

## CD Review

*Le donne e la chitarra.*

James Akers, romantic guitar.

Drama Musica DRAMA004, 2018. 1 CD.



It is an unfathomable tragedy in the history of Western art that misogynistic attitudes about whose creative voice deserves to be heard have discouraged women artists from exercising their genius, hidden their works from view when they managed to transcend their oppressive social conditioning, and erased them from the cultural record when they failed to fit conveniently into the implicit narrative of heroic males and supportive females. Visionary women artists have always been with us. Slowly, all too slowly, we are awakening to the contributions of these creative personalities, but much important work remains to be done, and sadly, much work is lost forever. Women composers still face plenty of resistance in the twenty-first century, and a reappraisal of their historical position is, not least, an important part of opening the space they deserve today. Thus it is that Scottish guitarist James Akers's 2018 CD, *Le donne e la chitarra*, is to be warmly welcomed as part of a gradual but inexorable effort to reexamine the historical record. The disc is part of the *Donne* collection on the Drama Musica label, along with *Donne barroche* (on which Akers plays Baroque guitar and theorbo), *Homage, Anna Bon di Venezia*, and *Hildegard Now and Then*.

Akers is a pedigreed and iconoclastic artist, a musical polyglot who began by playing rock and blues, before exploring jazz and finally taking up classical guitar. His formal studies focused on classical training at Napier University with Rob MacKillop, before he continued his study of lute with Jakob Lindberg at the Royal College of Music, later taking up theorbo and moving on to a fellowship at Trinity College, where he studied with Jacob Herringman and David Miller. Since then he has established himself as a consort player of lute, theorbo, and early guitar on any number of recordings with prestigious opera companies and chamber orchestras. His 2012 solo debut recording of Jean-Baptiste Besard's *Thesaurus harmonicus* for lute was followed by a 2016 disc of nineteenth-century solo guitar music, *The Soldier's Return*. He has also taken on unusual chamber music recording projects such as *Ombre Amene*, devoted to songs with guitar accompaniment by Sor and Giuliani, and *Classical Vienna*, bringing to light the repertoire of duets for guitar and piano by Carulli, Moscheles, Diabelli, and Giuliani. He brings a conscientious and scholarly approach to his guitar recordings, playing a period instrument and cultivating a nail-less technique with an intimate yet crisply defined sound.

For *Le donne e la chitarra*, Akers turns to three women composers of the nineteenth century: Emilia Giuliani, Catharina Pratten, and Marie Ursule Athénaïs Paulian. Emilia Giuliani is perhaps the best known of these three, partly due to her own pedigree as the daughter of Mauro Giuliani. As to whether she was the daughter of his wife Maria Giuseppa or of his Austrian mistress Nina Wiesenberger, there is some question. What is not in question is that her father supported her development as a musician, performing with her in a public concert in Naples when she was no more than fifteen years old. Her solo debut came the same year, also in Naples.

Tragically, Mauro died the following year, Emilia at his side. His death left her alone in Naples, but she set about building a career as a performer. As formidable a task as that ever is, we can only imagine what it meant for a young woman in nineteenth-century Italy. Nevertheless, she persisted. The traces are faint, but in 1832 a review praises her performance as soloist with an orchestra in Foggia. In 1839, she appears in Florence on a program with Franz Liszt. Despite Liszt's celebrity, *Gazetta di Firenze* praised them both in equal terms. The fragmentary evidence we do have suggests a supremely accomplished guitarist, strong-willed and determined, struggling to make her way on her own in a world where fixed ideas about a woman's role must have presented overwhelming challenges—and doing so as a guitarist, a performer on an instrument considered most suitable for serenading under balconies. Around this time the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* praised her technique as “noteworthy—if only it were applied to something more gratifying.” In the same journal, thirty years earlier, a reviewer had expressed the same condescension toward the guitar in reference to her father: “I, for one, could not avoid thinking, while listening, what Music would have gained if this talent, this incredible diligence and perseverance in conquering the greatest difficulties, had been applied to a more rewarding instrument.” They might have been the same reviewer.

The same year as the concert with Liszt, Giuliani married the Neapolitan composer Luigi Guglielmi, to whom she had already dedicated her opus 5, a variation set on “Non più mesta accanto al fuoco” from Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, wherein Cinderella sings of her happy destiny, changed as by a bolt of lightning from the suffering into which she was born. The aria was a standard theme used by many composers as the subject of variations—it was also set by the likes of Legnani, Paganini, and Chopin—but in the context of the couple's relationship the dedication can easily be read as a testament of a lover's devotion.

