



sextets (though not this edition) have been recorded, and were released on the Supraphon label in 2004 (SU 3788–2 131).

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RECORDINGS

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JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683–1764)

CASTOR & POLLUX

Jeffrey Thompson, Hadleigh Adams, Celeste Lazarenko, Margaret Plummer, Paul Goodwin–Groen, Anna Fraser, Pascal Herington, Mark Donnelly / Pinchgut Opera; Cantillation, Orchestra of the Antipodes / Antony Walker, Erin Helyard
Pinchgut Live PG003, 2013; two discs, 139 minutes

Each December, as the rest of the world braces itself for the annual *Messiah* indulgence, Sydney audiences are treated to new, invigorating productions of rarely performed works by Pinchgut Opera. This small company – which plays on the one hand on the name of an island in the shadow of the Sydney Opera House where, in colonial times, miscreant convicts were chained Prometheus-like, and on the other on the gut-wrenching affect of early opera – was the brainchild of a team led by musical directors Antony Walker and Erin Helyard, and philanthropists Elizabeth and Ken Nielsen. Walker and Helyard share responsibilities: Helyard prepares the editions and assists in rehearsals, while Walker conducts. The gifted Walker draws on wide-ranging experience: in addition to his positions as Music Director of the Pittsburgh Opera and Washington Concert Opera, it is with Pinchgut that he has been able to indulge his passion for pre-romantic opera. Starting in 2002 with Handel's *Semele*, the company's offerings have ranged from Monteverdi to Mozart's *Idomeneo*, taking in numerous rarities such as Vivaldi's *Griselda*. Mounted in short runs of just four performances in Sydney's modest City Recital Hall, and adapted for minimalist staging, the company's work deserves to be better known, and is available to international audiences through live recordings. (Early releases were on the Australian Broadcasting Company's Classics label, and later on Pinchgut's own Pinchgut Live. Recordings of some productions are downloadable from iTunes, but so far *Castor* is only available in CD format.)

Castor & Pollux, Rameau's second *tragédie en musique*, takes as its theme the psychological tensions and love intrigues of the twin heroes Castor and Pollux of Greek legend. Despite conforming to the platitudes of myth-based opera, involving a pantheon of divinities and demi-gods, a *lieto fine* and a metamorphosis orchestrated by a *deus ex machina*, and concluding with a celestial ballet, *Castor* revitalized the *tragédie en musique*. It was also Rameau's greatest success, and exercised significant impact, with a long and distinguished performance history into the 1780s. *Castor* became the touchstone of French opera: it was decisive in the *querelle des bouffons* and was played at the inauguration of the Tuilleries theatre in 1764. Revivals across Europe attest to the breadth of its influence. After its 1737 creation, substantial reworking in 1754 resulted in a second version different enough to count as a distinct work. With Pierre-Joseph Bernard's revised text, Rameau provided a completely new first act and reorganized the material in the remaining portions. He did not fail to include the best of the larger pieces from the earlier version, but these were enhanced by a new dramatic organization and innovations such as the off-stage chorus and an entr'acte between the first two acts that, breaking with convention, sustain dramatic continuity in a manner that looks forward to *verismo* dramaturgy. It is often stated that the suppression of the Prologue, with its reference to the 1736 Peace of Vienna, was Rameau's personal decision, but in reality it resulted from



protocol established by the Paris Opéra shortly before that dispensed with the obligatory encomium to the monarch.

In the twentieth century, *Castor* was first revived in concert in Paris in 1903, with the first modern staging five years later in Montpellier. A series of performances in the inter-war years took the work to locations as far-flung as Glasgow and Buenos Aires. In the second half of the century, audiences had to wait until 1962 for a revival in Schwetzingen, and then two years later in London. The ‘twin’ versions are equally strong from both musical and dramatic standpoints, and have received equal attention in modern revivals. Since the 1970s, recordings of either version have appeared at the pace of about one per decade. Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s 1972 account (available on CD as Teldec 8.35048 ZB, 1987), the first complete recording of the opera and also the first using ‘original’ instruments, preceded a production at the Frankfurt Opera that he directed eight years later. Charles Farncombe’s reading from the 1983 English Bach Festival is also still in the catalogue (Erato 204509–95311–2, 1983). The work returned to Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1982, but it was Les Arts Florissants’ production of the 1737 version at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence in 1991 – with a cast of early-music specialists under the direction of William Christie, baroque-inspired staging by Pier Luigi Pizzi and choreography by Béatrice Massin – that had a lasting impact on the work’s recent history (the recording dates from two years later; Harmonia Mundi HMC 901435.37, 1993). This impact can be heard both in Christophe Rousset’s performances with the Nederlandse Opera (DVD on Opus Arte OA0999D, 2008) and on Pinchgut’s CD, both of which use the 1754 version yet show Christie’s influence in their casting, dramatic pacing and interpretative choices.

