



crowds wherever he appeared, so much so that in 1762 the Archbishop banned him from playing during the annual Midnight Mass at St Roch. Yates's competent performance demonstrates that she has all of the qualities essential for casting Balbastre's music in the best light – in particular, a cantabile touch coupled with sensitive timing. The *notes inégales* are elastic, giving shape and conveying a forward movement and a dance-like quality, especially in the gavottes *Le Segur* and *La Berville*. Yates's embellishments are judicious and artful, though only occasionally, such as in *La Lugeac* and *La Genty*, does she sprinkle in flourishes of her own.

Generally speaking, Yates is adept at picking a tempo that best matches the shape and character of the music. Connections between phrases and sections, sometimes punctuated by waits and tiny hesitations, are expertly handled. She is capable of maintaining a flowing movement and a steady tempo over a long period, but with sufficient flexibility to avoid any impression of sameness of expression. She often infuses subtle expression by delicately varying the speed of the ornaments, as in the unusually leisurely *pincé* (mordent) heard in the *louré* (middle section) of *La Castelmore*. *Noblement* is an attribute commonly associated with Balbastre's music (such as in *La Suzanne* and *La Morisseau*), and Yates achieves this largely by choosing the right tempo, often refraining from pushing the music to its extremes. In *La Suzanne*, for example, the balance between virtuousness and virtuosity is precisely managed with poise and authority. In all, she articulates not only the music, but also the emotions and language embedded in the music.

Yates's liner notes cover much ground intelligently, and show a nuanced awareness of recent research on Balbastre. She stresses, as many previous commentators have done, the role of patronage in Balbastre's illustrious career, recounting vividly how Balbastre, following in the footsteps of Jean Henry D'Anglebert and other composers of the ancien régime, made the most of his connections in order to move dramatically up through the ranks of society. In telling the tale of Balbastre's rise and eventual fall after the French Revolution, Yates highlights that historical awareness is key to penetrating the composer's character and his music, which is invaluable if the modern performer is to forge convincing performances and convey a message of profundity rather than frivolity.

Yates's superb performance contributes fresh insight into what makes Balbastre's *Pièces de clavecin* pertinent both to their time and to ours. As Alan Curtis and Mary Cyr remark ('Balbastre, Claude-Bénigne', in *Grove Music Online* <www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (30 March 2011)), Balbastre's music, which captured the mid-eighteenth-century Parisian sensibility, must be understood in the context of its time and culture. To bring out the flavour of his works, we must cultivate a broad grasp of the factors that shape the music. Such an enhanced perspective on the composer's world will assist the performer intuitively to strike the best balance in a range of performance-critical matters, from tempo and *notes inégales* to ornamentation and touch, and to cultivate a compelling interpretation.

DAVID CHUNG



Eighteenth-Century Music © Cambridge University Press, 2012
doi:10.1017/S1478570611000510

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (1685–1759)

FLAVIO, *RE DE' LONGOBARDI*

Rosemary Joshua (soprano), Iestyn Davies (countertenor), Tim Mead (countertenor), Renata Pokupić (mezzo-soprano), Hilary Summers (contralto), Andrew Foster-Williams (baritone), Thomas Walker (tenor) / Early Opera Company / Christian Curnyn

Chandos Chaconne, CHAN 0773(2), 2010; two discs, 146 minutes

Flavio was one of the 'winners' in Winton Dean's definitive re-evaluation of Handel's operas, first in *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and then in *Handel's Operas, 1704–1726* (co-authored with John Merrill Knapp (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987; second edition 1995)). Previously



misunderstood, underestimated, or virtually ignored, it now occupies a distinguished place in a category aptly named by Dean ‘antiheroic operas’. It is impossible to improve on Dean’s summary (*Handel’s Operas, 1704–1726*, 466): ‘[*Flavio*] is in its modest way a little masterpiece. The prevailing temper is one of sly amusement at the follies and absurdities of the human species, not excluding the more convulsive passions. These flickering emotional cross-currents between tragedy and farce, irony and pathos, are held beautifully in balance.’

