

REVIEW RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Jacques DUPHLY (1715-1789)

La Larare (1e livre, 1744) [4:09]

Chaconne (3e livre, 1756) [7:30]

Médée (3e livre) [4:06]

Les Grâces (3e livre) [8:15]

Rondeau (1e livre) [2:53]

Gavotte (2e livre, 1748) [4:25]

La Lanza (2e livre) [7:36]

La de Villeneuve (3e livre) [4:08]

La de Belombre (3e livre) [3:58]

La Forqueray (3e livre) [5:56]

La Boucon (1e livre) [3:03]

La Pothouin (4e livre) [5:53]

La de Vaucanson (4e livre) [5:22]

Rondeau en do (1e livre) [5:10]

Aya Hamada (harpsichord)

rec. 2014, Chapelle de l'Hôpital Notre-Dame de Bon Secours, Paris

NAMI RECORDS WWCC-7784 [72:22]



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Jacques Duphly represents "the grace, beauty and elevated sensibility of French harpsichord playing" which will be familiar to those keen on the music of Rameau and Couperin. Aya Hamada's concise but informative booklet notes also point out that Duphly was trained by François D'Agincourt in his birthplace of Rouen. He became a highly regarded harpsichord teacher in Paris, numbering Claude Balbastre and Armand-Louis Couperin amongst his pupils. He died the day after the storming of the Bastille having vanished from public life some twenty years after publishing his fourth volume of harpsichord music.

This is a very fine sounding recording indeed, with as much deep bass as there is crisp sparkle in the colour of the instrument. There is indeed almost as much to say about the harpsichord used for this recording as the music itself. This is the so-called 'Nicholas Lefebvre 1755', which was originally presented as a restored antique. It was later revealed to have been made by Martin Skowronek in 1984 in a plan cooked but between him and Gustav Leonhardt to see how close they could get to creating an 'early' harpsichord using authentic techniques and materials. The process was also designed to reveal to what extent experts and performers would accept that this was a genuine 18th century instrument rather than a 20th century copy.

Tenderness and virtuosity are presented here in equal measure, though spectacular pieces such as *Médée* suit the deeply resonant impact of this instrument very memorably indeed. Aya Hamada's playing is not only technically immaculate, but musically very stimulating indeed. Not all harpsichord recordings welcome repeated listening, but this is the kind of stylish and vibrantly lively set of performances I could spin all day without fatigue. Taking the following track, *Les Grâces*, and you can hear Hamada's touch with those "exquisite ornamentations", also creating a magically 'mythical' atmospheric aura of sound through just the right amount of legato sustaining of the notes. All of these pieces have something to offer, but the selection also includes highlights such as the substantial rondeau *La Pothouin*. This piece builds on harmonically sublime couplets with descending and ascending lines in variations of increasing virtuosity. *La de Vaucanson* with its Alberti bass left hand and boogie-woogie octaves is great fun. The final *Rondeau en do* is a clear homage to a Couperin favourite, *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*.

Whatever the competition, this is a harpsichord recording to treasure. If you want Duphly's complete harpsichord works you could do worse than investigate Pieter-Jan Belder on Brilliant Classics. Mitzi Meyerson's MDG recital (see [review](#)) is worth considering, though Kirk McElhearn was less than complimentary about the over-resonant acoustic in the recording. Jos van Immerseel's contribution from the 1970s (see [review](#)) is still attractive though recorded very closely: you listen as if with your cheek to the soundboard. There are quite a few single-disc recital programmes around but it's always worth trying these in advance if you can. After all, widely differing ideas about the tuning of instruments can have a big effect on the final result. Hamada seems to be using a kind of mean temperament which does tend to iron out some of the more juicy sharpness in remote key signatures such as the F minor of *La Forqueray*. The reviewer's job is made easy in this case however. In terms of instrument and sound quality as well as in the spirit and touch of the performances, Aya Hamada's recording is simply the best.

