



REVIEW: RECORDING

## Mr Charles the Hungarian: Handel's Rival in Dublin

Irish Baroque Orchestra / Peter Whelan  
Linn Records CKD 718, 2023; one disc, 64 minutes

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This latest offering from the Irish Baroque Orchestra (IBO), under the artistic direction of Peter Whelan, continues its mission as ‘an ambassador for the stories of Ireland’s musical past’ ([www.irishbaroqueorchestra.com/about](http://www.irishbaroqueorchestra.com/about)). It is the fourth in a series of albums that focus on composers and performers active in, or composing works for, Ireland in the baroque period. Previous albums in the series were *The Hibernian Muse: Music for Ireland by Purcell and Cousser* (2022; reviewed by David Rhodes in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 20/1 (2023), 106–109), *The Trials of Tenducci: A Castrato in Ireland* (2021) and *Welcome Home, Mr Dubourg* (2019; reviewed by David Rhodes in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 17/2 (2020), 281–285). Until IBO and Peter Whelan’s foray into Ireland’s eighteenth-century art music, little of it had been performed, let alone recorded. Their efforts allow listeners to eavesdrop on a long-neglected soundscape.

A dependable way to identify what eighteenth-century audiences in Dublin heard is to scour the newspapers. Indeed, the recording reviewed here takes its inspiration from an advertisement for a concert that occurred on 12 May 1742 at the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin, just weeks after Handel’s premiere of *Messiah*. This concert was presented by ‘Mr Charles the Hungarian, Master of the French Horn’ (*The Dublin Journal* (1–4 May 1742)). As the recording notes by Emily Worthington assert, this was probably Carlo Vernsberg (Charles Vernsburgh; died 1780). Vernsberg was a multi-instrumentalist and virtuoso horn player as well as being a member of the Royal Society of Musicians at various times.

Vernsberg, under the name Mr Charles, toured Britain for a total of twenty-four years between 1733 and 1757 and remained in Ireland between March 1742 and late 1743. Indeed, he had already presented the same programme for the Smock Alley concert on at least one previous occasion, in York (*York Courant* (9 February 1742)). Vernsberg was clearly peddling a proven successful enterprise, and the positive reception of the Dublin concert is shown in its public rehearsal and repeat performance. The concert programme – published in full in *The Dublin Journal* (1–4 May 1742) and reproduced in the recording’s liner notes – included four extracts from works by Handel, as well as his *Water Music* (as arranged and published by John Walsh in 1733). The concert was as follows:

### First Act

- 1 Georg Frideric Handel, Overture from *Il Pastor Fido*
- 2 Francesco Geminiani, ‘The 6th Concerto’
- 3 Mr Charles, ‘A Solo on the French Horn’
- 4 [Anon], ‘A Concerto on the Clarinet’

## Second Act

- 1 Handel, *Water Music* with the march in *Scipio* and the grand chorus in *Atalanta*
- 2 Jacques (le vieux) Aubert, 'A Concerto on the German Flute'
- 3 Mr Charles, 'A Solo on the Hautbois de Amour'
- 4 Johann Adolf Hasse, 'Concerto with Signiora Barbarini's Minuet'

## Third Act

- 1 Handel, Overture and the Dead March from *Saul*
- 2 [Anon], 'A select Piece on the Shalamo'
- 3 Pasqualino de Marzi, 'A Solo on the Violoncello'
- 4 [Anon], 'The Turkish Musick in the original Taste, as performed at the Spring Garden, Vaux-hall, London'.

The inclusion of Handel was surely an effort to capitalize on the 'Handelmania' sweeping Dublin at that time, but one should remember too that *Water Music* (1717) and other works by Handel (including extracts from *Il Pastor Fido* (1712), also on Vernsberg's programme) had enjoyed repeat performances in London and provincial venues since their premieres. Other popular composers were featured in Vernsberg's programme too, including Francesco Geminiani and Johann Adolf Hasse, but the greatest draw for the eighteenth-century audience must have been the novelty of the instruments that were featured: 'The Clarinet, the Hautbois d'Amour, and Shalamo [chalu-meau], were never heard in this Kingdom before' (*The Dublin Journal* (1–4 May 1742)).

As Worthington acknowledges in the liner notes, little of Charles's music has survived, so attempting to reconstruct his 1742 concert for this recording is impossible. Be that as it may, it is somewhat disappointing to find that only a single short piece on the album is by Vernsberg: the 'Chasse' in Suite 1 from his *Twelve Duettos for two French Horns* (published in *Apollo's Cabinet or The Muses Delight . . . with Twelve Duettos for two French Horns, composed by Mr. Charles* (Liverpool: Sadler, 1757)). It takes the place here (presumably) of 'A solo on the French Horn, by Mr. Charles, to shew the beauty of that Instrument', as advertised in the original programme. Given that one of the central intentions of the IBO is that 'scholarship and musical excellence converge in a unique way', it is unfortunate that a more thorough engagement with written scholarship, or with academics familiar with the music in question, was not pursued here. David Rhodes has noted problematic programming decisions in his reviews of previous IBO recordings, most notably *Welcome Home, Mr Dubourg*.

