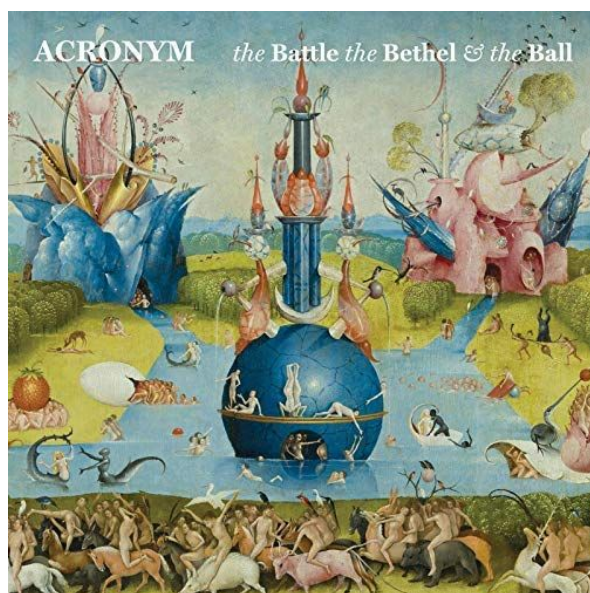


CD Review —

ACRONYM: *The Battle, the Bethel & the Ball*

by Nicholas Stevens



ACRONYM — Anachronistic Cooperative, Realizing Obscure Nuanced Yesteryear's Masterpieces — does not play the kind of music that marketers can brand as “relaxing.” Just as classical musicians [have questioned](#) the selling of their art as soporific and soothing, these twelve string and keyboard players reject sleepiness, self-seriousness, and the confines of the canon. On *The Battle, the Bethel & the Ball*, they pursue their stated mission of giving life to unknown, “wild instrumental music of the 17th century.” Steeped in the works and sensibility of Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber, this release from Olde Focus, cellist Kivie Cahn-Lipman's

sub-label of New Focus Recordings, goes down smooth but strong, more cappuccino than chamomile.

The *Sonata Jucunda*, or “delightful sonata,” bears no attribution but, like many pieces recorded here, comes from the library of Biber's longtime workplace. Like *Battalia*, which ends the disc, the piece depicts a military encounter. As in most 17th-century sonatas, contrasting sections fly by without pause: violent bowing and strumming can lead to what sounds like a Baroque barn dance, and vice versa. Austrian forces routinely sparred with Ottoman soldiers at the time, and we accordingly hear “Turkish” music every bit as alluring and ominous as the exoticism of the 19th century. Violinist Edwin Huizinga plays ecstatic solos over thousand-watt drone harmonies.

Molly Quinn makes for an ideal vocalist in *O Dulcis Jesu*, singing nimbly in dialogue with violinist Karina Schmitz. In absolute command of Baroque techniques, Quinn also brings prayer-like intimacy to her interactions with Schmitz, who unspools rolled chords

as though the fate of her soul depends on it. Near the end, Doug Balliett's violone sustains an ominous drone as Quinn breaks into her lowest register, where her tone darkens and blooms like ink in clear water.

Loren Ludwig's viola da gamba roars at the beginning of a *Sonatina* for the instrument, the first in a five-part suite. Exploratory, elastic timing gives him room to show off his tone, which has both gut-string grain and a hovering brightness. The Allemande packs rhythmic punch despite its slower tempo, and of all the movements, the Courente may have the most continuous notes, despite its brevity. Ludwig begins to ornament his tune by the second run through the circling chords of the Sarabande. Stormy energy electrifies the Gigue.

Listeners who hear the simple first phrase of violinist Adriane Post's solo might glance at the duration of the looping *Ciacona* and exclaim, "Seventeen minutes of *this*?" Rest assured, the composer — likely Biber — puts the virtuoso through her paces, and the continuo players of ACRONYM find captivating things to do with their repeating bassline. In minute five, Post skitters across the surface of the progression like a skater pulling off a triple axel. Soon after, the bowed strings weave a warm sonic cocoon, from which the rest of the piece gradually blossoms.

The *Balletae* for two string choirs anticipates both Bach and the French Baroque in its bustling feel, as well as classical-period elegance in its earworm of a tune. In *Hic est Panis*, baritone Jesse Blumberg sings with deep feeling, precision, and keen attention to text, in dialogue with Schmitz's violin and over thick bass twangs from the theorbo. Here, engineer and producer Ryan Streber, who does an overall fantastic job of mixing the record, allows Blumberg to sound distant.

The glorious opening wash of Biber's *Battalia* leads directly into hyper-athletic activity. Later, Biber asks each violinist to play a different folk song in a unique key, resulting in a pileup that makes Stravinsky's ballets sound like hymns by comparison. Ironically, the "resolution" chords that end this sound gorgeous, if tense, by modern standards. String techniques that would reappear only in the 20th century enliven an already attention-grabbing piece. In the end, Biber reminds us that battles come with consequences. The "lament of the wounded musketeer" threatens to leave listeners depressed, until a final surprise reminds us — in characteristic ACRONYM fashion — that one can only languish for so long.

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