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DUPHLY: *Harpsichord Pieces*

Aya Hamada—LiveNotes 7784—72 minutes

This is a terrific solo debut by a young Japanese-American harpsichordist trained at Juilliard and in France. From the four books of harpsichord music by Jacques Duphly (1715-89) Aya Hamada has selected 14 of the most familiar pieces, ranging from tender to fiery. Her control of touch and dramatic delivery are both extraordinary. Her expressiveness in the slow pieces is especially noteworthy, with plenty of de-synchronization between the voices to bring out melodies clearly: some of that undoubtedly comes from her study with Skip Sempé. Hamada's drive in fast music is powerful, too, with flair. Her expert playing holds my interest in every phrase and brings out details at several levels of the texture simultaneously. It makes Duphly seem like a major composer, not a second-rank contributor of curiosities to the harpsichord repertoire.

Another draw here for harpsichord enthusiast is the instrument: the "Lefebvre 1755" that Martin Skowronek built in the 1980s for Gustav Leonhardt, in its first recording since Leonhardt's death. The booklet notes explain its history as "a forgery without intent to defraud", where Skowronek set himself the

exercise of craftsmanship with old methods and tools, to simulate a 225-year-old instrument. Leonhardt recorded several of these same pieces in 1989 on this harpsichord, and I compared them directly: Hamada's interpretations bring more grace, a warmer sound, and have smoother and more moderate intonation. I compared Hamada's also with Pieter-Jan Belder's recent 4CD set and Byron Schenkman's recording of book 2. Those are excellent and well worth having, but Hamada and this harpsichord bring more immediacy and depth to the music.

The booklet is in Japanese and English. This was recorded at a church in Paris.

B LEHMAN

DVORAK: *Alfred*

Petra Froese (Alvina), Ferdinand von Bothmer (Harald), Felix Rumpf (Alfred), Jorg Sabrowski (Gothron), Peter Mikulas (Seward); Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno, Prague Radio Symphony/Heiko Mathias Forster

Arcodiva 140 [2CD] 125 minutes

Alfred was the first of Dvorak's operas, and the only one written in German. The title character is the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great, and the story tells of his battles against the invading Danes, with, of course, a love story grafted onto it. The libretto by Karl Theodor Körner had already been set by Flotow (of *Martha* fame), and no one is sure why Dvorak chose it. The opera was never performed in his lifetime—indeed, not performed at all until 1938, when it was done in Czech translation. The Arcodiva recording preserves the first-ever German language performances, given in Prague in September 2014.

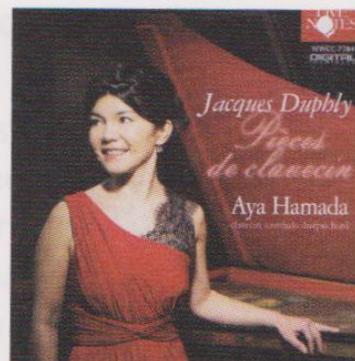
The opera was finished in 1870, when Dvorak had his first two symphonies behind him and very little else; his great works were still to come. The music shows the influence of Wagner's early operas, and it doesn't sound much like Dvorak at all. Even if we do get a few vigorous, striding tunes (the second and third scenes of Act 1, for example), we wait in vain for one of those warm, catchy melodies so typical of the Czech composer to break forth. For all one's hopes that here is a newly discovered masterpiece, *Alfred* is little more than note spinning.

There's no point in criticizing the performance—it's good enough and the only one we're likely to have for quite some time. Felix Rumpf's high baritone is often dry and wooden in the title role; his beloved, Alvina, is more accomplished and rises to the dramatic

