

number of singers do not respond well – and a frequently rather jerky, helter-skelter style. The subtitles can be confusing when two characters' lines are on one title (there's no dash, no italics, or any other indication). With one exception (there should have been consistency in characters' names in the cast list, synopsis and tracking list), Ricercar's presentation is superb, with the 60-page booklet including lovely costume sketches from the production; a detailed synopsis; a thoughtful note by festival director Bernard Foccroulle; an invaluable helpful essay by festival artistic adviser and dramaturg Alain Perroux; and transcripts of marvellous question-and-answer sessions with Alarcón and Ruf.

Given the unfamiliarity of this piece and the many strengths of the Aix-en-Provence performance, devotees of early opera should acquire this DVD. A masterpiece *Elena* is not, but it's a delight nonetheless. **Roger Pines**

Keiser Pomona.

New

Melanie Hirsch (soprano) Pomona; **Olivia Vermeulen** (mezzo) Ceres; **Jan Kobow** (tenor) Jasion/Jupiter; **Julian Podger** (tenor) Mercurius; **Doerthe Maria Sandmann** (soprano) Flora; **Magdalene Harer** (soprano) Vertumnus; **Knut Schoch** (tenor) Zephyrus; **Raimonds Spogis** (baritone) Bacchus; **Jörg Gottschick** (baritone) Vulcanus; **Capella Orlandi Bremen/Thomas Ihlenfeldt** (chitarrone/guitar).

CPO 777 659-2 (full price, two discs, 2 hours 3 minutes). German libretto and English translation included. Website www.cpo.de. Producer Uwe Walter. Engineer Bernd Friebe. Dates September 6th-11th, 2010.

As Thomas Ihlenfeldt, directing proceedings in this recording of Reinhard Keiser's 1702 operetta *Pomona*, or *Sieg der fruchtbaren Pomona* ('Victory of the Fruitful Pomona'), points out, this is not one of those Baroque operas with a complicated story, such as Veracini's *Adriano in Siria*, which I review on page 76. It is simply about a competition among the gods to determine which of the seasons should win the prize. It was written to praise King Frederick IV and Queen Louise of Denmark on their visit to Hamburg. Jupiter, king of the gods, who judges the contest, directs a recitative in honour of the royal couple near the close of the opera.

The format of the work is basically recitative/aria, none of great length: the longest is 'Amor scherzt mit hohen Würden', sung by Ceres in Scene 3 (there is just one act, in 18 scenes), which lasts 4'15". Summoned by Mercurius, the gods assemble. Spring is represented by Flora, goddess of flowers and youth, with her beloved Zephyrus, the west wind. They are followed by Ceres, goddess of grain and agriculture, accompanied by Jasion, to promote the claims of summer. Pomona, whose brief is fruit trees and gardens, bickers with Bacchus, who is only an onlooker, until they agree that

autumn should be the preferred season. She is married to Vertumnus, an expert in changing his shape. Winter's champion is Vulcanus, god of fire and blacksmiths. The result is that Jupiter chooses autumn and Pomona.

The Overture opens in stately fashion but after a few bars becomes quick and frisky, as is Mercurius's fist aria, tossed off lightly by Julian Podger, whose short second solo finds the bassoon tootling along gaily. The oboe is the instrument that joins Flora and Zephyrus in their duet 'Sei willkommen': a delightful effect. Zephyrus's aria, 'Auf den Feldern deiner Wangen', is a slower affair, neatly shaped by Knut Schoch, who owns a warmer, slightly heavier tone than Podger's. It would be difficult to name the most enjoyable arias, for all of them have a charm, from Jasion's 'Göttin, ach!', cleanly voiced by the third tenor, Jan Kobow, and given a simple accompaniment in which James Bush's cello is noted.

At the other end are arias which are glorified by the woodwind, especially the oboes of Harriet Herrle and Birgit Bahr and the bassoon of Györgyi Farkas, as in Pomona's 'Ich komm, ich kehre wieder', which also benefits from the rounded tones of Melanie Hirsch, and in Vertumnus's 'Kehret wieder', sung satisfyingly by the lighter-voiced Magdalene Harer. No matter what the tempo is or the rhythm, there is not one piece that did not please me in this opera. A few arias require the singers to negotiate divisions, including the lower male voices, as Jörg Gottschick has to do as he clearly articulates the melismata of Vulcanus's 'Facht die Kohlen auf' on the third track of the second CD, but nothing is as ornate and demanding as some of Veracini's pieces (see reference above).

