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GEORG PHILIPP TELEMANN (1681–1767)

BROCKES-PASSION

Birgitte Christensen (soprano), Lydia Teuscher (soprano), Marie-Claude Chappuis (mezzo-soprano), Donát Havár (tenor), Daniel Behle (tenor), Johannes Weisser (baritone) / RIAS Kammerchor / Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin / René Jacobs

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902013.14, 2009; two discs, 140 minutes

In the course of his career, mostly as the director of music at the five principal churches in Hamburg, Georg Philipp Telemann cultivated both the oratorio *Passion* (usually performed in a liturgical context, with a text drawn primarily from a single Gospel account and supplemented by chorales and other poetic interpolations) and the *Passion oratorio* (usually performed in a concert hall or a church during a concert rather than a religious service, its text usually consisting of free poetry and chorales, often interwoven with narration based on all four Gospel accounts). The so-called *Brockes-Passion*, TVWV5:1, is an example of the *Passion oratorio* and was Telemann's first major effort in the genre. He composed it in 1716 while he was city director of music in Frankfurt am Main.

The text of the *Brockes-Passion* (its complete title is *Der für die Sünde der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus*), by Barthold Heinrich Brockes, made a sensation in Germany in the early part of the eighteenth century; it was perhaps the most widely set *Passion* text of its time, and thirteen versions are currently documented. Brockes's text was set by many composers besides Telemann, including Handel, Stölzel, Mattheson and Keiser, to name only a few. Portions were also taken over without credit in *Passion* librettos, most prominently in J. S. Bach's *St John Passion*. It is unclear why so many composers made settings of the same text around the same time; in any event, the expressive emotional content, the graphic imagery of the physical suffering of Jesus and the impetus of the drama may have inspired Telemann to set a text that narrated the *Passion* story in a truly operatic fashion.

The work consists of two main parts, each of which consists of four subsections or scenes. The only purely instrumental movement is the opening *sinfonia*, which often sounds like a movement from an oboe concerto. I find it one of the more appealing movements in the whole work; the slow introduction alone encapsulates in a few simple but striking gestures the drama of the scenes to come. The success of Telemann's setting depends on its forward momentum: of its thirty-one arias, only eight are *da capo*, thereby minimizing repetition and stasis.

The present recording is a welcome release, since the only version previously available (Stadtsingechor zu Halle / Capella Savaria / Nicholas McGegan; Hungaroton HCD 31130-32, 1996) has now been deleted from the Hungaroton label's catalogue. Along with the recently published critical edition (*Der für die Sünde der Welt leidende und sterbende Jesus, Passionsoratorium von Barthold Heinrich Brockes*, TVWV5:1, ed. Carsten Lange (Kassel and New York: Bärenreiter, 2008)), the work is at last available for detailed study by aficionados and musicologists. Harmonia Mundi spared no expense with this release: aside from the two CDs, it contains a beautiful illustrated booklet with liner notes by Carsten Lange (of the Telemann-Zentrum in Magdeburg and editor of the 2008 critical edition) and a libretto in German, French and English. A separate booklet contains an annotated discography of René Jacobs.

The Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin is in fine form on this recording. Its members play with their usual zest, rhythmic incisiveness and *joie de vivre*. Especially delightful are the oboe solos in many of the arias. Telemann, who can always be counted on to provide colourful orchestrations and idiomatic obbligato writing, doubtless took advantage of the participation of Peter Glösch, the oboe virtuoso from Berlin, who was in Frankfurt the year he conceived the work (1716).

The soloists overall are quite pleasing. Daniel Behle as the Evangelist is very effective. Donát Havár, as Peter, is especially nimble in aria no. 33 ('Nehmt mich mit, verzagte Scharen'), which is sung after the arrest of Jesus. The use of female sopranos is historically accurate: women sang the solo soprano roles at the



premiere performance in 1716. I wonder, though, why Jacobs chose a mezzo-soprano instead of a male alto, the voice type that Telemann would have used.