Jacques Duphly: Pièces de clavecin

Aya Hamada, harpsichord

Live Notes WWCC-7784



Aya Hamada's debut recording is a pleasure on many levels. The repertoire comprises 14 exuberant and exquisite selections from the four books of harpsichord pieces that Jacques Duphly (1715-1789) composed from 1744 to 1768. Although he began his career as an organist, the Rouen-born Duphly decided he was better suited to the harpsichord and devoted himself to the instrument in Paris as performer and teacher. The compositions for harpsichord offered here—from only 52 Duphly pieces known to exist—alternate between giddy grandeur and tender reflection, with numerous surprising turns of phrase and options for imaginative ornamentation. Duphly was greatly inspired by masters who wrote for harpsichord, but he always had something fresh to say within a chameleon-like style. Hamada sounds as if she's captivated by every note Duphly set to staff paper. She brings crisp rhythmic profile and acrobatic finesse to "La Lanza," and she is as adept at dramatic gestures (as in "Médée") as she is conveying the elegance in a series of dances. Hamada plays these works on a two-manual harpsichord originally attributed to Nicholas Lefebvre in 1755 but revealed by Martin Skowronek in 1984 to be his own creation. (Read the entire story of the hoax in the liner notes, either in English or Japanese.) The instrument, which Gustav Leonhardt owned until his death in 2012, is a marvel of brilliant and glistening sonorities. Hamada takes every opportunity to savor the instrument's luxuriant tonal qualities while providing the music with shapely, poetic, and—when Duphly is in his most extroverted frame of mind—what could only be termed swashbuckling performances. The recording was made at Chapelle de l'hôpital Notre-Dame de Bon Secours in Paris, the city where Duphly died, alone and harpsichord-less, a day after a crowd stormed the Bastille.

—Donald Rosenberg

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EDITED BY

Tilman Skowroneck

Schornsheim's and Staier's playing—this comes as no surprise—is on a very high level, both in terms of finger technique and of being able to control the nuances of the instrument. They are obviously having a lot of fun with their new/historical “toy,” and, although they sound slightly competitive at times, are evidently a comfortable match for each other.

But the playfully competitive character of this exploration of the Vis-à-vis also has a flip side, most clearly evident in the fast movements of the two four-hand sonatas as well as towards the end of the variations, and whenever the pulse and tension accelerate in the improvisatory pieces. In these movements, the joint interpretation takes on strident tones, while the overall dynamic level settles rather on the forced side. Thus, for example, the opening Allegro of the B-flat major sonata (K. 358) is played at a fast and inflexible tempo, glossing over any change of mood in the second theme and other subtle musical gestures, and with little reference to the orchestral connotations of this movement. This rather mainstream classical approach, with its emphasis on large-scale phrasing and the strict unity of tempo, may be a reminder of how thin our layer of historically informed intuition really is, if we too readily give in to our (otherwise understandable) enthusiasm. In all other respects, a highly recommended CD.

Jacques Duphly, Pièces de clavecin, Aya Hamada, harpsichord (LIVENOTES LN 3814, 2015).

Pre-Revolution musical France cherished the harpsichord in a very special way, and composers and performers luxuriously celebrated its best sonorities. François Couperin, in his *L'Art de toucher le clavecin* (1716), instructed harpsichordists in developing great subtlety of touch, sound, and articulation, in order to overcome the instrument's built-in severity and to play it with the appropriate character. The best harpsichord builders, in turn, succeeded in producing instruments of individual character, gorgeous sonority, and great tonal beauty. For the listener of today, the best French harpsichord music of this period says that the harpsichord can, or should, do more than merely lay down a blanket of historically appropriate sound: a good harpsichord is a personality, to be taken seriously by players and listeners alike.

Jacques Duphly (1715–1789), organist, harpsichordist, and in his day a famous harpsichord teacher, lived in the midst of all this. Easily mistaken for “the best bad composer” of music “like a chocolate bonbon,” exquisite on the outside “but with a soft filling” (Gustav Leonhardt's tongue-in-cheek expressions of admira-

tion for Duphly⁷), Duphly is an unfailing negotiator of the borderland between traditional and new styles, and between taste and tastelessness. His pieces are a blend of virtuosic (but never back-breaking) showpieces, character pieces with changing moods, languid *rondeaux*, and carefully crafted miniatures. At times, like his colleagues Armand-Louis Couperin and Claude-Bénigne Balbastre, he weaves early classical elements into the Baroque fabric, but without embarrassing the player more than occasionally with newfangled *Alberti* basses or thoughtlessly thrown-in 4-6 chords. In fact, his harmonic progressions are often innovative and unexpected for the time. His command of form and voice-leading is impeccable. Most of his melodies have the stamp of canonic creations; one can imagine, at the height of his fame, his students whistling them on their way home.