I enjoyed the playing of Capella Orlandi Bremen, whose director also plays the chitarrone and guitar. Herrle and Bahr play recorders as well as the oboe, and Mark Nostrand doubles on harpsichord and organ. Two violins, a viola and a cello complete the instrumental forces. It is a group new to me, worth hearing again, for there is a liveliness in their playing, which, like the singers, is captured in very good sound: no smothering or distorting by excessive reverberation.

No weakness inhibits the cast, whose vocalism is admirable. Kobow, probably better known to record collectors than his fellows are (his many recordings include all three of Schubert's song cycles), renders with clarity of tone his three arias (two as Jasion and one as Jupiter), his duet with Olivia Vermeulen and that recitative praising the royal Danish pair. Schoch is mellifluous at all times as Zephyrus, though he has rather less to sing than his tenorial colleagues. As Mercurius, who, in Ihlenfeldt's view, is on good terms only with Bacchus among the gods, Podger is called upon to explain why, according to his character, women take a long time to prepare themselves, then sings in the

aria 'Ein Buhler trägt ein schönes Joch' that when a man in love 'finally gets what he strove for, then he's unwittingly signed on for slave labour'. It is hardly twenty-first-century thinking, and I am sure that none of our male readers is nodding his head.

The two lower-voiced men make successful contributions. I have mentioned Gottschick's efforts already, but Raimonds Spogis enters in a lively manner to laud Bacchus's devotion to wine. Spogis is not the voluminous bass that one might expect but a focused baritone.

Three sopranos and one mezzo form the distaff side, all well up to their task. Doerthe Maria Sandmann's light timbre is suitably chosen for Flora and the youthfulness of the year, and she brings freshness to her three arias and a duet with Schoch. The rather fuller sound of Harer as Vertumnus is able to soar without hindrance. Like Harer and three other members of the cast, the remaining soprano, Hirsch, is new to me. I am pleased to make her acquaintance. Her voice is ample and warm. Keiser allowed Pomona seven arias and a couple of duets, and Hirsch performs extremely well in all. That leaves the sole mezzo, Olivia Vermeulen from the Netherlands, whom I praised in my round-up in January 2014 regarding her singing of music of Reutter (Accent ACC24275). Her high-lying voice copes superbly with Ceres's contributions: secure, supported and steady. She augments one's pleasure in this welcome issue from CPO. **John T. Hughes**

Decade

New

Mozart La finta giardiniera, K196 – Geme la Tortorella. Idomeneo, K366 – Se mai pomposo apparse ... Se il padre perdei; Andrò ramingo, e solo^{abc}. Lucio Silla, K135 – Vanne. T'affretta ... Ah, se il crudel periglio.

Mysliveček Artaserse – Deh, respirar lasciatemi^{abc}; Il pianto non trattengo^{ac} ... Va tra le selve ircane. Il gran Tamerlano – Sento nel alma mia; Odimi, qual tu sia^a ... Nacqui in seno alla sventura.

Medonte, Re di Epiro – Dov'è, ah dov'è, son io? ... Adorata mia speranza.

Simona Šaturová (soprano); **L'Armonia Terrena/Zdeněk Klauđa** with ^aFrédérique Friess (soprano); ^bMichaela Kapustová (mezzo); ^cRichard Samek (tenor).

Nibiru 01592231 (full price, 1 hour 8 minutes). Italian texts and Czech/English/French/German translations included. Website www.nibiru-publishers.com. Producer Lukáš Matoušek. Engineers Václav Roubel, Karel Soutník. Dates July 14th-17th, 2014.

