



REVIEW: RECORDING

Sonatas a Violino Solo e Basso

Gaetano Brunetti (1744–1798)

Carlos Gallifa (violin) / Galatea Ensemble

Lindoro NL3055, 2022; one disc, 55 minutes

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From violinist Carlos Gallifa, the Galatea Ensemble (Pablo Zapico, baroque guitar; Javier Aguirre, cello; Alfonso Sebastián, harpsichord) and the Spanish-based Lindoro label comes this 2022 recording of four violin sonatas by Gaetano Brunetti (1744–1798). Interest in the music of this Italian-born composer has flourished since the 2000s. Brunetti became prominent among other Italian violinists working in Spain at the time because he was the teacher of Prince Carlos IV (1748–1819) and later directed his chamber ensemble when Carlos became king (reigning 1788–1808). Nearly all of his music existed only in manuscripts during his lifetime, within the Spanish royal collections. Nine of Brunetti's more than ninety symphonies have been available through Garland since 1979, together with some other isolated scores printed in the 1960s and 1980s. Team efforts led by the Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales in Madrid have yielded additional publications of string quartets (2013), string trios (2012) and violin sonatas (2022); recent issues of this journal have reviewed editions and recordings of some of this music. Raúl Angulo Díaz, author of the liner notes, has contributed enormously to making Brunetti's music available with his transcriptions of symphonies, oboe sextets, string quartets and quintets, violin sonatas and duos and divertimentos, all published by the Ars Hispana Association. Germán Labrador López de Azcona at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid has contributed to this growing literature by publishing a *Catálogo crítico, temático y cronológico* for Brunetti (Madrid: AEDOM) in 2005.

Performers including Gallifa and the Galatea Ensemble have also been conducting their own research beyond the available printed music, and their historically informed approach becomes evident on page 2 of the liner notes, which includes information about the recording's four instruments, along with the tuning (A=417 Hz). Gallifa plays an original 1784 French violin made by Léopold Renaudin (1749–1795), which, with its gut strings, contributes to the distinct timbre of the ensemble. The recording's four sonatas – 18 in G minor, 19 in E flat major, 17 in D minor and 125 in C minor – come from a collection of five books of violin sonatas compiled around 1776, according to Angulo Díaz. The collection partially survived in manuscripts at the Archivo General del Palacio Real de Madrid and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, two repositories that have long been sources for Brunetti's music. A complete version of the five-book collection was only possible through a third, newly discovered, manuscript in the Nederlands Muziek Instituut, The Hague.

The first performance choice that stands out is the use of guitar and cello for basso continuo in two of the recording's four sonatas, those in G minor and D minor. For the other two sonatas, in E flat major and C minor, a harpsichord and cello accompany the violin. In other recent projects, the Galatea Ensemble has also featured Gallifa (violin) and Aguirre (cello) with either Zapico on the

guitar or Sebastián on the harpsichord. The reasons for their choice of guitar and cello for the continuo on the present recording, however, are not entirely clear. The decision may have derived from the ensemble wanting to include both musicians in the recording or they may have wanted to experiment with this combination. Regardless, this choice of ensemble prompts listeners to consider the possible performance circumstances of violin sonatas in late eighteenth-century Spain, including performance forces and spaces, audiences and the availability of sheet music.

This recording also raises an important question regarding Brunetti's Italian background and the performance of his music in Spain during his lifetime. By the 1770s, when Brunetti was appointed violinist at Madrid's royal chapel and teacher to the future Carlos IV, violin sonatas were primarily concert repertory, whether at noble residences, city theatres or one of the many chapels in the city. Certainly, some amateurs played Luigi Boccherini's (1743–1805) violin sonatas at home, for instance, but Brunetti's works were not generally available because they had not been published. Violin sonatas, however, were not as central to Madrid's domestic repertory for listening and dancing as other genres such as contredanses, minuets and songs. Violin sonatas were appreciated for what they were: a foreign genre that had come to form part of Spanish musical life. This raises the question as to what today's performers and listeners should make of Italian music written and played in eighteenth-century Spain.

