



families, which makes Spohr's innovations in orchestration and tone colour clear to the ear. Contemporaries such as Samuel Wesley noted that Spohr surpassed even Mendelssohn in orchestral colour (quoted in Brown, *Louis Spohr*, 70); the clear mix and mastering of this cpo recording put listeners in an excellent position from which to assess Wesley's claim and appreciate this quality for themselves.

ERIN HELYARD

<erin.helyard@nzsm.ac.nz>



Eighteenth-Century Music © Cambridge University Press, 2013
doi:10.1017/S1478570613000183

LEONARDO VINCI (1690–1730)

LA PARTENOPE

Sonia Prina, Maria Grazia Schiavo, Maria Ercolano, Eufemia Tufano, Stefano Ferrari, Charles Do Santos / I Turchini di Antonio Florio / Antonio Florio

Dynamic CDS 686/1-2, 2012; two discs, 126 minutes

Although Leonardo Vinci's life was brief, he still managed by the age of forty to have completed more than thirty-five operas, at a rate of three to four per year. A specialist opera composer, Vinci was very much steeped in the Neapolitan tradition, having lived and composed almost exclusively in that city (excepting a few Venetian and Roman outings such as the famous *Didone abbandonata* of 1726).

Partenope was premiered in 1699 at the Teatro San Bartolomeo in Naples. The original libretto is by the prolific Arcadian librettist Silvio Stampiglia, and is credited as the first libretto to deal with the myth of the foundation of Naples. Unlike similar myths relating to Venice and Rome, the Neapolitan myth is the only one based on a musical subject: the voyage of the Sirens after their encounter with Ulysses. The long line of allusions in the text would have been readily understood by the local public, who, under Spanish dominion, saw themselves as Partenopei, the descendants of Partenope, and therefore 'real' Neapolitans.

The myth deals with the aftermath of Ulysses' collusion with the Sirens, when a group of them led by Partenope broke away and found themselves on the Neapolitan shore (the name itself stems from 'nea-poli' – that is, new city). Despite being a musical myth, and therefore suitable for an opera libretto, the story in fact exhausts itself with the arrival of the group on the shore and the foundation of the city. There are no subsequent (pseudo-)historical events to sustain and feed the plot, as in the case of other librettos on Greco-Roman subjects. This deficiency makes itself felt in the plot, which largely limits itself to a series of love intrigues together with the two stock couples (a royal and a noble one) that traditionally provide the *lieto fine* in most baroque operas. The only real action is a battle scene between the Partenopei and the invading Prince Emilio; the remainder relies on stock situations of love intrigue, cross-dressing, misunderstandings and so on.

Partenope as a musical entity has had a convoluted history, as was often the case with eighteenth-century operas. After the 1699 premiere there followed a number of different musical settings until 1722, when the libretto was set anew by Domenico Sarro. That version was then taken to Rome, where, because of its lukewarm reception, Vinci was asked to update the opera (presumably resetting some of the arias and/or adding new ones). That was in 1724. The following year Vinci was asked to compose an opera for Venice. With little available time, he chose to offer a reworking of *Partenope* as *La Rosmira fedele*, presumably because the identification with the Partenope myth would not have transferred successfully to the Venetian stage.

The musicological underpinning for the present project has been provided by Dinko Fabris. Vinci's autograph of *La Rosmira fedele*, which survives at the British Library, contains a substantial amount of Sarro's music; essentially, all of the recitatives and some of the choruses and sinfonias are by Sarro. On



the other hand, all of the arias are Vinci's (though some are imported from previous operas). Inevitably, one wonders whether the resulting work properly qualifies as a Vinci opera, and furthermore whether it can still be called *Partenope*. Opinions will differ, but in the convoluted world of eighteenth-century pasticcios it may be that Vinci's authorship of the arias constitutes a strong claim to the work as a whole.

None of this, however, detracts from the enjoyment of the music, and in those terms *Partenope* is a delightful opera. Despite the fact that the recitatives are by Sarro, the work still sounds like a complete opera, which is no doubt how contemporary audiences in Venice would have heard it, without worrying too much about who wrote what.

The sleeve notes are curiously silent about the details of the performance(s) that make up this live recording by Antonio Florio's I Turchini. Aside from a note in small print to the effect that the recording took place at the Auditorium V. Villegas in Murcia, Spain, in 2011, there is no further information about the circumstances of these performances. This is all the more curious since by all accounts this was a special project, involving a major Italo-Spanish collaboration funded by the Spanish government, with the purpose of recreating eighteenth-century staging techniques and costumes. There is even a private website with many videos from the performances and rehearsals (<www.partenope.tk>).

With the exception of Armindo, the principal cast is all female, which does create a certain lack of variety in the sound fabric. Nevertheless, all of the singers are excellent and very knowledgeable baroque performers. Another curious omission from the sleeve notes is that there is no identification of their voice types, just their names. Vinci's arias are in many instances delightful, with a real knack for representing the emotional responses of the characters concerned. Most are da capo arias, and in the majority of cases the repeats incorporate subtle variations on what happened in the A section. Vinci often introduces amazing off-beat accents, playing with syncopations and the rhythm of the Italian words. The coloratura in arias such as 'La rondinella' (Act 1) is also a pure joy. Among a whole cast of singers with excellent coloratura technique, Maria Grazia Schiavo (Rosmira) should perhaps be singled out: her aria 'Vuol tornare alla sua sponda la rubella Navicella' (Act 3) is a genuine *tour de force*. Elsewhere, the conflict between the Partenopei and the troops of Prince Emilio gives the opportunity for lively battle effects and a strong vendetta aria in Partenope's 'A far stragi, a far vendetta' (Act 1).

Overall, this is music-making of the highest quality, which feels natural throughout. There are no extravagant touches and no excessive flights of ornamentation; everything is done with musicality and imagination, but without excess. I wish we had more recordings like this, in which the freedom of the historically informed performer to add to the text results in something well integrated that does not draw attention to itself. This sense of flow is also helped by the fact that almost all of the singers are native speakers. Not only it is a delight to have such natural rhythm in the recitatives, but even the ornamentation in the da capo sections feels as though it were a natural extension of the words; one almost forgets it is there.

The same sense of creative imagination, but without excess, applies to the playing of I Turchini and must ultimately be down to the artistic philosophy of their director, Antonio Florio. This is musical, imaginative and above all logical music-making.

VASSILIS VAVOULIS

<vassilis.vavoulis@nottingham.ac.uk>