This recital by Simona Šaturová is the third by her that I have reviewed in *IRR* and it is as pleasing as its predecessors, of which one was of Haydn arias (Orfeo, September 2009) and one of sacred music (Ars Produktion, included in my Opera/Vocal Round-up in June 2014). On the present CD she faces operatic arias by Mozart and by Mysliveček,

the latter of whom provides some challenges to her coloratura abilities. The three assisting singers listed in the heading are named in the booklet but its editor does not bother to tell us who of the ladies sings which roles. I think I have it right by listening to them.

The first piece by Mozart demands long breaths, a technique agile enough to contend with the tortuous roulades and a voice that can ascend the scale to sing a top D six times. It is Giunia's 'Se il crudel periglio' from *Lucio Silla*, a bravura aria in which she is overwrought by fears of what may happen to her husband. The conductor, Zdeněk Klauđa, describes it in his notes as 'one of the touchstones for all coloratura sopranos'. Šaturová displays remarkable breath control as she takes on some long runs. Hers is a voice sizeable enough for Donna Anna and Lucia, not that of a soubrette. 'Geme la tortorella', of the turtle dove lamenting her companion, is more withdrawn in the voice and has a much slower tempo.

The third Mozart opera is *Idomeneo*, from which Šaturová elegantly sings Ilia's 'Se il padre perdei' with her voice flowing along on an even line. No adornments or tricky coloratura face the singer in this aria; just an ease of emission, which comes easily to the Czech soprano. She is then joined by her fellow vocalists in the quartet 'Andrò ramingo, e solo', in which Ilia, Elettra, Idamante and Idomeneo express their varying emotions. Idamante is sung by a woman. The four gel as a quartet.

Of Mysliveček we find on track 1 a virtuoso aria, 'Sento nel alma mia' from his 1771 opera *Il gran Tamerlano*, an expression of hatred by Astasia. As in Giunia's aria there is much that challenges the performer, and once again Šaturová's technique is sorely tested and once again it proves to be up to the mark as she voices Asteria's rage at 'In my soul I feel a fierce and cruel storm'. In 'Nacqui in seno alla sventura', Asteria is less angry and admits that she has never known happiness and does not fear death. Šaturová's tone is strong and abundant as she conveys the young woman's feelings.

Intrigue and accusations fill *Artaserse* of 1774. Of two excerpts from it, one is another quartet, 'Deh, respirar lasciatemi'. (Like the pieces from *Il gran Tamerlano*, the ones from *Artaserse* are denoted as world-premiere recordings.) The quartet follows the pattern of solo lines interspersed by ensembles. Mandane's ensuing aria 'Va tra le selve ircane' is an *aria di furore*, described by Klauđa as one in which 'its ferocity perfectly matches the dramatic potential of the libretto'. Šaturová hurls herself at it, releasing on the one hand Mandane's hatred for Artabano and on the other a seemingly more biting tone from her own throat.

The last and longest excerpt, a scene running more than ten minutes, finds Seléné incarcerated in a dungeon when Medonte, the opera's eponymous character, is going to wall

her up. It is a through-composed scene, in which she relays her terror. Composed in a series of contrasting sections, it opens with the recitative 'Dov'è, ah dov'è, son io?' and proceeds to 'Adorata mia speranza' with its slow, sad opening which changes into a more agitated section at 'Che tentate' and from there to what serves as a cabaletta. By altering her volume and intensity, Šaturová covers all aspects convincingly.

It is good to have the opportunity to hear these selections by Mysliveček, and I am left wondering why we have had so few recordings of his operas, but whether one is listening to his music on this CD or to Mozart's one hears Šaturová giving estimable performances, admirably backed by L'Armonia Terrena's 26 instruments under Klauđa and given very good support by the three singers.

The CD's title, 'Decade', refers to the years, the 1770s, when Mysliveček and Mozart were friends, showing respect for each other's work.

In the booklet, the recitative in *Artaserse* is misnamed: it is correct in the text.

John T. Hughes

Poulenc

Dialogues des Carmélites, FP159.



