



OPERA AND ORATORIO

HANDEL: *Ariodante*

□ *Gauvin, Puértolas, DiDonato, Lemieux, Lehtipuu, Brook; Il Complesso Barocco, Curtis. Texts and translations. Virgin Classics 070844 (3)*

It would seem that in the past few decades we've been offered every possible way of performing Handel's operas. From the dark days of New York City Opera's 1966 *Giulio Cesare* (which was regarded as an unmitigated horror by musicologists, and justifiably so, yet it did kindle interest in this body of work) we eventually moved through productions of *Cesare* so well-researched and so faithful to the critical edition of the score that they contained more music than Handel himself ever took the trouble to include in actual practice. We've had every approach to ornamentation, from the plain page to the laughably hyper-composed. We've had orchestral instruments in numbers and types Handel would have recognized, and we've had big bands at the Met. But it turns out that this *Ariodante* still has something new to offer — the experience of what it may have been like to attend the opera in Handel's day. It's hard to think of another performance, recorded live or in the studio, that offers such a specific feeling of entertainment. There's a sense of enjoyment, a sense of an evening out at which, in the memorable phrase of historian Thomas Forrest Kelly, "before the opera begins the stage is swept of orange peels, bottles and debris of various kinds that accumulates during and after a performance." There's the feeling that we are invited to follow the proceedings as we would follow a soap opera.

A bit of this sensation does come from the work itself. *Ariodante* is not the stereotypical progression of nothing but da capo

arias. In Act I alone there's a duet, a "pastoral symphony," two rounds of a chorus and a ballet. Act III has an atypical succession of two duets. Each of the acts ends with a dance *divertissement*. (On this recording, the soloists pitch in for the chorus, as Handel would have expected.) Part of the special color of this recording comes from the performance of Joyce DiDonato as the titular hero, a reading of the role that gives the illusion — and an illusion it is — of extreme simplicity. And a great deal of the fun comes in the treatment of the villain. Marie-Nicole Lemieux's Polinesso, seconded by the winking inflections of conductor Alan Curtis, is someone you root for just because the singer is such a ham. Lemieux shows a mastery of the vocal writing, a pleasure in doing well, but she offers more than that. In her first aria she gives the impression of twirling her mustache, and in her last it's as if we could see her licking her chops.

Curtis brings an ingratiating swing to the pastoral symphony. When the overall light spirit of *Ariodante* darkens for what might be called the third quarter, Curtis shows, in "Scherza infida," how all the research and experimentation in performance practice in the end have brought to this music a new semblance of modernism in the textures, timbres and articulations. He does add some extra woodwind lines on occasion, but he has left the first use of the woody transverse flutes for the moment when Handel knew that it would be a perfectly placed balm for the ear. The music for natural horns is dispatched with an appealing seat-of-the-pants quality in keeping with the homespun spirit of the enterprise. Even the text booklet gives a quaint, archaic English rhyming translation from the time of the world premiere, adding one more layer of artifice.

DiDonato gives a touching performance. As accomplished as she is in the written and unwritten passagework she sings, she is even more striking when she gives a light rhythmic inflection, instead of ornamentation, to her long runs of even notes. (Curtis makes slight adjustments to dotted rhythms for this royal character.) As Ariodante's brother Lurcanio, tenor Topi Lehtipuu has the sparest approach to ornamentation, but he also

gives the keenest sense that he is actually making it up. His fioritura is highly listenable, always maintaining vocal sheen. Karina Gauvin has the stamina and gravitas for Ginevra's "Il mio crudel martoro," the anchor of Act II, but she also takes advantage of the microphone for some intimate singing in the final duet, "Bramo aver mille vite." Matthew Brook, as the King, has a lovely voice (if such things can be deduced only from recordings). He is less touched by performance practice than the others in the cast. Sabina Puértolas's high notes stand out as Dalinda, which is acceptable. Listeners who learned their Handel from Sills, Sutherland or Dessay may not realize that he didn't write much for the extremes of vocal range, but he did pitch this role on the high side. Puértolas is generally fine, but in the interest of drama she crosses over into some harsh singing in her last aria.

Curtis has made a number of artistic decisions, as Handel conductors must. If a singer ventures ornamentation over a unison violin line, the violin parts are not rewritten to match the singer. (This wouldn't have happened in Handel's day, but it sometimes happens now on recordings.) Curtis uses a wide variety of continuo textures and instruments, but he doesn't call attention to it. The occasional over-ambitious final cadenzas once or twice prompt thoughts of Handel's wry exclamation "Welcome home, Mr. Dubourg!" Curtis has chosen two alternative numbers from the appendix of the Bärenreiter score, both of them written for the premiere but replaced before the first night. One, a four-movement ballet representing Ginevra's troubled dreams in Act II, is pure gain. Including the other, an aria for the King, was probably a mistake. It's in the siciliana style; Dalinda has just sung one of these herself, and the king has another one later. (Curtis might better have offered Gauvin a replacement for her first aria, which suits her less well than the remainder of her role.) At any rate, there are other complete *Ariodantes*, so it's good to have the choice. *Giulio Cesare* may have a grander sweep, *Alcina* more fantasy and *Orlando* more ceaselessly, senselessly beautiful music. But *Ariodante* deserves to be standard repertory.

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