



voice. She does not quite achieve the same clarity as the other singers, though this is probably owing to the range of her part, at least to some degree. However, she does bring tremendous drama to the role, and does a great service to the demanding passagework in the aria ‘Anima infida’ (Faithless soul). We will, no doubt, continue to hear more from her in the future – especially in some of the dramatic contralto parts in the Italian repertory of this period.

The instrumental contribution to proceedings is a four-part string ensemble with concertino and grosso, in addition to a range of basso continuo instruments that includes harpsichord, cello, bass violin, archlute and organ. The playing is generally excellent throughout (with a few lapses of intonation), and the contrasts between the solo and tutti parts are convincing in conception and execution. The microphone placement for the continuo bass (sometimes cello or bass violin) is quite close and unforgiving, but this approach really helps give rhythmic impetus and drives the performance from the bass; the results are refreshing and invigorating. The balance is clear and natural, without the commonly found up-front placement of singers, and this layout creates a good spacious feel. However, some might question the decision for such hard audio separation of the continuo bowed bass and harpsichord with the singers near the middle. Perhaps even stranger than that are the few examples where the layout of the performers changes between adjacent tracks – is it possible that the initial layout was forgotten for some later retakes? These reservations are minor indeed; Peter van Heyghen and Les Muffatti have gone to considerable lengths to remind us that Bononcini is not merely some sort of ‘also ran’ of Handel’s generation – which is a fallacious idea in any case, because Bononcini was at least fifteen years older than Handel – but a bright and inventive composer whose finest works, such as this gem, deserve a wider hearing.

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JOHN ECCLES (c1668–1735)

*THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS; THREE MAD SONGS*

Lucy Crowe (soprano), Claire Booth (soprano), Susan Bickley (mezzo-soprano), Benjamin Hulett (tenor), Roderick Williams (baritone) / Chorus of the Early Opera Company / Early Opera Company / Christian Curnyn  
Chandos, CHAN 0759, 2009; one disc, 62 minutes

Historians of English music have traditionally had problems with William Congreve’s masque *The Judgment of Paris* and the competition organized in 1700 to set it. For a start, it has generally been thought that the wrong person won: Gottfried Finger (born c1655), John Eccles (born c1668) and Daniel Purcell (born c1670) were all much more experienced theatre composers than John Weldon (born 1676 or 1677), though in the event the virtually unknown Weldon won with his first major theatre work, while Eccles came second, Purcell third and Finger last. The four settings were performed separately at the Dorset Garden Theatre in March, April and May 1701, and then all together on 3 June. Strangely, the scores of the runners-up were published, while the winning entry survives only in manuscript; Finger’s setting is lost. There is a facsimile of the Eccles in the series *Music for London Entertainment*, and a modern edition of the Weldon was recently published by A-R Editions. A fifth setting, by Johann Wolfgang Franck, probably missed the deadline. It was performed separately at York Buildings on 11 February 1702, when it was said to be ‘Composed for three Quires, and in a quite different way to the others, not used here before’ (Michael Tilmouth, ‘A Calendar of References to Music in Newspapers Published in London and the Provinces (1660–1719)’, *RMA Research Chronicle* 1 (1961), 41). It too is lost.