The libretto was adapted by Nicola Haym from an earlier one by Matteo Noris, itself ultimately derived from the *Gesta Langobardorum* of Paulus Diaconus. The action takes place at a time in the Dark Ages when Britain was ruled by Lombardy. The plot is tightly constructed: its individual strands are skilfully interwoven, and the motivations for the action spring convincingly from the characters of the protagonists. There are two pairs of lovers: Guido (son of Ugone) and Emilia (daughter of Lotario) are about to be married; Vitige, a courtier, and Teodata (daughter of Ugone) are conducting a clandestine love affair. Lotario had been expecting to be named the next governor of Britain in succession to Narsete, but Flavio, the King of Lombardy, appoints Ugone instead: having been attracted by the charms of Teodata, the king hopes that the absence of her father will give him easier access to the daughter. Angry at being passed over, Lotario (offstage) slaps Ugone’s face. Ugone demands of his son that he avenge the insult by punishing Lotario. Thus wounded pride and a smarting cheek lead to a tragic outcome that is out of proportion to its origin: Guido feels impelled, by filial duty, to fight a duel with the father of his fiancée. The consequences of his action come to a head in the opera’s most powerful scene, when Emilia confronts her father’s murderer, and Guido invites her to kill him. The Flavio–Teodata–Vitige love triangle is treated in a lighter way by librettist and composer, but Flavio’s persistence and Teodata’s coquettish teasing cause Vitige much anguish, especially when the king demands that he (Vitige) woo Teodata on his (Flavio’s) behalf.

Handel moves with consummate skill between tragedy and farce: the impact of neither is lessened by its proximity to the other – indeed, it is increased. Occasionally Handel treads a knife edge: in Vitige’s ‘wooing-by-proxy’ arietta (the tender ‘Corrispondi a chi t’adora’) the audience might well wonder whether to smile or shed a tear at the young man’s predicament – or instead to guess that Vitige probably intends Teodata to accept his loving words as coming from his own heart, rather than from the king’s. In this scene and many others much depends on the skill, intelligence and sensitivity of the singers (and of the director in a staged performance). The gentle ridicule by librettist and composer of the absurdities of opera seria is evident not only in the broad structure of the plot (murder as revenge for a slap on the cheek) but also in its details: at one point, for example, Vitige swears that, if he does not win Teodata for himself before the sun sets, his sword will strike down Ugone, Guido, Flavio, himself and the whole world. (As if to deflate the hyperbole, Teodata immediately responds with her teasing aria ‘Con un’ vezzo’.) But if *Flavio* were merely satirical, it would be a far less powerful opera: Emilia’s grief in her aria ‘Ma chi punir desio?’ at the end of Act 2 and in her accompagnato ‘Oh Guido! oh mio tiranno!’ in Act 3 is real, and the audience shares her anguish.

On the whole, the singers on this new recording, conducted by Christian Curnyn, rise to the challenges well: in vocal tone and technique they consistently give pleasure, and they characterize their parts and convey the drama well. Whether Curnyn’s singers or those on the only other recording (on the Harmonia Mundi label, conducted by René Jacobs: HMC 901312.13, 1990) are preferred will probably be a matter of personal taste. As Emilia, Rosemary Joshua and Lena Lootens are both outstanding, as are the two Vitiges, Renata Pokupić and Christina Högman. All four countertenors are good. One might prefer the tone of Tim Mead (Flavio) and Iestyn Davies (Guido) on Curnyn’s recording to that of their counterparts (Jeffrey Gall and Derek Lee Ragin) on Jacobs’s recording, while at the same time preferring the more mature sound of the latter two. As Lotario, Andrew Foster-Williams (with Curnyn) is preferable to Ulrich Messthaler, who is slightly less secure technically. As Ugone, Thomas Walker (with Curnyn) and Gianpaolo Fagotto are both impressive in their coloratura, though the latter’s occasional sacrificing of pitch to expressiveness might irritate some. My slight reservations about Curnyn’s singers relate only to the suitability of certain voices for their roles, and to the similarity of timbre between two singers. Rosemary Joshua, one of our finest