Gallifa's answer to the question in this recording tends aurally to place the Italianate, courtly and modern quality of Brunetti's pieces to the side. It should be noted that Gallifa has worked consistently with late eighteenth-century repertory produced in Spain by foreign musicians like Brunetti, Boccherini and João Pedro de Almeida Mota (1744–1817). He has recorded all three composers' string quartets with Trifolium (with cellist Aguirre), an ensemble committed to historical performance. Taking seriously the historical performance of this mostly unknown repertory fills a gap in the history of Spanish music and complements musicological research. Gallifa and Ensemble Galatea's take on historical performance in the recording considered here, however, removes Brunetti's music from Italianate galant musical language, making these violin sonatas sound a tad too austere and plain.

Several factors contribute to this sonic character. This includes the lack of that clear homophonic texture characteristic of Italian music, established from, at least, the time of Corelli (1653–1713), and common throughout Europe by the 1780s–1790s. It would have been clear to Brunetti in particular, and to any Spanish musician generally, that the violin is the main character in such a piece, and that it should sing over the continuo. Instead, the four pieces in the recording sound more like violin–guitar or harpsichord–cello trios than violin sonatas. In other words, the continuo section is not functionally distinct from the violin in such a way that the former sounds as support and the latter as the soloist. The three instruments lack precise ensemble, perhaps because of the independent processing of the microphone inputs during the recording session or because they approached Brunetti's sonatas more as works for a broken consort than one for a virtuoso violinist.

Overall, the technical difficulties of Brunetti's writing overpower melodiousness in Gallifa's performance. Some of these challenges he masters better than others: double stops sound full and expressive in the first three sonatas, yet appoggiaturas are often out of tune. Throughout most of the recording, the violin's melody struggles to flow between too-heavily sustained notes. These long notes are occasionally paired with high-register passagework where Gallifa achieves the smooth lyricism of the Italian galant violin, such as around 1'30" of the Sonata in G minor's second movement, *Larghetto gracioso* (track 2). The music comes to life when Zapico accompanies these lighter violin figurations with strummed guitar.

Issues with phrasing, articulation and blending among the instruments persist in the album's second sonata, that in E flat major, the only one in a major tonality. In the sequence beginning at 1'55" in the first movement (*Allegro maestoso*, track 4), for example, the violin ascends with difficulty through three distinct blocks of semiquaver passagework rather than gliding through a single melodic line that has a motive thrice repeated. Register changes in the violin pass uncomfortably,

but the sound becomes more rounded once Gallifa reaches the lower end of his instrument. Tuning issues emerge in this sonata, as there are moments where the violin's intonation and harpsichord's temperaments do not quite match. This is particularly evident in the sonata's third movement (Presto, track 6).

The performance is at its best in the first (*Allegro moderato*) and second (*Andantino gracioso*) movements of the Sonata in D minor (tracks 7 and 8). The violin melody flows more easily here, supported by an energetic, yet contained, guitar pairing well with Aguirre's cello. Aguirre holds the continuo section together with a full sound and legato passages when the guitar strums, masterfully using the bass-line suspensions for expressive phrasing. The cello stands out in the second movement, harmonizing with the violin in several sections that sound galant, even sentimental. There is an intention to the long notes in both the violin and the cello: the sound appears, swells and then fades subtly, like a sigh. Each bar leads to the next, creating a cyclical longing. In this context of smooth melodic cycles, the chromatic passages starting at 2'40" and 4'07" add emotional depth to the second movement of the D minor sonata. Zapico, meanwhile, keeps the violin-cello duet together whilst remaining in the background with discreet broken chords. Listeners can finally hear the instruments sing, even though lyricism falters again in the third (*Presto*) movement.

As a violinist, Brunetti was one of a select few who worked for the highest social circles and held prestigious positions in the royal house and chapel, reserved for the best musicians in late eighteenth-century Madrid, making his music available only to a select audience. I would not hesitate to label his violin compositions as courtly and refined. Recordings of Brunetti's repertory need to acknowledge Madrid's cosmopolitan music culture, especially those works composed for the royal houses. While Gallifa and Ensemble Galatea's album of violin sonatas considered here contributes to making late eighteenth-century Spanish music better known, it falls short of this acknowledgment. This listener would have wanted to hear something of Giovanni Paisiello's lyricism or Joseph Haydn's charm, as is typical in recordings of these composers (both were popular in late eighteenth-century Madrid), rather than this somewhat plain approach to Brunetti's works.

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