There are other works by Vernsberg that might have been a better choice, and others still that could have made more interesting additions to the recording. A 'SOLO for French horn' by 'Mr Charles', for example, survives in the collection at King's College Cambridge (GB-Ckc, MS 118, fols 11v–12r), and would have represented the solo performed at the concert more accurately than the 'Chasse' horn duet. In addition, three concertos exist: two horn concertos by Vernsberg in the Egerton manuscript collection at the British Library (GB-Lbl Add. 71539) and a horn concerto in D major by 'Signor Charles' in seven parts at the University of Birmingham (GB-Bu SH/670–676). One of these would have been more suited for inclusion than Handel's Concerto Grosso in G major Op. 3 No. 3 (HWV314), scored for 'Flauto traverso or Hautboy', which was not part of Vernsberg's original concert. This concerto is in fact a compilation that John Walsh had illegally made of several earlier works by Handel for the 1734 Op. 3 publication (as are all but one of the other five concertos in Op. 3, the so-called 'oboe concertos'). Indeed, as Donald Burrows suggests, it is unlikely that the final movement of this work is even by Handel (Burrows, *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 201–202). A further addition would have been a flute concerto by 'Mr. Leveux' – Jacques (le vieux) Aubert (1689–1753) – that is listed on the original concert programme but has been omitted here. This would not have been overly onerous to locate, given that much of Aubert's work survives.

Slightly more difficult to include would have been the ‘Solo on the Violoncello by Signior Pasqualino’ (Pasqualino de Marzi; died 1766). The term ‘solo’ at this time typically referred to a sonata, and at least twelve sonatas for two violoncellos by Pasqualino survive (Op. 1, published in 1748, and Op. 2 of 1751). However, the alternative solo sonata for cello chosen in its stead – Lorenzo Bocchi’s Sonata 10 from *A Musically Entertainment for a Chamber* (published in Dublin c1725) – is in fact a particularly suitable one, given that Bocchi was an important figure in Irish musical history of the 1720s. He was probably the first cellist to perform in Ireland and was involved with the first publication of Irish tunes, *A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes: Proper for the Violin, German Flute or Hautboy* (Dublin: John & William Neal, 1724). Bocchi’s sonata is performed wonderfully by soloist Jonathan Byers, showcasing all the brilliance and flair that the music of these mid-eighteenth-century concerts needed to attract an audience. The first movement, with its fast string-crossing passages, is reminiscent of the virtuosity of Vivaldi’s cello works, and Byers plays these exuberantly. In all movements the continuo interpretation is sensitive and unimposing, but is placed a little too much in the background; this is perhaps due to the quiet timbre of the organ.

There is no doubt that wind and brass instruments take centre stage on this album. Some of them are likely to be unfamiliar to the twenty-first-century listener. A welcome inclusion too is the little-known concerto by Hasse, which represents the ‘select Piece on the Shalamo’ of the original programme. Although it boasts the chalumeau as a solo instrument, this is in truth an intimate chamber work for three soloists: oboe, chalumeau and bassoon. It is performed delicately here by Leo Duarte, Nicola Boud and Michele Fattori, with a beautiful dialogue established between the three soloists. The continuo is more central in the mixing here, which adds rich colour and depth to the performance. The ornaments are executed with grace, and closely worked phrasing allows each voice to have the spotlight at just the right moment. The enjoyment of the performers is palpable. However, were this recording truly to follow the original concert programme, the Hasse Concerto in F major (Op. 4 No. 1) would have been a better choice, for this was what was clearly billed for Smock Alley, identifiable with certainty in the description of its closing minuet as ‘Signora Barbarini’s Minuet’. The minuet – named for the Venetian ballerina prodigy Barbara Campanini, who made her debut in Dublin a few weeks after Charles’s concert – follows on the recording as a brief stand-alone item.

A wonderful addition to the original concert is ‘Va tacito’ from Handel’s *Giulio Cesare*, in an arrangement for flute (which takes the vocal line), horn and orchestra published by John Walsh in *Six Celebrated Songs made on Purpose for French Horns. . . by Mr. Handel* in 1732. The da capo includes some thrilling ornamentation from soloists Miriam Kaczor on flute and Anneke Scott on horn, but the horn steals the show, with Scott engaging in some daring invention across the instrument’s full range.

Continuing with the brass at centre stage, the Walsh arrangement of *Water Music* similarly foregrounds the horns, and is, as ever, a crowd-pleaser, played with vitality and freshness here by the IBO. Telemann’s *Napolitana* features what is today known as the oboe d’amore (played with skill by Duarte with organ and cello continuo). Even though its title states that it was written for ‘houtbois d’amour, ou d’autres instrumens [sic]’, the opening of the piece sensitively exploits the serene nature of the oboe d’amore, with a gentle melody over a tonic pedal in the continuo (the cello playing imbues it with a wonderfully pastoral ambience). Published in *Der getreue Music-Meister* (Hamburg, 1728), one of Telemann’s pedagogical works, the bipartite dance was intended for teaching or amateur playing. It stands in the recording in place of the ‘Solo on the Hautbois de Amour, by Mr. Charles’, which was probably a sonata.