Not surprisingly, there are hints that the competition was rigged. Roger North wrote that ‘the sentences were not thought limpid and pure’, and reported Finger’s comment that he thought his music ‘was to be judged by men, and not by boys’ (*Roger North on Music*, ed. John Wilson (London: Novello, 1959), 312). Finger left England soon after in disgust, and was in Vienna by the end of the year. Writing on 3 December to the Earl of Halifax, George Stepney, the English envoy in Vienna, reported that the composer had assured him that ‘notwithstanding the partiality which was shown by the Duke of Somersett and others in favour of Welding and Eccles, Mr. Purcell’s Musick was the best (I mean after his own, for no Decision can destroy the Love we have for our selves)’ (William Congreve, *Letters and Documents*, ed. John C. Hodges (London: Macmillan, 1964), 21). Halifax had sent a copy of Eccles’s setting to Vienna, where Finger promised to ‘see it performed to the best advantage’, perhaps as part of a rerun of the contest. Dedicating his score to Halifax, Eccles wrote that some ‘came prepared to dislike’ it, though in a letter to his Dublin friend Joseph Keally on 26 March 1701, Congreve reported that it had been ‘universally admired’ (Congreve, *Letters and Documents*, 20–21). Sir John Hawkins reported that Jeremiah Clarke refused to enter the competition because ‘the nobility were to be the judges’ (*A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London: J. A. Novello, 1853; reprinted New York: Dover, 1963), volume 2, 760). A rerun of the contest using the three surviving settings was organized by Anthony Rooley for the 1989 Promenade Concerts in London. This time the audience voted for Eccles, and most scholars in modern times have agreed with them. This welcome CD enables us to judge the merits of his setting for ourselves.

The second problem with *The Judgment of Paris* is confusion over its genre and mode of performance. In the notes for this CD Lindsay Kemp argues that the aim of the organizers (and, presumably, Congreve) was ‘the development of all-sung opera in English’, and assumes that the work was staged. But in fact, despite supplying stage directions, Congreve wrote a resolutely undramatic libretto with almost no action, presumably choosing the subject for its appropriateness for a competition rather than for its dramatic possibilities. In addition, despite calling the work ‘A Masque’ on the title-page of the 1701 published libretto (it is described as ‘A PASTORAL’ on the title-pages of the published scores), he provided no cues or opportunities for dances. Furthermore, in the letter already mentioned, he wrote that ‘the number of performers, besides the verse-singers, was 85’ for the performance of Eccles’s setting on 21 March 1701; that the stage of the Dorset Garden Theatre was ‘all built into a concave with deal boards; all which was faced with tin, to increase and throw forward the sound’; and that the orchestra pit was ‘turned into White’s chocolate-house’. Thus there was a large choir and orchestra (the latter must have been on stage with the singers), there was no scenery and it is unlikely that there was room for stage action or dancing. There is no evidence that the organizers had any overarching long-term artistic aims, but if they did, it was seemingly to create a type of secular oratorio rather than opera. Interestingly, the arrangements anticipate those developed by Handel for his oratorios, which were also performed in theatres with all the performers on the stage.

This has interesting implications for Eccles’s setting. A striking feature is its lack of contrasts and forward momentum. Virtually all the solo music is in the form of song-like airs (there is no proper recitative), and much of it is accompanied by the full four-part string group – it was the practice at the time to signal passages for solo violins by leaving out the viola. By contrast, both Weldon and Daniel Purcell move the action forward in Italianate recitatives, require much more virtuosity from their singers, and give their settings more textural and stylistic contrasts, including solo numbers based on ground basses. Weldon also introduces choruses at the end of two of the solos near the beginning of the work, correcting a weakness in the libretto; Eccles conforms to Congreve’s original text, which means that the chorus is not heard until more than half-way through. Weldon also uses a slightly more modern, Italianate idiom than Eccles and Purcell, so it is easy to understand why a constituency of aristocrats, increasingly mesmerized by Italian opera, would have voted for him.

Nevertheless, Eccles’s setting has some memorable moments. It starts with one of the finest trumpet sonatas of the period, the more effective because it begins quietly and concentrates on musical substance rather than martial posturing. Christian Curnyn’s tempos here and elsewhere are well judged, and the orchestra plays with spirit and refinement, though the bass line, played by two bass violins and a bass viol, is



not strong enough to compete with eight violins. In my experience one needs at least four bass violins to provide a satisfactory balance in a baroque orchestra of this size. Double basses, first used in England in the orchestra of the Italian opera company formed in London in 1706, increased the weight of the bass line and enabled fewer violoncellos or bass violins to be used.