Giuliani and Guglielmi settled in Vienna, where Luigi was able to establish himself as a singing teacher but struggled to gain a footing as an opera composer after the example of his two illustrious uncles, Pietro Alessandro and

Pietro Carlo. It was, rather, Emilia who began to blossom in Vienna as a composer; her 6 Preludes, op. 46, were published there by Artaria. Their opus number indicates she was an industrious composer, but the only works of hers left to us are opp. 1–9, 11, and 46. Against eleven opus numbers that survive, at least thirty-five are lost.

Luigi Guglielmo finally found artistic patronage in the person of Johann Náko, a Hungarian count and amateur musician who convinced the couple to return with him to his homeland, where Luigi became singing-master at the National Opera in Pest. Unfortunately, he had no more success with his operas there than in Vienna, and he and Emilia eventually followed the count to his ancestral castle on the Romanian borderlands, where they assisted him with a private theatre, to which internationally renowned artists were invited to perform.

Náko died in 1848, leaving Guglielmi without patronage or employment. He returned to Milan with a portfolio of operas, but success continued to elude him. Emilia remained behind in Hungary. Whether their relationship had ended, or the separation was intended to be temporary, we do not know, but a concert review from Buda in 1849 indicates she had returned to the stage.

The return was brief. Emilia Giuliani died of a fever in November 1850, at the age of thirty-seven. She left behind a very modest body of work, and a reputation for impressive technique as a performer, especially in playing harmonics. We can only wonder what she might have achieved had she lived longer.

Catharina Pratten, by contrast, lived a long and successful life, and was famed in her day as a virtuoso and a teacher. Born Catharina Pelzer in Germany to a guitarist and music-teacher father, she was a rebellious child who frustrated her harmony teacher until they parted ways by mutual consent. Her abilities on the guitar, however, were prodigious: her public concert debut took place at the age of seven, and thereafter her father traveled with her to various European capitals, where she won acclaim as a child prodigy; she soon became known for her interpretation of Mauro Giuliani's Third Concerto. Another child prodigy, Giulio Regondi, was active at the same time; he was a year older than the young Pelzer, and the two performed together in duo concerts for a while.

The elder Pelzer settled in London, where he founded the *Giulianiad*. Catharina, still in her teens, also established herself as a teacher, in the city of Exeter. There she was taken under the wing of an English aristocrat, who offered her apartments in London and began opening society's doors to her as an instructor. She became a highly successful teacher and performer, and later counted the daughter of Queen Victoria among her students.

In 1854, she married the prominent flutist Robert Sydney Pratten and was thereafter known as Madame

Sydney Pratten. By all accounts their married life was a happy coupling between two artists at the height of their powers. But it came to an end when Robert died suddenly in 1868, at the age of forty-four. Her teaching and concertizing suddenly stopped, and it was years before she again took to the stage. In time she resumed her activities as a musician, surviving her husband by twenty-seven years and never remarrying. Pratten gave her last concert in London's Steinway Hall, a year before her death in 1895. She left behind three guitar methods and hundreds of compositions. Her society connections and celebrated career helped to ensure their survival, mostly in private collections.

About Athénaïs Paulian very little is known. She was born in Strasbourg in 1802 and died in Switzerland sometime in the 1870s. In her twenties, though, she was living in Paris and was part of the circle of guitarists that included Sor, Aguado, and de Lhoyer. She left behind only one published work, consisting of four themes with variations. All four are based on the repertoire of the celebrated coloratura soprano Angelica Catalani, the foremost exponent in her day of the vocal performance of instrumental and instrumental-style variations, a sort of early ancestor of the *vocalese* style of jazz performance pioneered in the twentieth century by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Paulian's stature as a guitarist is suggested by the compositions dedicated to her by her friends among the foremost virtuosi—Sor's *Pièces de société*, op. 33, Aguado's *Huit Petites Pièces*, op. 3, and Lhoyer's *Duo concertant pour deux guitares*, op. 44. Her own opus 1 variations were dedicated in turn to her brother, Eugène Paulian, also a guitarist, and somewhat better known as a composer. Had his sister remained in Paris, where she enjoyed a web of connections with composers, performers, and publishers, we might know more of her works today.

The program on this album is composed in an unusual way, interleaving pieces from sets by different composers. Instead of grouping Paulian's variations as one set, and Giuliani's Preludes as another, Akers sprinkles them throughout, like recurring motives. In between these are pieces by Pratten, and two more compositions by Giuliani: the Rossini variations she dedicated to Luigi before their marriage, and one of her six *Belliniane* on themes from that composer's operas. Listening to the entire recital from beginning to end, the Preludes, especially, serve as a kind of unifying element. The overall effect of mingling the different composers' works in this way, rather than grouping them in clusters by authorship, is to implicitly frame them more as a collaborative development of a common repertoire than as individual creative achievements. The parallel with stereotypically feminine and masculine modes of creative endeavor is interesting to consider, whether or not it was intended by Akers.