Handel singers, possesses the most mature voice in the cast, but she gives it an appealingly youthful quality – not least in the charming ornaments that she adds to the da capo of ‘Amante stravagante’. Iestyn Davies, as Emilia’s betrothed Guido, makes a beautiful sound and has an excellent technique, but the voice is younger: he can sound at times inappropriately boyish beside Rosemary Joshua. The ‘problem’ in the case of Tim Mead (Flavio) and Hilary Summers (Teodata) is different. The richness of Mead’s voice is greatly preferable to the whiteness of tone that was once common among countertenors, but the unfortunate consequence here is that his timbre, while not identical to that of Hilary Summers, is quite similar, so that in recitative exchanges it is not always easy to distinguish their voices instantaneously. Handel gave his first Teodata (Anastasia Robinson) and all subsequent singers of the role a difficult task. In her cheerful flirtatiousness Teodata has much in common with Poppea (in *Agrippina*) and Atalanta (in *Scerse*), but they are sopranos and she is a contralto. The latter voice seems intrinsically less well suited to a coquette, and Hilary Summers – notwithstanding the gorgeous tone of her voice – is not entirely convincing in the role. These problems are not encountered in the Jacobs recording: the vocal timbres of Jeffrey Gall (Flavio) and Bernarda Fink (Teodata) are more distinct, and the latter has more sparkle in her voice – though the tempo of ‘Con un vezzo’ still sounds rather laboured.

Any sound recording of an opera inevitably lacks one element that formed part of the composer’s original conception: the visual aspect. To what extent should the performers and the producer of a CD attempt to convey, though a purely aural performance, the visual impression of the opera that an audience in the theatre gains? In Christopher Hogwood’s marvellous recording of *Rinaldo* (Decca 467 087-2, 2000) the thunder that accompanies Armida’s aria ‘Furie terribili’ conjures up the sight of lightning flashes, and the birdsong in Almirena’s aria ‘Augelletti che cantate’ creates an idyllic picture of pastoral peace. In *Flavio* an obvious opportunity for sound effects is the duel fought by Guido and Lotario in Act 2 Scene 10. Quite apart from deciding whether to include the sound of clashing swords, an additional problem here is that Handel gives hardly any time for the duel to take place. In the Jacobs recording the solution is to insert a brief sinfonia, which at least creates a plausible gap between Lotario’s last speech before his death and Guido’s after it. The implication in the Curnyn recording seems to be that Lotario sings ‘Chi desia di morir . . .’ and is fatally wounded during the continuation ‘. . . qui resta esangue’. Neither recording includes sound effects.

More interesting, however, is the possibility of creating visual images in the listener’s mind by the manner in which secco recitative is performed. In Curnyn’s performance it is clear that his singers are endeavouring to convey – through flexibility of rhythm, pacing and dynamics – the drama of the unfolding plot; but occasionally their delivery becomes somewhat colourless, and it is hard to sense the inward emotion – let alone the facial expressions or bodily gestures – that would accompany their singing on stage. Even when the performance by Curnyn’s singers is good, there is sometimes an even more vivid projection of the words under Jacobs: in the latter’s recording the listener can easily visualize, for example, the changing facial expressions of Vitige (Christina Högman) in her brief recitative in Act 2 Scene 9, or, in the following recitative, the angry gestures of Lotario (Ulrich Messthaler) and Guido (Derek Lee Ragin) as their tempers flare up. Unfortunately, while enjoying the greater dramatic intensity of Jacobs’s *secco* recitatives, one also has to endure his editorial flights of fancy: several recitatives are prefaced by brief chordal improvisations by the continuo player(s) or by sinfonias for the full string orchestra. The recitative that opens Act 1 Scene 10, for example, is preceded by the G major sinfonia from Act 1 Scene 1 of *Arianna*; and Act 2 begins with a sinfonia lifted from the opening of Act 2 of *Ariodante*. The intrusion at the beginning of Act 3 is even more misguided: before Flavio sings his pensive recitative, he is given the G major arietta with which Demetrio begins Act 2 of *Berenice*; but Demetrio’s willingness to give up sceptre and crown is certainly not shared by Flavio.

