

EDITOR'S CHOICE

J Strauss II**Fürstin Ninetta**

Tua Åberg *sop* Ninetta Campocasso
 Elin Rombo *sop* Anastasia Knapp
 Henriikka Gröndahl *sop* Adelheid Möbius
 Jesper Taube *bar* Cassius Pascha; Lord Plato
 Fredrik Strid *ten* Ferdinand Knapp
 Göran Eliasson *ten* Prosper Möbius
 Ola Eliasson *bar* Baron Mörsburg
 Samuel Jarrick *bar* Emilio; Consul Rübke
 Ninetta Chorus; Stockholm Strauss Orchestra /
 Valéria Csányi

Naxos © 2 8 660227/8 (103' • DDD)

A welcome recording of a lesser-known operetta, but lacking in required zip



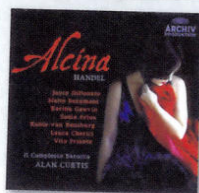
Naxos seems to be specialising in Johann Strauss's later – and, it has to be admitted, lesser – operettas. Following *Jabuka* of 1894, the label now offers Strauss's immediately

preceding operetta. *Fürstin Ninetta* ("Princess Ninetta") is set in a Sorrento hotel and concerns a young couple whose wedding is threatened by – but ultimately overcomes – events that, as set out in the booklet-note, seem bizarre even by operetta standards. The title-role of a Russian Princess was first played by the Hungarian actress Ilka Pálmay, who in a diverse career also created the roles of Christel in Zeller's *Der Vogelhändler* and Julia Jellicoe in Sullivan's *The Grand Duke*. She must have had good legs, because for reasons unexplained in the synopsis she swaps between male and female dress throughout the operetta.

An unusually brief orchestral introduction leads into an attractive scene-setting number in tarantella rhythm. Noteworthy in Act 2 is a fascinating Quintet and a "Hypnotic Duet", while Act 3 produces the only two numbers that will be at all familiar complete – the waltz-song "Einst träumte mir", recorded by Hermann Prey, and the *Neue-Pizzicato Polka*, which Strauss interpolated into the operetta as an intermezzo. If other numbers too often sound like dances with words attached, rather than a lyrical treatment of the plot, those dance melodies are attractive enough – many of them recognisable from orchestral dance arrangements from the operetta.

The live recording is of a performance with Swedish personnel in Stockholm in October 2007. It has no dialogue and some applause. It's altogether professionally done, with orchestra and chorus that are especially good. The best voices are perhaps those of the baritones Samuel Jarrick and Jesper Taube; but the two leading sopranos are apt to approach their notes from below. Such general tentativeness and some lack of zip may owe something to conductor Valéria Csányi, who certainly contrives an ending that is thoroughly anti-climactic. If there were rival versions of *Fürstin Ninetta*, this would probably not be the preferred choice. As it is, it makes a welcome change from yet another *Fledermaus* – and it comes at give-away price too. **Andrew Lamb**

Joyce DiDonato:
a superb Alcina



An Alcina up there with the best – this could be the one we've been waiting for

EDITOR'S
CHOICE
GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

Handel**Alcina**

Joyce DiDonato *sop* Alcina
 Karina Gauvin *sop* Morgana
 Maite Beaumont *mez* Ruggiero
 Sonia Prina *contr* Bradamante
 Kobie Van Rensburg *ten* Oronte
 Vito Priante *bass* Melisso
 Laura Cherici *sop* Oberto
 Il Complesso Barocco / Alan Curtis
 Archiv Produktion © 3 477 7374AH3
 (3h 23' • DDD)

On attending the first rehearsal of *Alcina* Handel's friend, the remarkable Mary Pendarves, pronounced it "the best he ever made". The first audiences at Covent Garden Theatre thought so too. Put to the test by the rival Opera of the Nobility, Handel seems to have relished the opportunity to shine afresh with a mixed cast of Italian, English and German singers and a French ballet company, led by Marie Sallé.

Alan Curtis, too, clearly welcomed the chance to add this masterpiece to the gradually expanding list of Handel operas he has recorded with Il Complesso Barocco. This *Alcina* is polished and passionate, the standard of *da capo* ornamentation unsurpassed.

Acoustically it offers a striking alternative to the Hickox (EMI, 11/86^R) and Christie (Erato, 3/00) versions, both of which were based on live performances, rely upon larger forces and involve concessions Handel would have understood. The acoustical environment of this recording is near-perfect. Every detail can be clearly heard, in part because of the minimal instrumental resources Curtis employs and his

keen sense of the architecture and pacing of Handel's music.

Handel knew his singers' individual strengths and played to them. Curtis, too, knows how to coax the best from his singers. Joyce DiDonato, Maite Beaumont and Karina Gauvin have worked with him before and contribute vividly informed portrayals of the principal characters that stand comparison with the best performances on previous recordings. Technically, DiDonato is superb: her Alcina is a complex, feminine creature, vain and vindictive – listen to her spine-tingling performance of "Ombre pallide" and the recitative that precedes it in Act 2. Beaumont is at ease in Carestini's role as Ruggiero – heroic when required (as in

'Curtis clearly welcomed the chance to add this masterpiece to the list of Handel operas he has recorded'

"Bramo di trionfar", the discarded aria, originally in Act 1 scene 7, that Curtis reinstated) – and more than equal to the demands of the much-loved "Verdi prati" (Act 2). Gauvin, her silk-clad Morgana fully as manipulative as Alcina, and Prina, the ever faithful Bradamante, each bring tremendous spirit and sensuousness to their roles. If Van Rensburg's Oronte wavers momentarily in Act 3, Priante's steadfast Melisso and Cherici's courageous Oberto show the way. This could well be the *Alcina* we've been waiting for. **Julie Anne Sadie**