

CD Review by [Bertil van Boer](#)

GIUSTINI 12 Sonatas, op. 1: No. 1 in g; No. 2 in c; No. 3 in F; No. 4 in e; No. 5 in D; No. 6 in B \flat ; No. 7 in G; No. 8 in A; No. 9 in C; No. 10 in f; No. 11 in E; No. 12 in G • Paolo Zentilin (pn) • BRILLIANT 96173 (3 CDs: 159:08)

In 1688 Bartolomeo Cristofori, a rather inventive instrument maker, moved to Florence to be the on-site repairman for the collection of the Medicis. Unlike the comfort of small-town Padua, Florence was an intellectual center, and Cristofori was given leeway to pursue his own keyboard inventions, eventually concocting one that used hammers, leather, and an advanced mechanism that offered elastic response and a larger dynamic range on a single keyboard. One would have thought that in the 1720s, as it was becoming more developed, that it would have been named the Cristofori, but instead came to be known for its dynamics as the pianoforte or fortepiano. It was relatively slow in attracting a wider attention, and the early instruments performed the music originally written for the other keyboards then in vogue, albeit probably with some nod towards the facility of the Cristofori. What it needed was a dedicated set of pieces, and in 1732 the organist in the small town of Pistoia, Lodovico Giustini (1685–1743) published a set of 12 sonatas especially composed with this new instrument in mind. He apparently did this while on a visit to Florence about a year after Cristofori's death, presumably coming into contact with the inventor's successor, Giovanni Ferrini. Why he composed them is less clear. The dedication is to Dom António de Bragança, the younger brother of Portuguese King João V, who apparently had acquired an instrument. The details are rather hazy, whatever Giustini's intentions, and though he may have thought this an honorific, as musicologist James Parakilas has noted, why these 12 sonatas were created is still somewhat of a mystery. Certainly, comparisons with Giustini's other compositions are lacking, as the bulk of his numerous church works and oratorios have been lost.

So much for the lacunar history of these works, but what we have is the first dedicated compositions for the fortepiano, even if a one-off set. This is not unfamiliar to the discography, even for Brilliant Classics, for this company offered a complete set done on a fortepiano by Andrea Coen a while back. Other individual works can be found piecemeal, but there is also a single disc of a tithe of them on CPO performed by Wolfgang Brunner. Here, however, we have a modern piano complete set of all 12 on three discs, performed by Paolo Zentilin. He has been through the printed score and done whatever editorial work it needed, and this seems to have resulted in a rather clean edition. As to the works themselves, they conform to the halfway house of the Baroque and galant styles. This is to say that they are multi-movement works, each of which includes the usual stylized dances of the Baroque suite. To discuss all 12 of them would seem to be somewhat redundant, given that there is stylistic continuity throughout, with Baroque spun-out sequences alternating with an operatic style; there is a plethora of technical challenges as well. For example, in the Corrente of the G-Minor Sonata (No. 1) the figuration is used as a counterfoil to the homophonic main theme. Giustini seems to be overly fond of giges, but the content ranges. In the first of two in the C-Minor Sonata (No. 2), the gigue takes on the character of a lilting Siciliano, which unfolds like a limpid pastorale. The second immediately following is much more manic, with a twirling main theme. The opening Prelude of the D-Major Sonata (No. 5) is a floating lyrical melody with some brief excursions into the minor mode, interspersed with arpeggiated chords. This particular sonata ends with a gavotte that would have easily been ascribed to Emanuel Bach for its easy theme and sudden harmonic excursions. The shortest of the sonatas is that in A-Major (No. 8), where the opening is an old-fashioned Sarabande, one that seems almost like it could have been written by Telemann in terms of stylistic simplicity and lyricism. Again, the final gigue is manic in its perpetual motion triplet figuration. For the more learned, there is the Canzone of the F-Minor Sonata (No. 10), a gavotte with a folk-like character that has some interesting internal imitation and echo effects. The Rondo

of the E-Major Sonata (No. 11) switches to the French style, with its careful ornamentation and dotted rhythms worthy of Rameau.

All in all, these are not simple pieces to be tossed away as oddities, a set of works that somehow can only be seen in an historical context as the first especially written for the new fortepiano. While one must wonder what it must have sounded like on the early Cristofori instrument, it is clear that they are meant as idiomatic works that would merely sound dull on any other keyboard of the time. There is a considerable variety to the stylized movements, indicating that Giustini was both aware of the emerging galant style as well as being familiar with the traditional Baroque suite form. There are nuances and details in each of the sonatas and their individual movements that show his thoughts on this new instrument.

All of this is certainly brought to life by the sensitive and often lively performance of Zentilin, whose interpretations have both solemnity and considerable fire (depending upon the movement). There might have been a tendency to regard these as toss-offs, but Zentilin displays an unusual sensitivity to the style that brings them to life with crisp clarity. To be sure, the range of expression on the modern piano may be responsible for some of this, but it is careful and perceptive performance that permeates this set. It is true that a closer reading through a fortepiano might give a better period view, but here this three-disc set does much to offer a wonderful picture of both the possibilities of the new instrument and Giustini's own abilities. This makes it much more the pity that more of his music has not survived to judge him more thoroughly. Well recommended. Bertil van Boer

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