Curnyn’s tempos are generally well judged, but that of Vitige’s ‘Che bel contento’ in Act 1 is puzzling. The aria is marked ‘Andante’, and however broadly that term might range in Handel’s music, it should surely not be quite as fast as this: it is much faster than, for example, the ‘Allegro’ of Flavio’s ‘Chi puo mirare’ in Act 2. (Both of Curnyn’s tempos are almost identical to those of Jacobs.) The problem in ‘Che bel contento’ perhaps lies in the words, and specifically in the presence of a conditional clause that darkens



the mood: 'Che bel contento sarebbe amore, se non vi fosse la gelosia'. Do Curnyn and Jacobs both feel that the fast tempo suits the word 'gelosia' (jealousy)? If so, they are misguided: all it does is diminish the effect of Handel's suspensions on 'gelosia', while simultaneously destroying the gentle, contented lilt of the music.

Curnyn uses a performing edition prepared by Peter Jones, which is generally reliable, but there is an odd feature in Act 1. In the autograph score of Scene 6 it was originally Vitige who brought the letter to Flavio, in which Narsete relinquished his governorship of Britain. Handel crossed out his original stage direction and Vitige's few bars of recitative, and replaced the former with the new stage direction 'entra un soldato con un foglio'. In this form it was copied into the performing score, and the libretto follows this precisely. Inexplicably, both Curnyn's editor and (before him) Jacobs ignore Handel's alteration and reinstate his deleted stage direction and music. There is another curious 'agreement' between the two recordings, which might possibly reflect a common mistake in the editions: in Act 3 Scene 6 both Iestyn Davies and Derek Lee Ragin sing an A natural (instead of A flat) in bar 6. In an earlier scene in Act 3, Curnyn's CD booklet is confusing: in the recitative preceding Flavio's aria 'Starvi a canto' what is printed represents (more or less) the music before Handel made two cuts, but what is performed is (thankfully) the correct version. (At this point Jacobs again reinstates the deleted music, but misinterprets Handel's alterations.)

Of the two available recordings, the new one by Curnyn will not disappoint or irritate anyone, and there is much to enjoy in it. But it is the consistently vivid performance of the secco recitatives in the Jacobs performance that brings the opera alive in the listener's imagination.

ANDREW V. JONES



Eighteenth-Century Music © Cambridge University Press, 2012
doi:10.1017/S1478570611000522

JOHANN MATTHESON (1681–1764)

CHRISTMAS ORATORIO; MAGNIFICAT A DUE CORI

Nicki Kennedy (soprano), Anna Crookes (soprano), Ursula Eittinger (alto), Dorothee Merkel (alto), Andreas Post (tenor), Sven Hansen (tenor), Stephan MacLeod (bass), Johannes Gsänger (bass) / Die Kölner Akademie / Michael Alexander Willens

cpo 777 274-2, 2010; one disc, 55 minutes

Johann Mattheson has long been known as one of the most important music critics and theorists of eighteenth-century Germany. He was also a prominent performer and composer, though he seems to be more famous for his interactions with other composers (his duel with Handel in 1704 comes to mind). Mattheson was a child prodigy, performing as a singer and organist from the age of nine, and he eventually became employed as a singer, vocal coach and later composer and director at the Hamburg Gänsemarkt Opera. In 1715 he became the music director of St Mary's Cathedral, for which he wrote several large-scale vocal works for the principal feast days of the church year. He had to step down from this post in 1728, because of his worsening hearing loss. From that point on, he concentrated on theoretical, critical and historical writing (examples of which include *Der vollkommene Kapellmeister* (1739) and *Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte* (1740)) and thereby continued to wield considerable influence on the musical life and culture of Hamburg.

German record label cpo and Michael Alexander Willens are to be commended for their ongoing commitment to recording little-known works of the past. The present recording is their third recent release of Mattheson's vocal works (the other two feature the 1723 oratorio *Der liebeiche und geduldige David* and the