Harpsichordist Aya Hamada presents a selection from Duphly's four books of harpsichord pieces. She plays on a French harpsichord (FF-e³, 2x8', 4', buff stop) made by Martin Skowronek in 1984,⁸ apparently in an excellent state of regulation. The disc makes a superb case for the French harpsichord-lover's culture of the eighteenth century, and it is a joy to listen to from beginning to end.

Hamada's technique appears to be situated at the flexible-yet-energetic end of the spectrum, which allows her to produce passagework, note repetitions, and trills of astonishing speed and accuracy without ever compromising her tone and without producing much, if any, mechanical noise. Her tempo choices strike me as natural, never becoming either complacent or hectic. Her slow movements are meticulously worked-out, but delivered with spaciousness, subtly daring rhythmic flexibility, and convincing phrasing. Her take on note endings in the pieces marked "tendrement" is to not linger too long, compensating for the slightly airy results with a carefully planned touch. Some of the languorous pieces thus end up sounding unexpectedly light-footed, yet never stilted or coy—an efficient device to prevent them from becoming slow and sticky.

Throughout the CD, Hamada demonstrates a keen ear for the vocal treble of this particular instrument, but she takes nothing for granted, and actively enhances whatever the instrument has to offer through touch and timing: here is a harpsichordist who knows how to breathe and how to take time without losing her *cadence*. Each piece on this disc receives a thoughtful treatment with many well-shaped details and lovely registrations. This is especially gratifying in

⁷ These two quotations are authentic.

⁸ Formerly in Gustav Leonhardt's collection. The instrument became initially known as a 1755 original by Nicholas Lefebvre, but it was in fact made on order. See Martin Skowronek, "The 'Harpsichord of Nicholas Lefebvre 1755': The story of a forgery without intent to defraud," *The Galpin Society Journal* 55 (2002): 4–14.

some of the faster pieces (*La Larare*, *Médée*, and parts of the *Chaconne*), whose passagework easily could lead to a mechanical approach; to be sure, there is plenty of drive here, but it is always balanced against a musical conception that goes beyond the surface appeal of technical fireworks.

Only very occasionally does Hamada show that she faces the same challenges in these pieces as other harpsichordists. For instance, at the beginning of the *Chaconne* in F (technically not really difficult) it is hard to achieve a really triumphant sound and a confident stride; trills and leaps and the task of fitting everything into the pulse get in the way. The result tends to become heavier than perhaps intended. Hamada meets the challenge of this beginning admirably, but a residue of its inherent problems remains faintly audible—the rest of the *Chaconne* with its many contrasts is brilliantly performed.

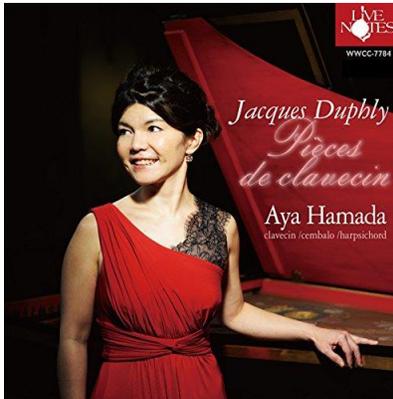
The recording, made in the same venue as Gustav Leonhardt's CD reviewed above, is direct but still spacious, and captures the character of the harpsichord well (especially when single stops are being played). The CD booklet, in Japanese and English, provides short, well-written "notes from the performer" on the instrument, composer, and recording.



