2018), which won a 2019 "Most Promising New Textbook Award" from the Textbook and Academic Authors Association. Dr. Nelson currently explores barriers to equity in academia while teaching off the tenure track, and she serves as the chair of the College Music Society's Academic Citizenship Committee.

About Soundboard Scholar

SOUNDBOARD SCHOLAR is the peer-reviewed journal of the Guitar Foundation of America. Its purpose is to publish guitar research of the highest caliber. *Soundboard Scholar* is online and open access. To view all issues of the journal, visit <http://soundboardscholar.org>.

About the Guitar Foundation of America



THE GUITAR FOUNDATION OF AMERICA inspires artistry, builds community, and promotes the classical guitar internationally through excellence in performance, literature, education, and research. For more information, visit <https://guitarfoundation.org>.