Another highlight is Venus's languorous air 'Hither turn thee, gentle swain', with its ritornellos for 'Flute D. *Almagne*', two solo violins and continuo. This is apparently the first use of the baroque flute in England (Eccles, like Weldon and Purcell, also accompanies Venus with 'flutes' – that is, recorders), and the player was probably Pietro Chaboud, a flute player, bassoonist and bass viol player from Bologna. He was almost certainly 'the Bolognese the Traverse' paid by the Duke of Bedford for a concert on 23 May 1702 (Gladys Scott Thomson, *The Russells in Bloomsbury, 1669–1771* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940), 130). Bedford was one of the aristocrats involved in *The Judgment of Paris*, and sponsored a repeat performance of Weldon's setting at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre on 27 June 1702 (Thomson, *The Russells in Bloomsbury*, 132; *RMA Research Chronicle* 1 (1961), 43). It is unfortunate that in this recording the flute is far too reticent, though it is not clear whether the problem is the player or the recorded balance.

Eccles's big gesture comes in Pallas Athene's air 'Hark, hark! the glorious voice of war', with its accompaniment for four trumpets, timpani and continuo; the trumpets and timpani are also used in the chorus 'Oh how glorious 'tis to see'. As far as I know, Eccles was the only native English composer of the time to use four trumpets (they appear again in his 1701 Ode for St Cecilia's Day, a setting of another Congreve text, 'Oh harmony, to thee we sing'), though several lost pieces for '4 Trumpets, a Kettle-Drum, 2 Hautboys, 2 Violins, Tenors and bass' appear among 'Mr. Finger's *Great Pieces for his Consort in York-Buildings*' in the sale catalogue of his music library, sold in 1704–1705 (my paper on this recently discovered document will appear in a future *RMA Chronicle*). I suspect that Finger, who was brought up with the highly developed central European tradition of concerted trumpet writing, was a much greater influence on his English colleagues in this respect than has been recognized. Eccles's writing for four trumpets is certainly technically accomplished and brilliantly effective, and makes a splendid noise on this recording. The only puzzle is why Eccles does not also use the trumpets in the next solo section, 'O what joys does conquest yield', which includes the words 'Fame her golden trumpet sounding'. Here, and in one or two other places, Eccles seems disappointingly reluctant to respond to those opportunities for drama and colour provided by Congreve's libretto.

Any performance or recording of a setting of *The Judgment of Paris* will inevitably be perceived as a competition between the three sopranos portraying Juno, Venus and Pallas Athene, sung here respectively by Susan Bickley, Lucy Crowe and Claire Booth. All three are very good, though my prize goes to Claire Booth for her absolute clarity of diction and her ability to colour words for emotional and dramatic effect. Eccles wrote the part of Paris in the alto clef as a typical low 'countertenor' part with a tessitura centred on g–g<sup>1</sup>. In the past it would doubtless have been given to a falsetto, but the use of the pitch a<sup>1</sup> = 392 Hz enables the sweet-toned tenor Benjamin Hulett to take the part with excellent effect. (It should be said, however, that English secular pitch at the time was a little higher than a<sup>1</sup> = 392 Hz, at about a<sup>1</sup> = 403 Hz.) The baritone Roderick Williams seems initially a little uncomfortable with the part of Mercury, written in the baritone (F<sub>3</sub>) clef with a tessitura centred on e–e<sup>1</sup>, though he is more convincing later. All in all, this is an excellent performance, energetically directed by Christian Curnyn. The fact that it uses a choir and orchestra of thirty-four – less than half the size of the original group – is a salutary comment on changing economic circumstances and the decline of patronage. My main regret is that since *The Judgment of Paris* runs to under fifty minutes, the opportunity was not taken to record another of Eccles's major works, such as the music for *Rinaldo and Armida* or *Macbeth*. As a filler, each of the sopranos sings an Eccles mad song, though together they add only 12' 23" to the total, and all three were recorded in 1990 by Catherine Bott on a CD of Restoration mad songs (Decca, L'Oiseau Lyre 433 187–2). But we must be grateful for what we have; let us hope that recordings of the Purcell and Weldon settings will follow, so that we can all judge the competition for ourselves.

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