

Flanders Recorder Quartet - Banchetto Musicale

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Aeolus Multichannel SACD AE-10156, 80:48 ****

This very tasty program of recorder music was inspired by the concept of the musical banquet, which was very popular in the courts of Europe and the homes of the wealthy in the 16th thru 18th centuries. Important compositions from many composers have come down to us which were created for such musical accompaniment to banquets, including works of Telemann, Mozart and Lully. Sometimes they were string ensembles, sometimes wind players. Henry VIII loved to have the sound of recorders playing during his meals.

The Flanders Recorder Quartet has become one of the world's top such ensembles, and this SACD appears in honor of the 20th anniversary of their founding. For two centuries the recorder was forgotten, but it's now a mainstay of the early music world (As is the harpsichord, which was almost also ignored.) One of the Flanders' many attributes is their huge collection of differently-voiced recorders - ranging from descant high soprano models to long contrabass instruments. They encompass both Renaissance and Baroque period recorders, and on this program they are also credited with a long list of "Modern" instruments, including Schweppes Tonic, Chimay Triple and Coca-Cola! These are employed in the final selection by Frans Geysen: *On The Bottle*, which really lives up to the disc's title by having the quartet perform on drink bottles from their own cellars!

Other attributes of the quartet are their technical perfection - the ability to achieve a homogeneous sound without ever being the least bit off-pitch as so many recorder ensembles often are. I just auditioned another recording of a trio with recorder, and while not annoying, the performer is just a shade flat once in a while - providing a contrast to the Flanders' perfection of pitch. Yet another plus for the group is their wide-ranging and very creative programming, of which this very SACD is a fine example.

Johann Schein wrote many sets of "table music" using various dance models, and one of his suites opens the program. Bach wrote very little for recorders, and the Prelude and Fugue in c minor on the disc is probably transcribed from keyboard original. Vaughan Williams was the second modern composer after Hindemith to write a piece for recorders; he based his suite on various themes from English early music.

The two modern composers Swerts and Roost wrote sophisticated and tuneful pieces - both dedicating their works to the quartet, and both adding a guest performer on percussion. Roost's *I Continenti* is a sort of world music tour for recorders. It's back to around the year 1400 for the penultimate anonymous work, an improvisation by the quartet on three medieval tunes. Finally, the brief work for bottles provides - as the quartet themselves call it - "a unique Flemish dessert." And it's amazing how they make the bottles in this minimalist work sound just like a recorder quartet! The low noise floor surround recording presents the four players very specifically arced in front of the listener, and makes it easy to appreciate the most subtle sounds of these polite instruments. (And none of my writers who are sensitive to being shortchanged length-wise by many discs would have anything to gripe about with this SACD!)

John Sunier, for Audiphile Audition
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