



earlier in style, partly because of its more sophisticated textures such as are typical of Handel's keyboard music. The inclusion of this work in the programme was an excellent idea, for it helps the listener to place Nares's lessons in context. The 'setts' stand up well against one of the finest English harpsichord compositions of the time, as well as sounding more modern.

The instruments used by Julian Perkins are a single-manual Kirckman harpsichord of 1764 and, even more appropriately, the double-manual royal harpsichord built by Burkat Shudi for Frederick Prince of Wales in 1740 (Handel's suite had been written for the prince's sister the previous year, and may have been played on this instrument). Perkins exploits the latter's various possibilities for variation in registration with considerable skill, and his performances are thoroughly convincing. He includes all the repeats throughout the collection, often adding tasteful ornamentation in the repeat (and occasionally in the first hearing). The speeds are all well judged, with sparkling allegros but sensitive and expressive playing in movements such as the G minor Largo of Lesson 3.

In the booklet the trilingual text offers ample information by Perkins about Nares and his 1747 collection, along with a lucid account of the instruments by Christopher Nobbs and a brief biography of Perkins. Finally, the back cover appropriately shows Philip Mercier's famous painting from 1733 of the Prince of Wales making music with his sisters. This first complete recording of these works would be a worthy addition to any CD collection.

BARRY COOPER



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NICOLA PORPORA (1686–1768)

OR SÌ M'AVVEGGIO, OH AMORE: *CANTATAS FOR SOPRANO*

Elena Cecchi Fedi (Soprano)/Auser Musici/Carlo Ipata

Hyperion CDA67621, 2008; one disc, 55 minutes

This recording presents a stimulating interpretation of unfamiliar repertory that is of considerable musicological interest. Admirers of Nicola Porpora will discover that they are treated here to a fine performance of his cantatas for soprano by Elena Cecchi Fedi, whose clean and clear diction is impeccable, and the chamber ensemble Auser Musici, whose members excel themselves in their virtuosity (the contributions of cellist Alessandro Palmeri and of flautist-director Carlo Ipata are especially worthy of note). Furthermore, the advice and scholarly expertise of Italian musicologist Stefano Aresi, who wrote the disc's accompanying essay, offers a virtual guarantee of the highest level of historical accuracy in this well-informed performance. (In fact, Aresi's recent critical edition of the disc's title-piece was sponsored by the Società Italiana di Musicologia, and was published with a facsimile of the autograph to coincide with the international conference 'La Cantata negli anni "italiani" di Handel', held in Rome in October 2007.)

Because musicologists have tended to focus on Porpora's operas and sacred music, the cantatas of this renowned composer and pedagogue have often been relegated to the sidelines. Yet it has long been recognized that the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century cantata genre acted as an experimental 'testing-ground' for opera composers. It is illuminating, therefore, to revisit Porpora's works for solo voice and basso continuo (sometimes with extra instruments) and to consider why he was regarded as such a great master of composition and vocal technique, and why the nineteenth-century scholar Francesco Florimo went so far as to call him 'the father of the recitative'. This disc, it seems, offers the first recorded versions of any of Porpora's cantatas, and as such begins to fill a significant gap in the Porpora discography, as well as providing some hard evidence to substantiate claims for the composer's greatness.



Porpora achieved international fame in his lifetime, especially in Italy, the German-speaking lands and England; he is also remembered for his rivalry with George Frideric Handel while based in London between 1733 and 1737. In London, Porpora enjoyed the patronage of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who also supported the Opera of the Nobility, an enterprise that operated in direct competition with Handel's opera company. Porpora's popularity in England culminated in the publication of his first opus, a set of twelve cantatas entitled *Nuovamente composte opre di musica vocale* (London, 1735), which was dedicated to the Prince of Wales.

One of the works performed by Fedi and Auser Musici, *Già la notte s'avvicina* (*La pesca*), is taken from this published collection. The other piece on the disc that can be dated with certainty is *Credimi pur che t'amo*, which was completed in 1712. Although we do not know the exact dates of the other two cantatas recorded here (*Or si m'avveggiò, oh Amore* and *Or che d'orrido Verno*), Everett L. Sutton assures us that the majority of Porpora's cantatas were composed during the period 1715–1730 ('The Solo Vocal Works of Nicola Porpora: An Annotated Thematic Catalogue' (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1974), 32). He cites as evidence for this hypothesis the predominance of a four-part structure (recitative–aria–recitative–aria) in the bulk of the composer's cantatas, as well as the greater length of arias in comparison with those of Alessandro Scarlatti and Handel, and the Arcadian subject matter of the texts – all typical characteristics of cantatas from the first half of the eighteenth century.

The four cantatas chosen for this recording represent the stylistic diversity of Porpora's oeuvre, as Aresi emphasizes in his accompanying essay. Although this diversity is apparently to be found at a number of different levels, a much more detailed explanation of the criteria used in selecting the works would have been helpful. But we can attempt to identify these ourselves, taking into account the following three aspects: the ways in which instruments are used, the form of the works and chronology.