Some of the omissions from the recording are understandable – such as the ‘march in *Scipio* and the grand chorus in *Atalanta*’ appended to *Water Music* in the second act of the original concert. The decision not to include these excerpts surely considers the twenty-first-century listener, who is not accustomed to such a mixture of instrumental works in most ‘classical’ concerts. Moreover, it is

likely that the chorus from *Atalanta* was an arrangement by Vernsberg ‘for French-Horns and Trumpets’, as the advertisement for his earlier performance of it in London in 1738 details (*The London Daily Post, and General Advertiser* (3 March 1738)). Understandably omitted too – probably so that the focus can remain squarely on the wind and brass – is ‘The 6th Concerto of Signior Geminiani’. This could refer to Geminiani’s Concerto Op. 2 No. 6 or Concerto Op. 3 No. 6; the former was moderately popular in eighteenth-century concerts, and the latter was very popular (my thanks to Rudolf Rasch for confirming this in private correspondence).

However, it is unfortunate that no clarinet is featured on this IBO recording, not just because a clarinet concerto is listed on Vernsberg’s programme, but because it also identifies the instrument as having never been heard before in Ireland. Furthermore, Vernsberg holds an important role as one of the earliest performers on the clarinet. The overture and ‘Dead March’ from Handel’s *Saul* are also omitted, an especially curious choice since the title of the album fashions ‘Mr Charles’ as ‘Handel’s rival’. These excerpts from *Saul* were billed as having been ‘composed by Mr. HANDEL, but never performed here before’ (*The Dublin Journal* (1–4 May 1742)). Indeed, their performance in Smock Alley preceded Handel’s own premiere of the work in Dublin by several weeks (*Saul* was performed on 25 May), which shows them to be the focus of the rivalry inherent in Vernsberg’s undertaking. This was surely not an intentional affront to Handel’s performance of the work, for, as mentioned, the programme that Vernsberg was presenting was one that he had already given, in its entirety (in York three months earlier).

In fact, Hasse would have stood as more of a rival to Handel than Vernsberg, as he was one of the most revered and successful opera composers in Italy and the German lands. While the subtitle of this recording might (or might not) deliberately allude to the eighteenth-century practice of sensationalizing advertisements, it is nonetheless disingenuous. By performing the music that was in vogue, Vernsberg was doing nothing different from many other performers in Dublin (and London) at this time. In May 1742, this happened to include Handel. As we can easily see from the advertised concert, however, Vernsberg drew in his audience with more than just Handel; the instruments being featured were an equal attraction.

The final track of the album is billed, as found on the original programme, as ‘The Turkish Musick in the original Taste, as performed at the Spring Garden, Vaux-hall, London’. Vernsberg was clearly aligning his programme with the fashionable music performances taking place at Vauxhall. As has been widely established, ‘Turkish’ music at this time did not engage with the kind of exoticism with which we are familiar from nineteenth-century romantic music (see Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)). What is presented on this album is therefore at once understandable, yet at the same time a markedly poor choice. It includes Lully’s ‘Marche pour la Cérémonie des Turcs’ from *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. This now well-known march is taken from a work that premiered some seventy years before Vernsberg’s – certainly not in any way fashionable or being performed at the time at Vauxhall. Moreover, the march itself originates from a farcical scene, one not intended to represent Turkish music ‘in the original Taste’. Be that as it may, Whelan and the IBO surely chose this familiar baroque ‘Turkish’ music with the interests of their twenty-first-century audience in mind; a familiar excerpt from the work of a well-known composer is always welcome. This addition to the recording is therefore truly in line with eighteenth-century practices, although it is an unexpected inclusion that seems somewhat out of place at the conclusion of the recording.

The Walsh publications are clearly labelled ‘arr. Walsh’, suggesting that the performers used the versions of the works as they were published in London during the mid-eighteenth century. Adding details of such sources would have provided an extra layer of interest for many listeners and revealed the surely significant research undertaken behind the scenes. This is all the more important for works associated with Ireland, given that so few from the eighteenth century survive.

*Mr Charles the Hungarian* adds to a series that sheds light on the otherwise neglected eighteenth-century concert culture of Dublin, but it somewhat misses the mark in places. The quality of the

performance is not at all in question, the works being executed throughout with enthusiasm, intuition and at times breathtaking virtuosity. The recording is an enjoyable one, featuring the strange and wonderful instruments so novel to audiences at the time, some of which remain unfamiliar and alluring to twenty-first century audiences. Closer attention to programming choices would have made this recording truly brilliant. This issue notwithstanding, the IBO's future projects will doubtless feature further gems from baroque Dublin and deliver them with the interpretation and joy in performance that one has come to associate with the ensemble.

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