

## CD Review:

*Corbetta: La Guitarre Royale. Elias, Izhar. Brilliant Classics 95587, 2018. 1 CD.*



### *El Mejor de Todos*

The eminent Spanish guitarist Gaspar Sanz called Francesco Corbetta *el mejor de todos*, or “the greatest of all.” He got his start teaching guitar to the fashionable set in the university town of Bologna. Along with Giovanni Foscarini, he pioneered the mixed style of composition that combined the strummed chords in fashion since the turn of the seventeenth century with the contrapuntal playing associated with lute and theorbo players. Corbetta was active not only in Italy, but also in Spain, France, Germany, England, and the Low Countries. Settling first in France and then in England, he returned to Paris at the end of his life and died there. Building on the work of earlier guitarists like Montesardo, Colonna, and Sanseverino, Corbetta brought the seventeenth-century guitar to heights of refinement it had never known and laid the groundwork for the last generations of Baroque guitar composers, including de Visée and Campion in France and Roncalli in Italy.

Izhar Elias’ CD of Corbetta’s music, *La Guitarre Royale*, is named after Corbetta’s last two collections, both of which bore that same title. One was published in 1671 and was dedicated to Charles II of England, and the other appeared in 1674 and was dedicated to Louis XIV of France. Elias is the first guitarist to receive the *Nederlandse Muziekprijs* or Dutch Music Prize (2010) and is active not only in performing early guitar but also new works for guitar and chamber music. For an artist with such varied areas of specialization, he has produced an excellent recording of Corbetta.

The repertoire on the CD includes two dance suites from Corbetta’s 1671 book, one in A-minor and one in G-minor. These comprise eight and six movements respectively. Both are also presented on other recordings reviewed in this issue, and serve as excellent opportunities to compare different artists’ interpretations. Both suites have a number of points in common: short *preludes* in broken style, followed by *allemandes* and *courantes* in thicker, mixed texture. In both suites, the Allemande and Courante have strummed openings that stand in the same rhythmic relation. In the A-minor suite the Courante is more French, full of unexpected accents and characteristic hemiola patterns; in the G-minor suite it is more flowing and Italianate. Both suites include *passacailles*, *sarabandes*, and *gigues*, but in different combinations.

Between and around these two groups of dances, Elias includes other individual pieces from both the 1671 and the 1674 collections. The first and last pieces on the disc are *chaconnes* in C-major. The *Autre chaconne* at the beginning and the *Caprice de chaconne* at the end are the last and first pieces, respectively, of a loose group of dances from the 1671 book. Here Elias reverses their order and uses them to frame the entire program. In the opening piece, written as a series of repeated sections, he lingers over the *batterie* section in a rapidly strummed texture, repeating it a number of times and returning to it at the end for even more repetition.

Another *chaconne* in C begins the final group of five pieces. This one is from the much shorter 1674 collection, and contrasts significantly with the others in its strummed simplicity. The closing *Caprice de chaconne* is the real showpiece of the recording: the longest piece by far, it is made up of eleven sections, the fourth of which is another *batterie*. Here we see the only appearance in the 1671 book of a complex ornamental strum called *repicco*, which Corbetta had not used since his first book in 1639. Elias takes a flexible approach to the structure, repeating some sections and not others, and introducing *petite reprises* where it suits him. His *repicco* is fluent and energetic, and he returns to the *batterie* for several more repetitions at the end of the piece.

Elias’s sound is bright, sometimes even a tiny bit scratchy, but also raw and vigorous; it makes up in presence anything it lacks in refinement. A modern guitarist as well, he also plays the Baroque guitar with very short right-hand fingernails, a practice that is uncommon but completely authentic: it was employed by Corbetta himself. For this recording he uses a guitar made by Ivo Magherini after a 1620 model, with A4 tuned to 406 Hz, or *ton de la chambre du roy*. Elias references the advice of the renowned expert Lex Eisenhardt on stringing his instrument with a lower octave on both the fourth and fifth course, when guitarists have traditionally presumed that Corbetta tuned both strings of the fifth course to the higher octave, as de Visée did after him. The truth is that Corbetta is silent on the fifth course, so performers must try to deduce from internal musical evidence what he wanted. Elias’s approach is conscientious and musically engaging, and one cannot ask for more.

—ELLWOOD COLAHAN