With regard to the use of instruments, we can hear that the accompanying ensemble for each cantata ranges from a simple basso continuo part in *Già la notte s'avvicina* to the almost orchestral conception in *Or che d'orrido Verno* (for flute, two violins, viola and continuo). Between these two extremes we find that *Credimi pur che t'amo* is scored for violin, cello and basso continuo, and that in *Or si m'avveggiò, oh Amore* a complex cello obbligato line is added to the basso continuo. We also see that two types of structure are found in Porpora's cantata output: aria–recitative–aria and recitative–aria–recitative–aria. Not only are both represented on this disc (the former by *Già la notte*, and the latter by the three others), but also, given that some fifty-five of Porpora's 132 surviving cantatas fall into the first category and the remainder into the second, the chosen works reflect the proportion between these two patterns.

Consideration of the works' possible chronology provides another frame of reference for the varied use of the voice throughout the programme, and for the differences in style that can be appreciated among the cantatas on this recording. If the listener is prepared to play the works in any order, I would recommend the following strategy (which will allow for a greater appreciation of the range of vocal techniques Porpora employs): listen first to the earliest cantata, *Credimi pur*, and then *Or si m'avveggiò*, which is thought to be the latest. This chronology is based on Sutton's simple observation that the main melisma in every aria gradually became increasingly elaborate as Porpora's compositional career progressed. The melisma ranges from simple sequential formulas in the earliest cantatas (for instance, the setting of the words 'cor' or 'affanna' in the aria 'Si, si t'ador ma' in *Credimi pur*) to the use of much more complex devices and a galant style (as in the stressed syllable of the words 'lontan' and 'pace' in the aria 'Dolce pace, lieta calma' from *Or si m'avveggiò*). Some of these melismas last for up to eight bars. The melismas in the other two cantatas on the CD, *Già la notte* and *Or che d'orrido Verno*, can be situated between these two extremes. Thus the melodic shape of the first aria in *Or che d'orrido Verno*, 'Lungi dal ben che s'ama', seems rather elaborate and galant – so much so that the soprano soloist Fedi evidently encountered some difficulty in embellishing her solo line in the da capo, and thus confined any extra ingenuity to an improvised cadenza, which is the only one on the disc. Such an option was not necessary in the other arias, however, where the vocal line is much more restrained and thus easier to embellish.



*Or che d'orrido Verno* represents Porpora's typical melodic style, whose chief characteristics Aresi says are 'refinement, subtle interplay between the parts, and highly intensive (at times obsessive) exploitation of the thematic material' (CD booklet, 4). It is in this cantata's challenging aria 'Lungi dal ben che s'ama' that a number of vocal imperfections (which are otherwise rare) become noticeable. The long melisma that the score in Naples (I-Nc 34.6.25(7)) ascribes to the stressed syllable in the word 'sento' at the end of part A (and in the da capo) is sung by Fedi with a closed, practically incomprehensible vowel (similar to an 'i') that is impossible to understand without the score. Another questionable moment occurs at the start of the da capo section in the aria 'Amami e non languir', which Fedi begins by jumping to an extremely high pitch that clashes with the more measured range displayed in the other arias.

One wonders what the result would have been like had the selection of cantatas been different. The least interesting cantata on the disc is *Già la notte s'avvicina*: even though it sets a fine text by Metastasio, in the recitative 'Lascia una volta, oh Nice' we miss some of the harmonic daring that often underlines the expressive character of the other recitatives recorded here. These recitatives normally contain traits of light word-painting, as in 'di pianti e dogli' in the second recitative of *Or sì m'avveggo* and the words 'minaccia' and 'ahì' in the introductory recitative of *Or che d'orrido Verno*. In all other respects, *Già la notte* seems to have been written for the training of singers rather than for general public entertainment. The two arias are defined by features that were – and still are – the main concerns of vocal pedagogy: 'making the *passaggio* at the break', according to Sutton, and 'uniting as smoothly as possible the registers of the voice' ('The Solo Vocal Works of Nicola Porpora', 50).

An alternative means of selecting the programme for any future recording of Porpora's cantatas would be to choose the most outstanding works from a single manuscript collection, such as I-Nc 34.6.25, for example. This Naples source comprises a set of cantatas (almost all of them by Porpora) with a stylistic variety similar to that sought after for this Hyperion CD, and it has the advantage of having been compiled by a connoisseur whose taste was nearer than ours to eighteenth-century norms. Judging from the interest in Porpora's music that Auser Musici's performance is arousing, another CD with more cantatas will surely be issued soon.

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FRANCESCO NAVARA (*fl.* 1695–1699), COMPOSER X (*fl.* c1695),  
GIOVANNI LEGRENZI (1626–1690), TOMASO ALBINONI (1671–1751),  
GIUSEPPE VALENTINI (c1680–c1760), ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

*THE RISE OF THE NORTH ITALIAN VIOLIN CONCERTO, 1690–1740*

*VOLUME 1. THE DAWN OF THE VIRTUOSO*

Adrian Chandler (violin), Mhairi Lawson (soprano)/La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Avie AV2106, 2006; one disc, 78 minutes

ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

*THE RISE OF THE NORTH ITALIAN VIOLIN CONCERTO, 1690–1740*

*VOLUME 2. ANTONIO VIVALDI: VIRTUOSO IMPRESARIO*

Adrian Chandler (violin), Mhairi Lawson (soprano), Sarah McMahon (violoncello), Gareth Deats (violoncello)/

La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Avie AV2128, 2007; one disc, 77 minutes