

Bruno Cocset's cello playing is rarely less than revelatory, and his performance of all ten surviving Vivaldi cello sonatas with Les Basses Réunies on **Suonata à violoncello solo del signor Vivaldi** (Alpha 902, *rec* 1998) is simply the best recorded version I have ever heard. Like Anner Bylisma's 1990 version for Harmonia Mundi, it achieves great intimacy with the music, but it employs a much wider expressive palette and a much more interesting range of continuo solutions, where 16' and 8' tone are mixed and alternated very successfully. The lifelike quality of the recorded sound has to be heard to be believed. My sole quibble is that a few obvious mistakes in the sources have not been corrected or have been amended unconvincingly. Otherwise, this is sheer delight.

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Joyce Lindorff

The sweet sound of cultures clashing

For over a decade, the ensemble XVIII-21 Musique des Lumières has made a speciality of transcending cultural barriers. Under the direction of Jean-Christophe Frisch in collaboration with the ethnomusicologist François Picard, the group has embarked on a series of fascinating recordings that explore musical life in 17th and 18th-century China. Reflective of this entire milieu, in which hundreds of European missionaries pursued their religious goals despite difficulties and often severe imperial punishment, music is presented here with an admirable sense of risk and high adventure, for a worthy cause.

In their desires to please the court and so maintain hard-won permission to convert the Chinese to Christianity, the missionaries' world became closely entwined with imperial life. The late Ming and early Qing emperors highly valued and utilized their skills, especially in the areas of military strategy, diplomacy, astronomy and the arts. The emperor Kangxi particularly loved music, but was also capable of ordering the beating and imprisonment of a favoured musician. House arrests were not uncommon. Meanwhile, the building of churches and conversion of the Chinese continued to progress. Music, both western and Chinese, played an enormous role in that effort.

Beginning in 1996 with their ground-breaking **Teodorico Pedrini: Concert Baroque a la cité interdite**

(Auvidis Astrée E8609, *rec* 1996), Musique des Lumières has sought to recreate the context of this powerful and little-known intersection of Chinese and western musical cultures. Any attempt at reconstruction, especially of such an unlikely cultural mix, is bound to be fraught with questions. Frisch, Picard and company have made every effort to do their research, but have taken their challenge a step further, attempting to reconstruct what might have been, in an admirable spirit of imagination.

Currently numbering four discs recorded over a period of eight years, the project presents Western sacred and secular Baroque music along with traditional Chinese music and instruments in contexts that might actually have occurred. In successive recordings, the cultural collaboration expands, as the performers freely trade music, traditions, and even instruments. A fifth contribution to this collection, promised for the near future, will feature little-known Baroque music of Macau.

The first disc, which has now become something of a classic, offers five sonatas of the composer Teodorico Pedrini (1670–1746), who spent a tumultuous life as a Lazarist missionary in China. His opus 3, 12 sonatas for violin and bass that are modelled very closely on Corelli's opus 5, are held in the Beitang Collection in the Beijing National Library, the only manuscript of Western music that remained in China following this missionary period. There are records of concert performances in Beijing and Paris during the early 20th century, thanks to the interest and efforts of the Lazarist Aymard-Bernard Duvigneau, who not only wrote the first detailed biography of Pedrini, but with great care and foresight arranged to have photographs of the sonatas safely transported to libraries in France and the United States during the 1930s, when the fate of collections in China was at great risk during wartime.

Adding to its other merits, this disc is particularly important for being the first-ever recording of Pedrini's sonatas. They are given a fine debut. Each of the sonatas is beautifully rendered, with lovely musicianship and care fit for an emperor. The instrumentalists of Musique des Lumières share the solo role; Sonatas I and X are performed on the violin, Sonatas VIII (not VII as listed on the outer playlist) and V on the flute, and Sonata IV on the cello. It is not difficult to imagine this entertainment at the Forbidden City; indeed, Pedrini's own voluminous letters are full of references to Kangxi's enjoyment and participation in both western and Chinese music.