The revival of French baroque opera has been obstructed by the hegemony of the Italian and German traditions, and the dominance of bel canto to the exclusion of other schools of singing. This resulted in the virtual ostracism of French operatic works, and handicapped the text-dominated approach essential to the works of Lully and his successors. For his pioneering recording, Harnoncourt had access to an international cast of stars led by the veteran Gérard Souzay as Pollux, at the time the leading authority on French *chanson*, and Jeanette Scovotti in the role of Télétaire, whose use of portamento and prolonged upbeats betray the vocal training of a Metropolitan Opera diva. Their vocal production is heavy and their declamation laboured; indeed, the entire musical canvas sports a veneer of vibrato that disfigures the intricacy of Rameau’s writing.

Pinchgut’s version, by contrast, benefits from the intervening forty years of Rameau performance. Drawn largely from Australian and New Zealand talent, the singers negotiate the score with ease, and combine the best aspects of the early-music specialists like Howard Crook, Jennifer Smith and Agnès Mellon heard on Christie’s and Farncombe’s recordings with well-grounded vocal production. In this they succeed better than the Nederlandse Opera cast, which, apart from the exemplary Anna Maria Panzarella and Véronique Gens, both of whom had previously taken leading roles in Christie’s company, is filled out with singers whose vocal flexibility is not always suited to the demands of Rameau’s writing.

Celeste Lazarenko, an Australian trained at London’s Guildhall School of Music & Drama, is a ravishing Télétaire on the Pinchgut disc. In ‘Tristes apprêts’ – a high point of any performance of *Castor* – she is vocally closer to Smith and Panzarella, but distances herself from Panzarella’s more melodramatic delivery and incorporates some of the fragility and understated sorrow that Mellon brought to the part with Les Arts. Lazarenko’s is surely one of its most moving but also one of the slowest renditions on record (tempos vary markedly for this *air*, with timings ranging between 4’30’’ and 5’50’’).

One of the greatest challenges of French baroque opera is casting the *haute-contre* parts. Our understanding of the demands of these high tenor roles has changed markedly over the past half century. Jeffrey Thompson, who took the role of Castor in Sydney, has built up an eminent career in France, and his colourful and highly inflected declamation stands apart from that of the rest of the cast. In the tradition of Howard Crook (heard singing the role under Christie), Thompson insists on an affective interpretation driven by close attention to the text. The resulting technique is markedly different from his predecessors. Opinions are sharply divided on Thompson’s idiomatic style. Even if, for some, he lacks Crook’s taste and cool elegance, and in his endeavour to register each emotional turn in the *livret* he loses sight of the extended beauties of Rameau’s writing, his flexibility of tone production and *mouvement* (rubato) is to be commended. Even more significant



is his ability to challenge listeners to re-evaluate key elements of interpretation of this still unfamiliar repertory.

In their 1754 rewriting of Act 1 Bernard and Rameau elaborated tensions between the protagonists that had only been implied in the earlier version. The new act tilted the scales of recitative-set pieces heavily towards the end of the opera, where Rameau kept much of the magnificent dance music and *divertissements*. Between 1737 and 1754, furthermore, Rameau's style of *récitatif* became more melodic and highly ornamental, notated in great detail. Thus the extended opening dialogue also presents a challenge to performers, and indeed I found the Pinchgut version of Act 1 somewhat laboured. Diction is not always impeccable, *e-muet* terminations are too 'sung' and not all the singers maintain pure vowels. *Ports de voix* (upward-resolving appoggiaturas) are performed accurately and their expressive potential is realized to the full, but with the addition of *enflés* (vocal swells) the effect often seems forced, a hindrance to the natural flow of the dialogue. Thompson is the main culprit here, revelling in his own vocality at the expense of comprehensibility. I would have liked to hear more distinction made between the metrical consistency of the *petits airs* and the shifting metres of the *récitatif*. As it stands, there is little structure and the pacing is erratic. If it were not for the agile continuo playing of Erin Helyard, the recitative would lose its sense of momentum altogether.

