

Emperor of the Moon
Interpretations of 17th and early 18th century English Country Dances
by Andrew Shaw.
Music edited by Howard Mitchell
and arranged and played by Paul Hutchinson and John Hymas.

This third instalment of 18 dances from the collections of Nathaniel Kynaston and others with its accompanying CD will be greatly welcomed by dancers and musicians. Andrew Shaw has established his credentials as an interpreter and editor of these dances so well that we all know exactly what standard of material and presentation to expect. The combination of Paul and John is, of course, much more recently on the scene but they have lost no time in gaining great respect for their playing.

The style and format of the book continues that of its two predecessors, being impressively detailed and erudite. Andrew's infectious enthusiasm for the scholarly side of his research shines through once again, particularly in, for instance, his reference to Thurston Dart's dismissal of the tune to 'Emperor of the Moon' as 'gawky and dull', the fascinating account of the fortunes of the 'Royal Fishery of Great Britain and Ireland' or Ezekiel Spanheim's description of Queen Anne's dancing days being brought to an untimely end because "Elle a commence a grossir, et avoir des atteintes de goute"! A lesson for us all there, I think!

What we have in all three collections is a detailed account of Andrew's interpretations of the dances, presented in such a way as to leave little room for doubt (though I did have to ask him for clarification of his instructions for the first 8 bars of the B music of 'Chester Ladies!'). He, of course, uses standard abbreviations and commonly used dance terminology but these instructions are much more than aide memoires. Of the 18 dances only 2 do not have the music facing the dance notations and the links are always made clear in the details of barring and phrasing. I do feel that occasionally the music as played on the CD lacks sympathy for the phrasing of the dance. 'Draw Cupid Draw', for example, begins with an 8-bar double figure of eight but the tune is played as 4 groups of 2-bar phrases and although the tune for 'Royall Fishery' is undistinguished it could have been played more stylishly as the dance requires.

The present collection is of 8 dances from Kynaston's 1716-1718 sets, 6 from The Dancing-Master between 1690 and 1710, and 4 from Walsh (1710/11, 1715 and 1718). Although originally all the dances were longways dances - usually triple minor, as is common with modern interpretations, Andrew has adapted and varied them so that we now have an extremely useful collection of dances including longways duple minor, triple minor and three couple sets. The character and style of the dances is, again, varied and interesting. 'Chester Ladies', with its tune full of long, flowing quaver passages, is a dance of great elegance and courteous style; 'Dunrobin Castle', with its title suggestive of Gothic grandeur, has a darkly brooding tune in A minor which makes one wonder if the inter-weaving figures don't portend some diplomatic manoeuvring; 'Kind and Easy', as its title suggests, bubbles merrily along almost like a party game! There is a lovely moment in this dance where the first couple leads just 4 steps down the set before changing direction to return, a moment beautifully pointed in the music by the rhythmic device known as a 'Scotch Snap' This is clearly shown in the music but is missing from the recording. A pity.

As with Andrew's earlier collections many of the dances have become familiar as he has been trying them out and now the excitement of 'The Old Maid in Hopes' with its compulsive rhythmic drive, the sophisticated elegance of 'The Spanheim' with its alternation of 4- and 6- bar phrases, the curious cross rhythms of 'Tomson's Whim' and the seamless flow of movement of 'Jumpers Chase' are available for all to enjoy. This is particularly the case when, as now, a CD accompanies the book. Dancers who do not have access to live music will be very happy to possess this recording. Only 1 tune, 'The Soldier and the Sailor' (familiar from its use in 'The Beggar's Opera'), is omitted. The playing is in the very capable hands of Paul Hutchinson (who worked with Andrew on his first 2 publications) and John Hymas, accordion and violin respectively. On the whole the recording balance favours the accordion and lacks the transparency of the 2 previous CD's. This means that, to my ears, there is an overall lack of lightness and brightness and the middle frequencies, particularly of the accordion dominate too often. However this will not particularly trouble those who use the CD for dancing and they will find that tempi are appropriate and that the arrangements are unobtrusive and supportive. For listening purposes I would have preferred more use of counter melody and varied instrumental combinations. However the viola parts in 'Love and a Bottle' and even more in 'The Spanheim' are shapely and stylish. Indeed the CD really comes alive with the latter tune! 'Draw Cupid Draw' is played with great intensity: noble and resonant as if it came from a Baroque Passion setting. I also greatly enjoyed the hypnotic use of ostinati and drones in 'The Old Maid in Hopes' but was disappointed that the 3-part version of 'Vigo', though printed in the book, was not played. 'Emperor of the Moon' is indeed 'gawky and dull' but how compellingly played here. At last the musicians seemed able to give free rein to their improvisation skills using the tune merely as a framework for their inventiveness.

Once again the whole venture is a delight and dancers, callers and musicians will be grateful to Andrew and the band for drawing us further down these fascinating byways of early Country Dance and providing both clear instructions for the dances and highly danceable music.

Book and CD are available from Derek and Ann Appleing:
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