## REVIEWS

Pratten's *Malbrook Fantasia* is a variation set on the same French melody, *Marlborough s'en va-t-en guerre* (known colloquially in English as *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*), that was treated by Sor in his opus 28 variations. Paulian's Mozart variations use the same theme from *The Magic Flute* that Sor used for his well-known opus 9 variations. (The famous melody, also used as the basis for variation sets by Friedrich Dotzauer, Louis Drouet, and even Mikhail Glinka, takes up all of 35 seconds near the end of act I.) Giuliani's *Non più mesta* variations have a cousin in a similar set by Luigi Legnani, and her six *Belliniane* cannot but evoke her own father's six *Rossiniane*, some of his most popular compositions; indeed it is hard to imagine this was not intentional, as the marketing advantages were obvious and her pieces follow a similar plan. (Although she is more careful to note her operatic sources than he was, she is as liberal as he in her treatment of the material and included much that was inventively original. A quest for the operatic basis for the section of no. 3, labeled *La straniera*, can be quite challenging.) We can thus see each of these composers in conversation with their more well-known contemporaries, collaborating in the construction of a mainstream compositional tradition.

Two of Pratten's works, *Rhapsodie funèbre* and *Elfin's Revels*, strike me as the most interesting pieces on the recording. *Elfin's Revels* is, on the surface, the lightest kind of Victorian fare: a fanciful depiction of magical garden creatures doing nothing in particular but "frolicking," "wandering," and "dancing," complete with a short free verse to help us visualize the details of their idyllic playfulness. (The piece has a written program, ably narrated by Ciara Vinci.) And the music is playful as well as charming: a lugubrious minor-key siciliano introduction as gnomes trundle into the scene, followed by a supremely graceful major-key polka with a melody in gliding thirds to depict the entrance of fairies. This little dance is followed by two variations as the fairies perform their own variations on doing-nothing-in-particular, followed by a brief instrumental recitative to accompany the enactment of a trivial drama, and then a return to the theme in celebration of its resolution. As the fairies fade away, the opening siciliano is repeated once more at the end.

The piece, with its trivial program matched by an equally trivial dramatic design, is on one level utterly unremarkable except for its carefully constructed childish innocence and charm. To my ear, however, the very lack of a typically Romantic dramatic arc makes it intriguing as an alternative structural model. It begins and ends with the same slow 6/8 rhythm and minor key, and the middle is made up of a brisk, light, major-key theme in duple meter, with a couple of minimally contrasting variations, returning back to the theme after a slight interruption. The overall structure is a gentle, symmetrical arc, with an other-worldly

focus on joy of being, without purpose or goal. This music can be seen as standing in antithetical contrast to the more typical Romantic dramatic contour, with its teleological focus on confrontation and struggle, leading to a heroic climax and transformative resolution. Feminist critics like McClary have had much to say about the gendered subtext of such a structure. In the context of such discourse, *Elfin's Revels* takes on a new light. While at first it seems trivial, both by its putative subject matter and in terms of the dramatic norms of Romantic expression, on closer inspection it may be seen as both healing and subversive—even mocking in its text program with an exaggerated drama-over-nothing.

*Rhapsodie funèbre* is interesting in a completely different way. It is actually constructed by Akers out of three different short original pieces from Pratten's *Guitar School*. He begins with no. 70, "March [sic] funèbre," which opens with an allusion to "Fingal's Cave," the first piece in the fifth volume of Mertz's *Bardenklänge*. After the first section, with its repeat, he inserts no. 227, the hymn-like "Thème originale," complete but transposed from G minor to A minor, the key of the first piece. After this interlude, we hear the second section of the first piece, still in A minor. This is followed by an arpeggio study: no. 81, *Allegretto*, slowed to an appropriate tempo. This section in E minor provides a satisfying tonal motion that helps create a coherent whole from the disparate parts. The piece ends with the third section of "March funèbre," back in A minor, but with a twist: instead of the last two bars, Akers takes the first section again, *da capo*, but to the first ending, not the second. Only then does he take the last two bars—a haunting unaccompanied statement of the funeral march motive—setting them into greater relief as a coda.

A purist might see this mash-up as a violation of Pratten's authorship, and Akers acknowledges his role in the notes to the recording. I see this as a continuation of the creative process initiated by the composer. Where Pratten borrows elements from Mertz and the funeral march topos to create a statement of her own, Akers has taken her several statements and inserted them inside one another, weaving them together to create something larger, but still in Pratten's own voice. To thus break free of what one critical observer has called the delusional master-slave relationship that performers maintain with their "fantasy of the omnipotent composer" takes boldness and, if artistic failure is to be avoided, great musical understanding. It is no disrespect to Pratten's work that Akers has undertaken to combine her fragmentary miniatures in this way, and to my ears, the experiment seems successful.

