



Review of *Protégée of the Sun King* from Classical.net (2010)

Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729) is not a name familiar to everyone. Yet her stature in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in France in particular was considerable. Her influence perhaps more so. During her lifetime she published two books of harpsichord works, two books of sacred and one of secular cantatas, several violin sonatas and stage works – including a five-act *tragédie lyrique*, *Cephale et Procris*.

The ever-enterprising Centaur label here presents a portrait of Jacquet de la Guerre on two delightful CDs that really ought to win her and her work new admirers. The project makes no bones about the fact that it's an attempt to do just that. Indeed, even before you listen to a note of the highly enjoyable music, you have to be somewhat predisposed towards her. At the age of twelve she was brought to the court of Louis XIV as a prodigy well up to entertaining the Sun King and his entourage at Versailles. Much of what she wrote was published by Louis' own permission. She received an entry in Walther's "Musicalisches Lexicon" a few years after

her death; Louis Couperin did not. Despite this, like many other women composers, she slipped (or was pushed) into effective oblivion for almost two hundred years.

The music on these two discs is small scale: for solo harpsichord; for violin and oboe; trio sonatas; violin sonatas and small-scale suites. Even the ballet music (from *Cephale et Procris* [CD.1 trs.31-33]), the sacred cantata, *Esther*, [CD.2. tr.s 13-20], and secular cantata, *Le Sommeil d'Illisse*, [CD.2. tr.s 22-31] are for few musicians: two harpsichordists (playing modern builds after contemporary originals), Baroque flute, viola da gamba, two violins and three sopranos.

Yet the impression one quickly gets is of an unending stream of invention. True, it's music that's not so expansive and adventurous as that of some of de la Guerre's more celebrated contemporaries. But every phrase and musical idea has obviously come from a thoughtful and original mind. Rarely does the pace of creativity flag... listen to the changes in tone, pace and timbre in the F Major violin sonata, for example [CD.1 tr.s 34-38]. You never quite know what's coming next. There's also virtuosity expected of her players in the need to reflect one another's moods and timing during fugal passages, for instance. And indeed, Maiben and Hershey make very sweet sounds with plenty of depth and subtlety.

It's the nuances and appeal to subtlety and understatement that help to distinguish much of this music. Gentle and undemonstrative, its light and airy melodies almost always leave you with something to remember. And with such an idiom each of the players is heartily in tune. They're obviously enjoying the music-making and have all that they should have invested in bringing these fresh and graceful doughty musical worlds back to life. As if the only preconceptions with which the

nine musicians felt it healthy to bring to the performances were the advisability of working as an ensemble and letting the intricacies, poise and impact of de la Guerre speak for themselves.

Interspersed with the music are several spoken tracks... material by and about de la Guerre from contemporary sources. These are not long, though: the "portrait of" motif is not at all overdone. They simply illuminate and illustrate aspects of her life and output. The original French with an English translation is given in each case – and indeed for the other vocal works – in the perhaps rather short and less than fulsome booklet that comes with the CDs. Although there is a reference to the chief published study of de la Guerre, there surely could have been more on her life and the works available here. For each has its own character and musical particularities, whether of key, instrumentation or other musical context. One would have liked more about the conception and performance(s?) of Esther, for example.