The RIAS Kammerchor is a fine ensemble, though for this work they do not have an awful lot to do. Aside from the *turba* choruses and chorales, their only independent chorus is no. 2, 'Mich vom Stricke meiner Sünden', following the sinfonia. They also participate in the dialogue aria no. 84, 'Eilt, ihr angefochten Seelen', a text best known from J. S. Bach's St John Passion. As far as performance practice is concerned, the choir (numbering thirty-five singers) is probably far larger than the choir Telemann would have had at his disposal in either Frankfurt or Hamburg. It is most likely that the choir would have consisted of the soloists supplemented by a few ripienists, for a total of maybe ten to twelve singers.

My major objection to this recording is Jacobs's decision to omit several numbers from the oratorio without an adequate explanation. The movement numbers and types are included in the libretto, but without the texts, to indicate where cuts have been made. The first omitted number is Peter's aria no. 29, 'Gift und Glut', a rage aria in which Peter responds to Judas's betrayal of Jesus and resolves to strike a blow to defend Jesus. The effect of the consequent juxtaposition of recitatives is rather jarring and not quite tonally coherent. Three arias sung by the Daughter of Zion are also omitted: no. 71, 'Die Rosen krönen sonst', no. 73, 'Laß doch diese herbe Schmerzen', and no. 74, 'Die zarten Schläffen sind bis ans Gehirne'. All three arias provide commentary on the crown of thorns. The description of the thorns piercing the brain of Jesus and the contemplation of the purple streams of blood that flow from the wounds are quite startling, but Jacobs has stripped the oratorio of the very kind of textual imagery that made Brockes's poetry such a sensation for Telemann and his contemporaries. Jacobs has also omitted three numbers sung by the Gläubige Seele (Believing Soul): the recitative no. 81, 'Bestürzter Sünder, nimm in Acht', another contemplation of the gruesome wounds of Christ (such as his cracked skull, his swelling eyes and matted hair thick with pus and blood) and how he endured these injuries for the sake of the believer; the recitative no. 91, 'O Anblick! O entsetzliches Gesicht!', in which the Believing Soul looks on the horrible scene of the crucifixion and recounts in gory detail the act of the soldiers' stretching out each limb to nail to the cross; and the aria no. 111, 'Brich, brüllender Abgrund', a call to the rocks to break and the stars to tremble at the death of Jesus. The emotions run so high that the allegorical persona does not simply report that the earth has split, but calls physical phenomena such as these into being. Finally, Jacobs omits the aria no. 113, 'Wie kömmts daß da der Himmel weint', sung by the Hauptmann (centurion), recounting his wonder in the midst of the natural events following Jesus's death. It is a commentary on his declaration of belief in Jesus as the Son of God. At first his heart was harder than the rocks; even though the rocks cracked, his heart remained hard. Eventually, the death of Jesus caused the man's heart to break. The omission of this last number is in some ways the most puzzling of all: if the ultimate goal of a Passion was to stir the emotions of the listener and inspire fervent belief in Jesus as the Son of God, then why omit an aria that exemplifies this very process?

The only explanation for the above omissions is a single line in the booklet (8): 'These numbers have been omitted by René Jacobs for reasons of dramatic coherence.' The expression 'dramatic coherence' is undefined, but I imagine it is related to a continuous flow of narrative events. If so, how do the omitted numbers inhibit coherence any more than all of the other numbers that interrupt the drama? After all, every commentary movement interrupts the narration of biblical events. I think the real reason for the cuts is not to achieve greater 'coherence', but to sweep away the more lurid aspects of Brockes's text. Should there be a new recording of the St John Passion by J. S. Bach, I doubt anyone would countenance the omission of movements like the arioso no. 19, 'Betrachte, meine Seel', or aria no. 20, 'Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbter Rücken', with their vivid portrayals of Jesus's wounds and lengthy interruption of the biblical narrative, for the sake of 'dramatic coherence'. It is odd that a conductor would decide that such cuts are acceptable for a major work by Telemann. Furthermore, it is irresponsible to make such cuts without explaining the reasons. At the very least, the texts of the omitted movements should have been included in the libretto to provide the proper context. It is a shame that the user now has to locate a used copy or library holding of the discontinued Hungaroton recording, or consult the critical edition, to experience the *Brockes-Passion* in its entirety. As a



result of these omissions, the recording loses a fair bit of its value as a reference tool. It is only to be hoped that a future account will solve some of these problems.

