

Recording of the Week Porpora from Max Emanuel Cencic

by Katherine Cooper

It's been rather overshadowed by the profusion of recordings commemorating the centenary of Debussy's passing later this month, but tomorrow marks the 250th anniversary of the death of the Italian composer and singing-teacher Nicola Porpora, who wrote almost sixty operas as well as revolutionising vocal technique and counting two of the greatest castratos in history (Carlo Maria Broschi and Gaetano Majorano, aka Farinelli and Caffarelli) among his many pupils. Born in Naples in 1686, he taught extensively in his hometown and Venice and also spent time in Dresden and Vienna (where his beleaguered personal assistant was a young aspiring composer by the name of Joseph Haydn), but died in poverty after the ornate style of writing which had brought him and several of his students such success began to fall from fashion.

One of today's most intrepid champions of neglected baroque composers, the Viennese countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic has already masterminded the first complete recording of Porpora's *Germanico in Germania* (released on Decca in January, with a cast that also includes the Russian coloratura soprano Julia Lezhneva on seriously impressive form), and today brings a dazzling collection of operatic arias with his regular collaborators Armonia Atenea and George Petrou. Almost everything on the album is a world premiere recording: though both Philippe Jaroussky and Franco Fagioli have released Porpora discs over the past couple of years, Cencic's lower-lying instrument means that he eschews the roles which were written for the composer's two star pupils (both of whom were soprano castratos) and focuses instead on his arias for the alto voice. (One of Porpora's less high-maintenance muses was Domenico Annibali, who created the title-role in *Germanico* and also starred in the premieres of numerous operas by Hasse and Handel - including *Arminio*, which Cencic recorded in 2016).

In an era when operatic composers often tailored arias to showcase the specific talents and preferences of singers with big box-office appeal, Porpora seems to have sought to challenge as much as to flatter (he was, after all, frequently writing for his former students, at least one of whom he thought needed taking down a peg or two!), but Cencic makes even the most formidable roulades and longest phrases sound like a walk in the park. None of the exercises which Porpora devised for his pupils (including the single page of vocalises which Caffarelli was apparently made to study exclusively for several years!) survive in manuscript, though many of the arias include passages which act as fiendish technical workouts in themselves; in Cencic's hands, however, it all becomes real music rather than a compendium of vocal studies with orchestral accompaniment.

The album opens in a blaze of martial glory with the swaggering 'Se tu la reggi al volo' from *Ezio*, which was also the first track on Fagioli's Porpora disc from 2014 – but the two singers could scarcely be more different. Whereas Fagioli actively calls attention to the almost ludicrous vocal challenges inherent in the music with abrupt register-changes and roller-coaster coloratura, Cencic is all elegance: the voice is perfectly integrated

across its wide range, and the shoals of semiquavers are despatched with immaculate smoothness rather than the slightly aspirated quality of Fagioli or Cecilia Bartoli. Impressive though the virtuosic showpieces are, Cencic is at his considerable best in the long lines of cantabile arias such as the lilting siciliana 'Ove l'erbetta tenera, e molle' from *Filandro* (written for Annibali) and the achingly beautiful lament 'Torbido intorno al core' from *Meride e Selinunte*.

I had a lovely, lively chat with Max (who's currently planning his own new productions of two rather more mainstream operas, Rossini's *La donna del lago* and Handel's *Serse*) last week about the process of bringing this gloriously flamboyant music to light and the challenges involved in surmounting what he describes as the 'almost sadistic' demands of Porpora's vocal writing – do keep an eye on our website over the next few days to read more...