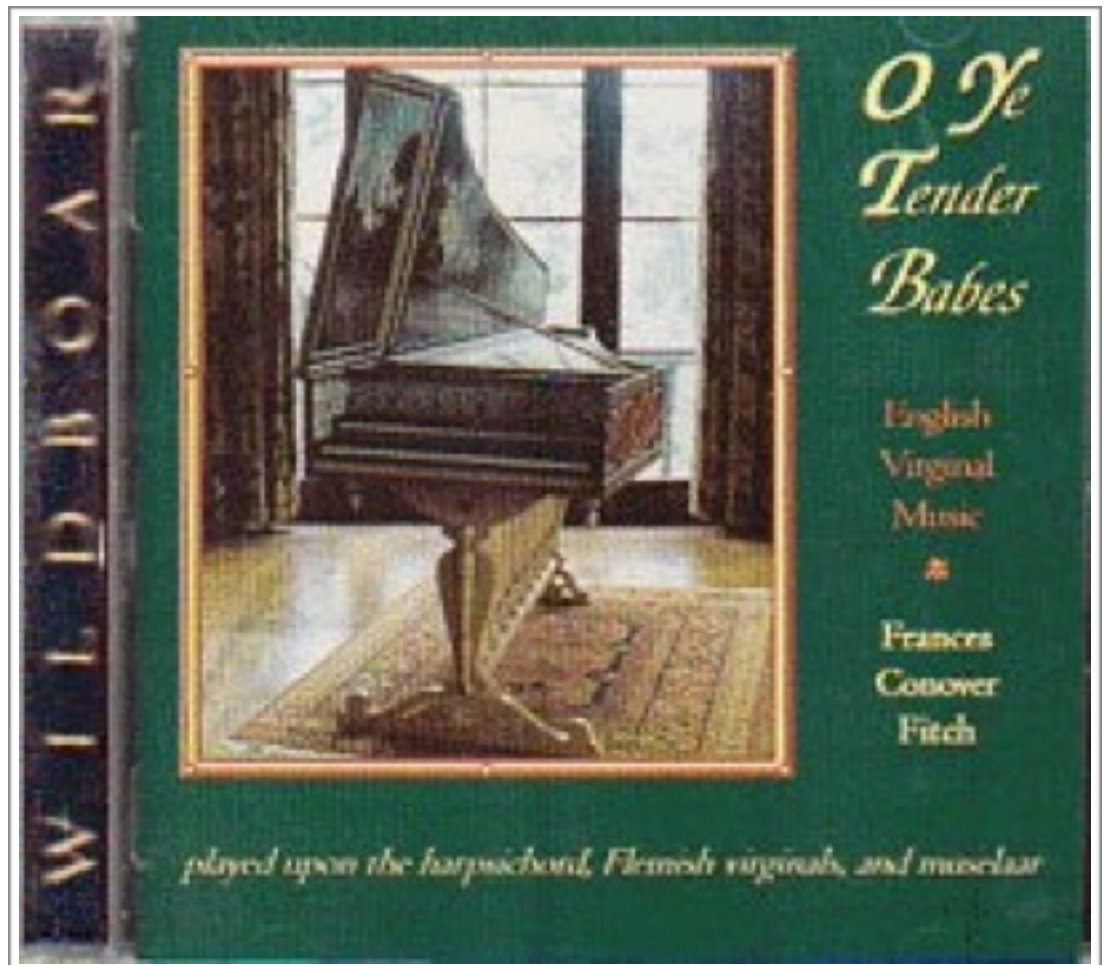
What counts, though, is the quality and brilliance of the playing and singing. In no case is this less than persuasive and highly enjoyable. If you feel the urge to push the Baroque boat out into new waters, pay due homage to a neglected composer, or simply spend a couple of hours enjoying thoughtful and lively music-making from the French mid-Baroque, this is a set to investigate. Next to none of the composer's music is currently available in recordings... The Cantates Françaises on Plectra was announced as this review was nearing completion; but otherwise this CD set must remain the leading collection of her works.

It's usually instructive to come alongside an advocate for the neglected; to see the object of their enthusiasm through their eyes; then to sift the (in this case) music for yourself and let it settle. After only a few hours with the variety and perception of Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre courtesy of Frances Conover Fitch and colleagues, it becomes obvious quite quickly that it's time well spent.

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Review of *O Ye Tender Babes: English Virginal Music*
Frances Conover Fitch, harpsichord and virginals
Wildboar 9507

Kevin Conklin wrote this review of Wildboar's last LP issue, English Virginal Music, from 1985. The recording was later reissued as a CD with added newly recorded material played by Ms Fitch on a "Mother and Child Muselaar" (a type of English Renaissance virginals) under the title "O Ye Tender Babes". The name is taken from a piece of Thomas Tallis included on the program.



"This new issue features selections of English keyboard music, composed between

Renaissance and

Restoration. That period in England was truly an Age of Giants, where not only did popular culture and artistic excellence work hand-in-hand, but indeed when few people could have imagined a serious rift between the two. Sixteenth and 17th-century English musicians and writers were very fortunate. Not only were they challenged by new musical theory and prosody, despite England's religious strife, her artists also shared a nascent linguistic and political identity which was exciting, experimental, yet supremely pragmatic. In truth English music has never regained the practical dominance it enjoyed during the time of Byrd and Dowland.

"A case in point is the Byrd Fantasia, a piece ruminative and fervent by turns, quite innovative in rhetoric, yet basically a religious work. John Bull's intense In nomine is still more startling, with harmonic and metric complexity (11/4 meter, variously divided 3-3-3-2 and 4-4-3, by my hearing) seldom to be heard again until 200 years of Classical-Romantic formalism had expired.

"Fitch has genuine feeling for this music, especially when playing on the virginals, on which she executes quite spontaneously. Her sense of rhythm and flow is good; there is no feeling of strain or lost line even in metrically challenging passages. The record is very good, too, especially of the virginals, which are earthy, immediate and forward, much as they would sound in the kind of drawing-room where a performance would most likely take place.

"Like all previous Wildboar issues- CD as well as LP- this one reproduces high frequencies and especially overtones very faithfully, without making the overall recording shrill or trebly. This album contains some marvelous, under-recorded, and underrated music, reproduced in fine sound. Buy it; you'll like it."