



reasons arising from the drama itself, especially in the first two acts. It was as close as Voltaire ever came to an operatic success on his own terms.

Readers will appreciate the presentation of these volumes, which are up to the Voltaire Foundation's high standards. Pages are thick, elegantly textured and generous in their margins: a tribute befitting the honoree. The editors have examined and described all available textual sources carefully enough to please any musicologist and have provided valuable descriptions of how the sources figured in previous critical editions of Voltaire's works. Best of all, they have presented textual variants and deletions as footnotes on the same page as the exemplar, with original poetic format preserved. This is especially helpful for the tragedies, in which the texts vary greatly; Voltaire, recognizing how controversial his projects were, took seriously every shred of advice he received, constantly adding and subtracting material in light of readers' comments. In the new editions, this material is immediately and clearly available to the reader, who need not lift a finger to compare versions. As for quibbles, these will sound niggardly when confronted with such fine editions. One might wish that the editors had shared notes with each other, because there is much here that deserves their mutually informed insights, as in the case, for example, of Voltaire's rejection of romance. Although the editors made an effort to consult musicological works, they sometimes rely on out-of-date research, which is especially unfortunate since the principal subject of the two volumes is opera. Musicologists will thus want to read the commentaries with special care, because these are rarely a comprehensive portrayal of secondary literature. Still, such quibbles are, in the end, small complaints. As additions to the new critical edition, the volumes reviewed here are valuable research tools, compiled with care and clear in what they set out to accomplish. They are outstanding contributions to our research, and our debt of gratitude can only grow accordingly.

CHARLES DILL



RECORDINGS

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GIOVANNI BONONCINI (1670–1747)

SAN NICOLA DI BARI

Lavinia Bertotti (soprano), Elena Cecchi Fedi (soprano), Gabriella Martellacci (alto), Furio Zanasi (bass) / Les Muffatti / Peter Van Heyghen

Ramée RAM 0806, 2008; one disc, 82 minutes

Despite Giovanni Bononcini's importance as one of the most successful and influential exponents of the 'new' Italian style around the turn of the eighteenth century, precious little of his important contribution to the oratorio genre is represented in the form of complete sound recordings. An important step in addressing this lacuna has been taken with the release of this impressive performance on disc by the Belgian ensemble Les Muffatti under the direction of Peter van Heyghen. Together with the singers they deliver a crisp and lively rendering of this compelling work in a clear and generally well-balanced recording.

As physical CDs become rarer with the rise of digital downloads and the general shrinking of the classical music industry as a whole, a handful of smaller recording labels are distinguishing themselves in terms of both product and repertory. Few newcomers to the industry achieve this as well as the German label Ramée. Like many of the discs in the rest of their interesting catalogue, this CD is elegantly produced in all respects. Instead of the fragile jewel case, there is a folding cardboard sleeve (with a plastic insert for the disc itself) that permits a booklet that is larger than usual; this document is also put together with care, containing well-written liner notes and translations of the libretto in English, German and French.



Bononcini and the librettist Silvio Stampiglia (1664–1725) forged an important and productive partnership in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is probably Bononcini's operatic setting of Stampiglia's *Il trionfo di Camilla regina de Volsci* (Naples, 1696) that is best known to modern audiences and scholars (perhaps even through Nicola Haym's English translation made for the London stage). Yet in spite of the large number of successful collaborations between Bononcini and Stampiglia, only one oratorio resulted: *San Nicola di Bari*. Following its Roman premiere during Lent in 1693 it received several subsequent performances, gradually working its way north, with known instances including Urbino (1697), Florence and Vienna (1699) and probably Lucca (1721). A version of the same libretto was set anew by Leonardo Leo and was performed in Brno in 1732.

The oratorio tells the story of the pious childhood of the popular saint and his exemplary obedience to his parents – with a special focus on his mother's devotion to the care of her son's immortal soul. The libretto is typical of Counter-Reformation poetic language with its frequent botanical and biblical metaphors (the busy bee, the rose, the lily and so forth) and the quasi-exotic settings, such as Nicola's father, Epifanio, singing about the phoenix in the 'Arabic mountains'. Bononcini generally responds to the text with evocative word-painting and delicate craftsmanship. He received due praise from Charles Burney for the clarity and idiomatic character of his recitative ('universally allowed to be the best of the time, and in the true genius of the Italian language' (attributed to Burney in Abraham Rees, *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown), volume 4, 1819)), and this oratorio bears witness to his immense talents in this area of compositional practice. The influence of the concerto principle is also apparent with a number of sections featuring *concertino* instrumental parts for two violins and cello.

The recording features four solo singers (two sopranos, one alto and one bass), all of whom are impressive, but Lavinia Bertotti deserves to be singled out for special praise. Singing the role of St Nicolas, she demonstrates tremendous flexibility and attention to detail in her performance. She is able to produce splendid *messe di voce* and has good enough control to decide where to use vibrato, rather than producing it as an omnipresent by-product of modern vocal technique (as is still so often the case). She is able to match Bononcini's intimate connection between text and music, ranging from reflective arias such as 'M'incateni, e si mi sciogli' (If you bind, and if you loose me) to the boisterous exclamations of the more animated recitatives. Bertotti is especially beguiling in the aria 'D'un bel ciglio l'ardente splendore' (The radiant splendour of a fine brow), with its obbligato cello – a special point in this number, since the cello was still a relatively new solo instrument at the time – and colourful harmonic language, which provide a testament to Bononcini's modern inventiveness.

The role of Giovanna, the doting mother of St Nicolas, has a substantial responsibility for carrying much of the drama of the oratorio, and the impressive soprano Elena Cecchi Fedi does not disappoint in this respect. I would prefer more selective use of vibrato from her, but she too demonstrates her wide-ranging ability in arias such as 'A girar sul prato ameno spesso v'è l'Ape ingegnosa' (The industrious bee goes wandering over the sweet meadow), with all the expected contrasts between the buzzing-around and sweet long notes (sung beautifully here).

The role of Epifanio, the father of the saint, is sung by Furio Zanasi with convincing paternal warmth and gravity, but never in a barking or growling tone; his ease and comfort in vocal production is especially clear in the recitatives, which are performed with delightful ease and naturalness. One can actually understand what is being said, and this is one of the strengths of this performance, since clarity of the text is a central goal of the singing of recitative, and one that is too rarely achieved. Zanasi does, however, have the irritating habit of ending almost every phrase with vibrato, irrespective of the context. Otherwise, he seems to have a substantial understanding of bass singing of the period, with a golden, sonorous lower register and an agile and clear upper one; his vocal prowess is aptly demonstrated in the aria 'Per godere un diletto' (To enjoy a delight), which contrasts the emotions of joy and pain.

The curious character of Clizio, an alto (a fellow student of St Nicolas who is the subject of a conversion experience in Part Two of the oratorio), is sung by Gabriella Martilacci, who possesses an athletic and husky



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.

ROBERT RAWSON



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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.