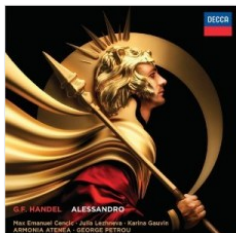


OPERA NEWS, 15_05_2013

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Elegant, Beautifully Performed Handel

Review by: Robert Levine



Artistic Quality: 10
Sound Quality: 10

Handel's *Alessandro* is practically a comic opera despite having as its hero the not-particularly-amusing Alexander the Great. Rather than focusing on his warrior image, the plot centers on two women who love him and vie for his affection; he manages to keep them both enchanted until he chooses one at the opera's close. Its premiere in 1726 in London was meant not only to showcase the greatest castrato of his time, Senesino, who sang the title role, but also to bring together both a London favorite, soprano Francesca Cuzzoni, who sang Lisaura, and newcomer Faustina Bordoni (a mezzo-soprano) as the rival lover

Rosanne. The women already had built up a heady rivalry in Italy a few years before, and box office was hoping for sparks. It worked brilliantly; there were 13 performances (and would have been more had Senesino not been taken ill), and the rivalry between the women continued.

Cuzzoni was a magnificent singer and apparently an enormously petulant, arrogant woman—Handel once threatened to throw her out of a window—but Bordoni was known for her sweet temperament. Nonetheless, during a performance of Bononcini's *Astianatte* in 1727, the two women resorted to punching one another and pulling each other's hair—or so it was reported. Ah, for the good old days.

And so the opera needs three great singers to make it work: *Alessandro* himself has eight arias and the two women have about an equal number of arias, plus a duet (and at one point one repeats the other's words and notes in recitative). The 36-year-old Croatian countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic sings the title role with absolute security, a good-sized voice of a fine color, and the ability to portray *Alessandro*'s whimsy, uncertainty, and even warrior-like sides—and, I might add, with endless breath and not an aspirate within earshot.

Young mezzo (bordering on soprano—see my [review](#) of her debut recital) Julia Lezhneva, who sings Rosanne (the one *Alessandro* eventually chooses as his bride), can take your breath away: the voice is lovely, with a trill on any and every note, and the registers are even. Her introspective second-act aria "Aura, fonti...", sung in a garden, has a wistfulness to it that is glorious, and it isn't just her beautiful tone and fine technique. Lezhneva uses downward portamento with such smoothness and feeling that we're thoroughly seduced. Moments later she lets loose with fireworks in "Alla sua gabbia..."—but again, with incredible grace and taste.

No less fine is the more sensuous, grander-sounding Karina Gauvin as Lisaura, as impressive in fast music as in the lament "Che tirannia d'amor", a meltingly lovely aria. As Tassile, an Indian King who is politically aligned with *Alessandro* but is in love with Lisaura, countertenor Xavier Sabata has a warmly opaque sound and an expressive way with the text. Two conspirators, Leonato and Cleone, are sung well by tenor Juan Sancho and countertenor Vasily Khoroshev, the latter being particularly aggressive with his top register. Bass In-Sung Sim as Clito, a Macedonian captain, impresses with his authority.

George Petrou leading the 30-member-plus period-instrument group Armonia Atenea and The City of Athens Choir has a marvelous sense of the work's pace; he knows his singers and plays to their strengths. Accompaniments tend to be nicely delicate in reflective numbers without ever being sappy, and the outbursts have real energy. The opera itself may lack something in dramatic weight—there seems little at stake, nobody goes crazy or plots murder—but it's still super Handel.

Keen ears will note a similarity between the orchestral intro to Rosanne's first-act "Un lusinghiero..." and the more wild, aggressive "Tornami a vagheggiar" from *Alcina* of nine years later; indeed, Lezhneva adds a brief cadenza near its close that might have been taken from the later aria. The only other performance of this opera currently available is led by Sigiswald Kuijken and it can't compare with this one: As fine as René Jacobs is as a conductor, his days as a countertenor (he sings the title role) were not as impressive as Cencic's currently are, and I suspect that this new Decca set will not be bettered for some time.

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Recording Details:

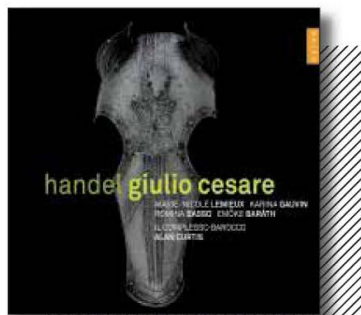
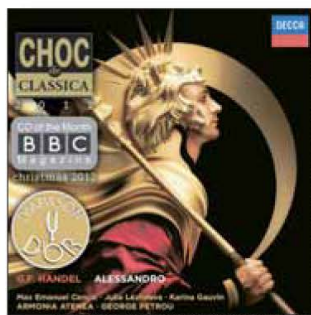
Reference Recording: This one

HANDEL, G.F.:
Alessandro

[Cencic, Max Emanuel](#) (countertenor)
[Gauvin, Karina](#) (soprano)
[Lezhneva, Julia](#) (soprano)
[Petrou, George](#) (conductor)
[Armonia Atenea](#)

OPERA

Trilli, virtuosismi del barocco



Georg Friedrich Haendel

Alessandro

Armonia Atenea direttore George Petrou

DECCA

Giulio Cesare

Il Complesso Barocco, direttore Alan Curtis

NAÏVE (3 cd)

Antonio Vivaldi

L'oracolo in Messenia ovvero La Merope

Europa Galante, direttore Fabio Biondi

VIRGIN

Orlando 1714

Modo Antiquo, direttore Federico Maria Sardelli

NAÏVE

