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CLASSICAL

Cello Napoletano

Catherine Jones & Van Diemen's Band

ABC Classics

4 stars



Cello Napoletano by Catherine Jones

Once in a while, an album comes along with music by an unknown composer. Such is the case here, the “new” composer being Nicola Fiorenza (1700-64), famous as the director of the Naples Conservatory who, according to sources of the day, “used to beat his students and draw his sword upon them”. He also wrote some glorious music, as abundantly illustrated in the three cello concertos recorded here. A needle-drop test might yield guesses somewhere between other 18th-century Italian masters such as Albinoni and Boccherini, yet distinctive twists in harmony and solo lines set him apart from the mainstream of the period’s galant style. These signature quirks

are more pronounced when compared with two shorter works by Geminiani and Alessandro Scarlatti. I suspect some of these works are recorded here for the first time, although this is not identified in the detailed notes by University of Texas at Austin musicologist Guido Olivieri.

Aside from the infectiously joyous music itself, this album has three star elements. The first is cellist Catherine Jones, a former student at the University of Western Australia, now a professor at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. She has a vibrant, dynamic style ideally suited to the motoric passages in this music, as well as the capacity to produce beautiful long lines without the syrup of 19th-century techniques such as vibrato and portamento. With all this, she has support from the second star: the cutely named Van Diemen's Band, which has recently emerged as one of the leading musical treasures of Tasmania. It comprises about a dozen highly accomplished younger musicians and is the brainchild of Julia Fredersdorff, who teaches baroque violin in Hobart, Sydney and Melbourne. She also features regularly as violin-leader of the Orchestra of the Antipodes for Pinchgut Opera and other groups. The band gave its debut performance in March last year and recorded this music about the same time. The third star is the venue itself: the ballroom of Government House in Hobart, which has a penetrating clarity and, at the same time, an enveloping warmth. In the more sustained music, the band produces the kind of meandering moaning associated with the viol consort sound of the likes of Jordi Savall's ensemble. The bloom of the acoustic is testimony to the ears and talent of producer and engineer Alex Stinson and his team. This is music to be enjoyed, all 78 minutes of it. Close your eyes and you are instantly transported to the aromas, bustle and smiles of 18th-century Italia.

Vincent Plush