CD Review by [Bertil van Boer](#)

DUPHLY *La Larare. Médée. Les Grâces. La Lanza. La de Villeneuve. La de Belombre. La Fourqueray. La Boucon. La Pothoüin. La de Vaucanson. Rondeau in C. Chaconne. Rondeau. Gavotte* •

Aya Hamada (hpd) • LIVE NOTES 7784 (72:24)



Jacques Duphly: Pièces de clavecin

Jacques Duphly (1715–1789) is one of those French composers of the Classical era whose entire career was lived in the shadow of contemporaries who forged ahead into a new and more dramatic style. To be sure, he grew up when Baroque harpsichord masters such as François Couperin were achieving their own success, and moreover he was already beginning to publish his own works in an imitative style about the time that Jean-Philippe Rameau entered the scene as one of the most important of Couperin's successors. By 1768, when Duphly was already in middle age, he had published four volumes of keyboard works, all of which were quite popular, even though increasingly dated. Thereafter, he apparently composed little or nothing, but even then he was considered mainly as one of the premiere keyboard teachers in Paris. That is generally where his reputation was made, for, as my colleague Jerry Dubins notes in *Fanfare* 38:6 regarding a disc of his music by Anders Daman, his works are generally too old-fashioned to be seen to be at the cutting edge of musical style for the period. Indeed, the Couperin tradition, alive and well in virtually all of his 52 surviving works, seems to be a nod to the past rather than any attempt to carve out a professional career as a composer, and it may not be beyond reason to suggest that all four volumes were *de rigueur* work designed to advertise his own pedagogical prowess rather than as attempts to prolong an outmoded style. Indeed, harpsichordists have recognized Duphly for his skillful works even today, though Dubins's point of recommending a broader selection of contemporaries for the uninitiated to such keyboard works of the same period is well taken, given that Duphly is interesting but not especially ingenious in these pieces.

They do, however, allow for a broad display of both the ability of the keyboardist and the various ways of bringing out the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) nuances that form the heart of this style of music. In short, they are excellent pieces to show off the skill of a performer, as well as an instrument. Such is the case here, with Japanese harpsichordist Aya Hamada playing a two-manual instrument. This was allegedly a reconstruction of one by Nicholas Lefebvre from 1755, done by Martin Skowronek in 1984. It was owned by Gustav Leonhardt, who made a number of recordings over the next decade. However, in 2002 Skowronek revealed that his instrument was actually modern, constructed using 18th-century techniques after Henri Hemsch, a Parisian maker. This became a bit of an embarrassment, for most had thought it authentic, and thus it vanished from recordings, being retained by Leonhardt in his private collection until his death a couple of years ago. Hamada evidently liked what she heard on the early recordings from the years around 1990 and was able to track it down. Skowronek, who passed away last year, continued to make instruments noted for their fine voicing and clear, crystalline sound, though he did so under his own name.

Hamada's playing is skillful and adroit. For example, in the piece entitled *Médée* from the third book, she brings out the tortured soul of Jason's jilted queen with powerful strokes and phrasing of music that seems to flash from one subject to another, now an ostinato bass, now rushing runs and sequences. The rapidity of the passagework expands towards the abrupt end, like mounting rage. In *La Lanza* the same sort of virtuosity is evident but less dramatic, with some nice opening sequences that mimic themes. A secondary section includes a change in registration to bring out the more lyrical minor key moment before a full-voiced final theme returns with increasingly more difficult passagework that seems right out of Domenico Scarlatti. In *La de Vaucanson* the use of Alberti bass makes the sequencing seem more "modern," in that it supports a stable harmonic center, above which *galant* thematic elements leap and twirl. As this is from his last book from 1768 it represents the culmination of style for Duphy, demonstrating that he was capable of incorporating the latest trends. This perpetual motion bass line gives Hamada room to exercise more rubato, which it turn creates a fluid phrasing that gives life to the mechanical figuration.

There are the usual *tombeaux*, honorifics to Couperin, Fouqueray, and Rameau, all of which Hamada performs with grace, such as the C-Major Rondeau and *La Fourqueray*. In short, this is an excellent recording that not only allows for the re-emergence of Skowronek's wonderful instrument but also sensitive and dramatic interpretations by Hamada. As her debut recording, it is a great beginning to what is hopefully a bright future as a harpsichordist. **Bertil van Boer**

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