Patricia Petitbon (soprano) Blanche de la Force; **Sophie Koch** (mezzo) Mère Marie; **Véronique Gens** (soprano) Madame Lidoine; **Sandrine Piau** (soprano) Soeur Constance; **Rosalind Plowright** (mezzo) Madame de Croissy; **Topi Lehtipuu** (tenor) Chévalier de la Force; **Philippe Rouillon** (baritone) Marquis de la Force; **François Piolino** (tenor) Monsieur Javelinot; **Annie Vavrille** (mezzo) Mère Jeanne; **Sophie Pondjiclis** (mezzo) Soeur Mathilde; **Matthieu Lécroart** (baritone) Thierry/Chaplain/Gaoler; **Jérémy Duffau** (tenor) First Commissioner; **Yuri Kissin** (bass) Second Commissioner/Officer; **Choeur du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées; Philharmonia Orchestra/ Jérémie Rhorer.**

Erato 2564 62195-3/also available on **DVD 2564**

46220-6 (2 hours 46 minutes). Subtitles in English/French/German. Website www.warnerclassics.com. BD 50. 16:9. Dolby Digital 5.1. LPCM Stereo 2.0.

Stage Director Olivier Py. Video Director François-René Martin. DVD Producer Jean-Stéphane Michaux. Date Live performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, on December 21st, 2013.

Comparison:

Voulgaridou, Harries, Schwanewilms, Schnaut et al, Hamburg State Op Chor, Hamburg PO/Young (Arthaus Musik) 101 493 (2008, rev. July/Aug 2010)

The last time I was at Tre Scalini, in Rome's Piazza Navona, it was a brief visit, merely to indulge in some Tartufo and scribble a postcard or two. Francis Poulenc, on the other hand, spent hours there, reading *Dialogues des Carmélites* by George Bernanos, a subject suggested by Guido Valcarengi, director of Ricordi, for a La Scala commission. 'I bought the book and decided to reread it', he later wrote. 'For that, I sat

down at the outdoors café Tre Scalini on the Piazza Navona. It was ten in the morning. At noon I was still there, having consumed a coffee, an ice cream, an orange juice and a bottle of Fuggi mineral water to justify my prolonged presence. At twelve-thirty I was drunk with enthusiasm.' Inspiration had clearly struck.

Bernanos's screenplay was based on the 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott* by Gertrud von Le Fort, itself based on the memoirs of Marie de l'Incarnation, a nun at Compiègne at the time of the French Revolution – Mother Marie of the opera. It tells the story, based on true events, of an order of nuns who in 1794 faced the guillotine rather than renounce their religious vows. The opera focuses on the order's newest member, Blanche de la Force, the only fictitious character in the cast, but is less an account of the religious suppression during the French Revolution than an exploration of faith. As Robespierre's reign of terror grips France, Blanche decides to join the religious order of nuns. After they are expelled by the revolutionaries, and take a vow of martyrdom, Blanche runs away, only to return to join the others in facing their deaths, singing the *Salve Regina* on the way to the scaffold. This emotional struggle is at the heart of the opera.

Carmélites caused Poulenc much anguish. During its composition, he suffered a nervous breakdown said (by Pierre Bernac) to be induced by the composer's identification with the nuns' suffering. Watching the opera is little easier. There are telling moments where dramatic truths hit home – the single dissenting vote on whether the nuns take a vow of martyrdom, prioress Madame de Croissy's terror in death, the Carmélites' fate at the guillotine. These moments register all the more strongly in Olivier Py's production at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées because his is an essentially minimalistic staging. Py updates the action to the mid-twentieth century. 'Liberté' and 'Égalité devant Dieu' are scrawled in chalk on the walls, without indicating what sort of political revolution is taking place outside the convent.

Sets are frugal and austere, with a simple box set that opens out to create the illusion of the cross. A forest is all that is seen of the outside world, while a candelabra is the one prop to indicate the home of the Marquis de la Force. Clever silvery lighting creates the set for the prison scene as the nuns await their death sentence. Simple cardboard cut-outs allow the nuns to form religious tableaux of the Nativity and Crucifixion scenes. The Last Supper is also evoked after the nuns have taken their vow of martyrdom.

This performance is blessed with a strong, mostly Francophone cast with as superb a line-up of nuns as you're likely to assemble today. Patricia Petitbon's soprano can be an acquired taste to some listeners, but she makes for an outstanding Blanche, lighter in tone than usually heard now (I'd have