

Next of Kynaston

*English Country Dance Tunes by Nathaniel Kynaston and his contemporaries
recorded by
Rebecca King, Jon Berger and Jim Oakden:
'Persons of Quality'*

Andrew Shaw's excellent researches into the dances and tunes of Nathaniel Kynaston and his contemporaries have been widely circulated and most of the music made available in print and on CD. Dancers, listeners and instrumentalists are now familiar with the music and this fine new CD, played by the same musicians who produced 'Farnicle Huggy', gives us all a chance to hear the tunes afresh in new arrangements which feature a wide palette of instrumental colour. All but two of these tunes have been previously recorded and instantly noticeable are the generally faster tempi which the players adopt, in two cases clipping over half a minute off the previous recording. The arrangements are imaginative and inventive and the sequence of tunes provides a very satisfying experience for the listener. Dancers, of course, will not worry too much about the sequence but will be more concerned with each individual performance.

The sheer variety of instrumental colour is testimony to the care and thought which has gone into the production of this very well recorded CD. The sound is bright and clear with a strong bass line, usually provided by the piano, which should be pleasing to dancers. Just occasionally, for instance in the later turns of 'The She Favourite' and 'Blenheim House' I felt that there was perhaps too much going on. Some of these melodies are very strong and benefit from not being over burdened with extra melody lines. On the other hand several of these performances, notably of 'The Old Maid in Hopes', end in a veritable romp!

The principle of at first presenting the melody clearly and unadorned, apart from harmonic and rhythmic support, is maintained and thereafter variations and elaborations are added. In this regard special mention must be made of Jon Berger's thoroughly idiomatic and sensitively ornamented fiddle playing. Throughout the CD his contributions are mostly very pleasing and he sets the standard immediately in the first track, 'Well Done Jack', with pleasing variations and decorations. Here there is real joy in the playing which works towards a grand climax. Later on, in 'Whiskers' with its busy semiquavers, the fiddle proves the better instrument, more suited to this tune than the rather breathless recorder! However the triple time tune 'Orange Nan', a difficult tune in which to achieve a real legato such as the long phrases of the dance requires, finds the fiddle phrasing, to my ears, somewhat awkward and ungracious. The piano verse seems happiest here!

The piano is the foundation for most of the music on the recording and Rebecca King's playing is inventive and distinguished throughout. She moves freely around the keyboard and is equally at home providing a solid and rhythmic bass line, as in the urgent and exciting 'Lady Dainty', or spinning out arpeggios, as in 'Fop's Fancy', or playing decorative variations, as in 'Count Leon'. Rebecca also makes sparing but effective use of other sounds which her keyboard provides, 'Neptune's Triumph' of 1713 beginning with harpsichord and – amazingly – launching into 'The Merry Conclusion' on full organ. It will be interesting to discover how this works for dancing!

The third 'person of quality' is Jim Oakden who plays a vast array of instruments which, along with the ability to double track, means that the arrangements can feature many changes of colour and texture. Perhaps the most effective of these instruments, sensibly used sparingly, is the clarinet. Its appearance in the faster tracks such as 'Lady Dainty' and 'The Old Maid in Hopes' immediately gives a klezmer quality to the music. Less happy, and more prone to uneven rhythm and phrasing, is 'Young Damon's Flight', though this is a good tempo for this shapely and busy dance. Elsewhere Jim makes effective contributions particularly with his various plucked instruments, banjo, cittern and guitars.

From the first sight of the colourful and good-humoured packaging of this CD the pleasure which has clearly been had in its making is conveyed to the listener. The imagination and musicality of the arrangements, the variety of tempi, keys and metres of the tunes chosen, the changes of instrumentation, colour and texture all combine to make this a thoroughly successful and important addition to the library of music for listening and dancing and will be greatly welcomed.

Ian Jones