Most of the pieces in this collection are presented in world-premiere recordings; the exceptions are Giuliani's Preludes and Pratten's *Malbrook Fantasia*. The former had already been taken up in recent years by a few performers,

but Akers's treatment is more convincing than those I have heard. The year after this CD, Paolo Amico released an album comprising all of Giuliani's surviving works, so that those not recorded here by Akers are finally available on disc. Though Amico's recordings are fluent and credible, he uses a modern instrument and technique, so the historicity of Akers's recording is lost.

The previous recording of Pratten's *Malbrook* deserves mention: It was released in 2012 by Ulrich Wedemeier, who pursues Pratten's nineteenth-century sound to the extent of performing on a guitar she owned and following her advice to tune the instrument a tone lower for a sweeter sound.

This disc remains the only recording available of Paulian's variations—and there still remains one that Akers omitted, the *Tema di Rode*. That piece is on the whole faithful to Pierre Rode's *Air varié*, op. 10, for violin, a piece Catalani was famous for performing in concert, indicating that the rest of Paulian's opus 1 may be an accurate document of Catalani's performances. I find myself disappointed that Akers also omitted one of the Giuliani Preludes (no. 5, which has some resemblance in its arpeggio pattern to Villa-Lobos's first etude), but space considerations surely made some choices unavoidable, and the piece can be heard elsewhere.

Akers's notes contextualize the music appropriately but will not satisfy the curiosity of the most inquisitive listeners. His focus is on the music, and we are grateful that he has engaged this historically underrepresented yet interesting and worthwhile repertoire. It is to be hoped that he will apply himself again to the work of these composers in the future, and inspire other guitarists to do the same. Meanwhile, *Le donne e la chitarra* makes for satisfying and unusual listening, and helps fill in some important missing colors in our portrait of the nineteenth-century guitar.

—ELLWOOD COLAHAN

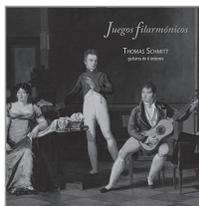
## CD Review

### *Juegos flarmónicos.*

Thomas Schmitt, six-course guitar.

Lindoro NL 3044, 2019. 1 CD.

Dice games designed around the idea of constructing musical compositions from the chance combination of prefabricated elements are some of the most curious artifacts of late eighteenth-century music. Leonard Ratner has written on these, as has Stephen Hedges, who identifies nineteen such games published between 1757 and 1812, including two attributed to Wolfgang Mozart and one each to Joseph Haydn and C.P.E. Bach. He links the popularity of these games to the enlightenment craze for rational explanations of all things, as well as to the essentially uncomplicated nature of early post-Baroque music.



The German guitarist-musicologist Thomas Schmitt has located two Spanish contributions to this genre (both unknown to Hedges in 1978), by the guitarist-composers José Avellana and Antonio Nava. The Nava publication lends its name to this album, and the last track on the recording is a waltz constructed according to Nava's game rules. The piece thus produced is interesting as a cultural artifact, and exemplifies to an extreme degree Hedges's observation about the simplicity of the style. But it is unsatisfying as a work of art, and Schmitt's choice to title his album after it is quite curious. Musical dice games were made possible only by stylistic conventions that generated a steady alternation between tonic and dominant harmonies, with no departure from the pattern, no large-scale architecture, no irregularity of phase structure or harmonic rhythm, and strong cadences at uniform intervals that could be used to stitch the various segments together. Schmitt calls the waltz thus created an example of "an easily reproducible product." The fact that composition in this style could be reduced to a kind of manufacturing process speaks of an ultimately trivial approach to music. Fortunately, other pieces on this album of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Spanish works demonstrate in great measure the creativity that could be exercised with a more intentional approach to composition, even within the stylistic constraints of the time.

The album is anchored by two fully developed three-movement sonatas, one at the beginning by Isidro Laporta, and another toward the end of the program by Antonio Abreu. Between these are two linked variation sets on the same theme, by Manuel Ferau and Laporta respectively, which are in turn separated by a trio of one-movement sonatas by Juan Antonio de Vargas y Guzmán. With a dramatic and expressive minuet by José Avellana and the waltz randomly constructed from Nava's game to finish the recording, the listener journeys through a compelling series of musical experiences in a well-paced and intentional sequence.

Laporta's Sonata at the beginning is straightforward in construction but has interesting features that emphasize thematic corroboration. The first movement contains a diversity of material, but the opening theme is stated again at the dominant at the beginning of the development, after the repeat of the first section. This might strike our modern ears as strange—almost like Haydn's monothematic form, but with the second statement of the theme on the "wrong" side of the double bar. In fact, it was a cliché of the time: at one point in the late eighteenth century, it was even normative. This serves to remind us of the great variety of approaches the form was capable of before it became a textbook paradigm. (As Charles Rosen has said, "Such freedom came easily when there was no such thing as 'sonata form.'") The next movement, a lyrical *Afectuoso* in