

Zoe Vandermeer, *If Love Be the Food of Musick*
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(Voce Classics, 1996)

This eloquent CD, its title aptly rearranged from Shakespeare's ultimate romantic layabout, Duke Orsino of *Twelfth Night*, is an accomplished and melodic journey through trends in music from the 1600s to the 1700s. Recorded by Zoe Vandermeer, who accompanies herself on the harp and harpsichord, the CD feels like a private concert of madrigals, ballads and mournful dirges from some of the more beautiful traditions from France, Italy, England and Scotland.

The singer has a rich, clear voice, obviously well trained. Her delivery subtly shifts according to the style and era of the piece, a careful and appreciated accomplishment. For those of you not familiar with the singing and playing style of the 1600s, there is less vibrato than one might assume. The sound is more akin to those impressive ladies of Anonymous 4, though still of a different time, and similarly relies most of the purity of the note and melody than bombast and overly-complicated melodies.

The harpsichord accompaniment immediately identifies the era. I am most familiar with the viol de gamba music of Marin Marais and Jean-Baptiste Lully than other instruments of the time, but the style is unmistakably the same tradition. Compositions of the time allow the voice and the harpsichord intricacy separately, but not as often together. The trills of the voice are given focused attention, and though the harpsichord may match the voice, most often they are either a true duet or a tinkling undercurrent, they are rarely turned into a fugue...

...One of the most interesting aspects of this CD is its general trend toward leading the listener through both a chronological order as well as a geographical one. The first selections mostly Italian, later English, Scottish and Irish, and the different origins are noticeable, but never jarring.

The songs themselves are mostly period love songs and madrigals, expectantly sweet and melodramatic. This kind of music can be quite compelling, with its sustained notes of yearning and sadness -- as with "Gelosia," "Sweeter than Roses" and "Mo Leannan." Even these melancholy songs have shifts into happier moments, as clear in "Sweeter than Roses." The more playful selections, including "Amarilli di Julio Roman" and "L'erba fresca," are mostly harpsichord tunes. These may seem more familiar, made up of the flourishes and regal melodies associated with the time.

As the selections move forward in time, you can hear the music and voice become more integrated and almost bubbly. About halfway through, with "Had Away Frae Me, Donald," Vandermeer introduces the sweeter, more delicate tones of the harp into the mix. Her playing is deft, and the airs which introduce it are the more romantic melodies familiar to fans of Celtic

airs.

The whole album has the fun of a journey both in time and across lands, showing us equally the similarities between traditions as well as the differences which make each unique. It is particularly fascinating to hear the early love songs and the later Celtic and British tragic ballads, exemplified by "Fair Dark Rose" and "Ca' the Yowes," play off one another. In the later tracks there is sometimes no accompaniment at all, in the tradition of the lands they come from, where a voice was all one needed. At the finish, you get either harp or voice, but not both until the final track, which unites the two threads of the album well.

To borrow again from the Bard, "If music be the food of love, play on." Indeed, with this album, I hope Zoe Vandermeer continues to express her love and play on.

[by Robin Brenner]

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