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From The Sunday Times

March 22, 2009

Handel: Alcina - Il Complesso Barocco, cond Alan Curtis

Hugh Canning



The 250th anniversary of the composer's death will be expensive for Handeliens if this fabulously well-sung account of his great "magic" opera of 1735 is a taste of things to come. Alcina was the first Handel opera to be revealed as a magnificent vehicle for great singers, when Joan Sutherland made her pioneering recording with Teresa Berganza. Subsequent interpretations have been marginally less starry — although William Christie's live-from-the-Paris-Opéra version, with Renée Fleming, Susan Graham and Natalie Dessay, comes close — but they have superseded it in matters of period style. Although less overtly "theatrical" than Christie, Curtis scores with his hand-picked cast and an approach to tempo that avoids extremes. Some of the vocal decoration of aria repeat sections sounds overelaborate, but its execution cannot be faulted. Joyce DiDonato's velvety, sensuous mezzo is a surprising choice for Handel's majestically tormented sorceress, darker of voice than Sutherland, and she might have trouble with higher-lying phrases in the theatre. She rises magnificently to the challenges of Alcina's great, wrenching scenes of despair and is preferable both to Sutherland's droopy wordlessness and Fleming's smoochy, Handel-on-Broadway solecisms. Maite Beaumont's Ruggiero is in the Berganza class, while Karina Gauvin (Morgana), Sonia Prina (Bradamante), Kobie van Rensburg (Oronte) and Vito Priante (Melisso) bring character and impeccable stylistic credentials to the supporting roles. This is the must-have Alcina on disc. HC

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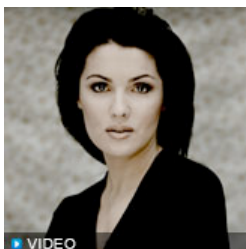
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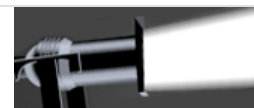
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