In this concert Pedrini's sonatas are performed alternately with five selections from *Divertissements chinois, ou Concerts du musique chinois* (1779), traditional scores

transcribed by the Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–93) using combined Western and Chinese notation. But these are not ‘authentic’ performances on Chinese instruments; instead the Western-trained musicians of *Musique des Lumières* transport the listener back to the Forbidden City of the 17th and 18th centuries, entering into the spirit of the Chinese music as the early missionaries must have done. An effort is made to present the Chinese music and Pedrini sonatas in a natural flow.

For their second recording, *Messe des Jesuites de Pekin* (Auvidis Astrée E8642, *rec* 1998), *Musique des Lumières* turned to sacred music. They are joined by the traditional Chinese music group, Ensemble Meihua Fleur de Prunus, along with the Chœur du Centre Catholique Chinois de Paris. Although the cover implies that the music of Amiot is featured, in fact the recording presents an imagined possibility of how a late 18th-century multicultural Mass might have been celebrated by Jesuits in Beijing. In a fashion similar to the Pedrini recording, selections from Amiot’s *Musique sacrée*, in which prayers are set to Chinese music, alternate with movements from a Mass by the Jesuit Charles d’Ambleville (d1637), a madrigal by the late 16th-century composer Simon Boyleau, and two movements from Pedrini’s Sonata XII. This compilation is based on more conjecture than proved necessary for the first recording, drawing on contemporary accounts that describe the active role of music and instruments in the celebration of Mass.

In fact there were vastly different approaches to the use of music in the church during the 18th century. Attempts at restriction came from the Propaganda Fide in Rome, which not only objected to Chinese instrumental accompaniment, but also laid down strict rules concerning the singing of Mass, and even the use of the Chinese language. In spite of this, the Mass was taught and sung in Chinese, so it appears that these rules were generally not followed. As in the first recording, the music is realized with great care and imagination, the *Sanctissima* of Amiot being the outstanding work; it is very moving to hear the familiar words of the prayer sung in beautiful Chinese style.

The third issue, *Chine: Jésuites & courtisanes* (Buda Records 1984872, *rec* 1999) fully integrates Frisch’s Western ensemble with the traditional Chinese instruments of Picard’s Fleur de Prunus. Here the collaboration of cultures is taken a step further, which being more experimental, requires a more difficult leap of faith for the listener. It is a great treat to hear this version of the *Incantation of Pu’an*, which the emperor Kangxi was said to have played on a harpsichord. Most surprising to listeners will be the Renaissance air *La Monica* played in Chinese style.

The latest venture, *Vêpres à la Vierge en Chine* (K617 K617155, *rec* 2003), features the Chœur du Beitang (Beijing), along with *Musique des Lumières* and additional Chinese instrumentalists in an imagined reconstruction of a Chinese Vespers service, for which no real model exists. This composite juxtaposes musical elements that span centuries, which adds an element of unlikelihood to the compilation. This is a small concern, however, because the recording contains small masterpieces, such as the famous *Eight songs for harpsichord* of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). It is not known what music might have been used for these lovely moralistic verses, but they are set here to *laudi* from Giovenale Ancina’s *Tempio armonico della beatissima vergine* (1699). Also important on this recording are the first examples of sung Mass and hymns written in Chinese, from the anthology *Tianyue zhengyin* (‘Repertory of the authentic sound of celestial music’, 1710), with texts by Wu Li (1632–1718), who was later known as Simon Xavier a Cunha. Of these, *Bei mo’ao* (‘Afflicted by the demon of pride’) is declaimed with such intensity by Shi Kelong that it needs no translation and is simply wonderful to experience. This recording literally ends with a bang, as all the percussion is used, flouting any decree issued by Western churches or tradition-bound Chinese musicians in equal measure.

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