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ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS

Sally-Anne Russell (mezzo-soprano), David Walker (countertenor), Sara Macliver (soprano), Fiona Campbell (mezzo-soprano), Renée Martin (mezzo-soprano) / Cantillation / Orchestra of the Antipodes / Attilio Cremonesi and Benjamin Bayl

ABC Classics 476 6957, 2008; two discs, 118 minutes

Deservedly, Vivaldi's oratorio *Juditha triumphans* – the only survivor among the four works Vivaldi is known to have contributed to the genre – has led a privileged existence since its discovery. It belongs to the volumes of the Foà donation (the first half of the Turin manuscripts to be uncovered), and in an article of 1927 drawing attention to the find, the discoverer, Alberto Gentili, was already singling it out for special praise. It was an early candidate for revival among Vivaldi's vocal works, receiving its modern premiere at Siena in 1941. The Accademia Musicale Chigiana produced a facsimile edition in 1948, and since this time there have been two editions published by Ricordi: the first, edited by Alberto Zedda, in 1971, the second, edited by myself, in 2008. Its numerous recordings have in recent years included versions by Robert King (1998, Hyperion CDA67281/2), Federico Maria Sardelli (2000, Amadeus AM133-2), Claudio Scimone (2001, Warner Fonit 8573 85747-2) and Alessandro De Marchi (2001, Opus 111/Naïve OP 30314).

Far fewer oratorios than operas have survived from Vivaldi's time. An oratorio was usually performed privately and rarely reached the commercial copyists through whom operatic music primarily circulated. For the Ospedale della Pietà, the Venetian foundling home where *Juditha triumphans* was first performed in 1716, no other oratorios are extant between 1683, the year of the earliest appearance there of the genre, and 1768, when Bonaventura Furlanetto's *Joseph pro-rex Aegypti* was given. To find a surviving comparator for *Juditha triumphans* in terms of the richness of vocal and, more especially, instrumental resources deployed, we have to go to a serenata, *Il ritratto dell'eroe*, composed for the Pietà in 1726 by Giovanni Porta, the newly appointed choirmaster of the institution. Porta does not have a fraction of Vivaldi's musical inventiveness, but his work at least shows that the parade of rare obbligato instruments and use of a large number of solo singers in addition to a choir belonged to a 'house style' rather than being a peculiarity of Vivaldi's.

Even more than most oratorios, *Juditha triumphans*, for all its vivid dramatic qualities, is a work to listen to and imagine rather than to watch. Its original audience at the Pietà had no choice but to adopt the first mode of reception, since the performers, being all female, were screened from it, for reasons of decorum, by grilles and black gauze. But even if we concede that the staging of *Juditha triumphans* was already in its day a valid, albeit remote, possibility, there are strong pragmatic objections if historical ones do not already suffice. Since the new recording reviewed here has been compiled from four staged performances by Pinchgut Opera at Sydney in December 2007, it illustrates in vivid fashion the pitfalls that beset this form of presentation.

First, there is the problem of the recitative. Because Vivaldi envisaged that the recitative for this oratorio would be read from the page, it is slightly less formulaic and more varied than ordinary operatic recitative – therefore less easy to commit to memory. Unexpected and inappropriate hesitations on the part of singers bear witness to this difficulty in the recording. Second, there is the problem of dramatic plausibility regarding the chorus, which has to represent on some occasions Assyrian soldiers, on others Assyrian