Pinchgut also do not follow the 1754 score to the letter. For this version, Rameau took care to retain as many of the work's high points as possible. The chromatic chorus 'Que tout gémissé' that so captured Debussy's imagination, Têlaire's sublime *air* 'Tristes apprêts', the stirring 'Que l'Enfer applaudisse' and many of the best passages from the Underworld music – including an ensemble where three characters simultaneously voice opposing opinions, the voluptuous Elysian scene and the monumental chaconne – were all features of the later versions. Rameau also gave more opportunity for his 1754 Castor to shine than he had provided in the original version, playing to the strengths of his favourite *haute-contre* Pierre Jélyotte. With the consolidation of Acts 3 and 4 Castor lost the monologue 'Séjour de l'éternelle paix', so Rameau assigned two new *ariettes* to him. This went against the protocol of allocating *ariettes* (the French composers' answer to the da capo aria) to incidental characters instead of protagonists, whose verisimilitude would have been undermined by launching unashamedly into song. 'Tendre amour, qu'il est doux de porter tes chaînes', at the end of Act 5, is a touching reflection on the *dénouement*, a final display of vocal virtuosity that reinforces the supremacy that the voice had won in French opera. Still, it would have been unthinkable for the work to finish with a solo aria, and in 1754 Rameau provided two gavottes to round out the celebration of the *Fête de l'Univers* and emphasize the corporeality of the company. Pinchgut's suppression of these concluding gavottes distorts the finale, then, and indeed also misrepresents the multimedia design of the *tragédie en musique* whereby voice and body are equal partners. Like other modern companies, Pinchgut also struggle more generally to replicate the lavishness of the pre-Revolutionary Académie Royale de Musique, and it is usually the ballet component that gets short-changed. Evidently baulking at the challenges of creating historical choreographies, they cut as many as three dances from Act 2 alone.

The skill of the Orchestra of the Antipodes is brought to the fore in any Pinchgut production. Although modest in size (with a string section of 8/4/3/1 compared with Christie's 15/6/7/2), the band exhibits a level of dedication rarely encountered in opera, and its precision and exquisite blend provide an appropriately expansive tonal palette. Equal to any early-instrument bands with longer track records in the northern hemisphere, it is not surprising that at earlier Pinchgut performances the orchestra received more public applause and critical acclaim than the singers. But opera is not about the instrumentalists. With *Castor*, Pinchgut has struck a more appropriate balance between pit and stage: here the singers give exemplary readings of their roles, and the orchestra does not simply accompany, but interacts and complements with rich and sensitive support. Take the opening ritornello to 'Tristes apprêts': infused with lugubrious sensibility, the orchestra's highly nuanced phrasing exemplifies how the music can be made to 'speak' even before the singer enters with the texted version of the same thematic material. (The lack of prominence of the Antipodes' exceptional bassoonists in the recording mix is a minor disappointment.) Cantillation is an outstanding chorus, and sings with exemplary diction and integrated harmony.



The audio quality is more than satisfactory, particularly considering that this was a live recording, with body microphones for the singers. Noise from the stage or audience is minimal, and never loud enough to disturb. The most obvious reminder that the CD originated in performances is the extended applause at the work's conclusion, which seems unnecessarily self-gratifying. Otherwise, the only lapse I noticed was a slight flagging of energy in the *tonnerre* at the end of Act 5. For my taste there is a little too much reverberation in the mix, and this tends to muddy the clarity of the singers' diction; meanwhile, the viola da gamba used as the sustained continuo instrument is under-represented.

Readers may be interested in the company's website, <www.pinchgutopera.com.au>, which offers some audio and video excerpts from the production, including the ingenious stage design featuring a geodesic dome alluding to the opera's celestial theme.

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JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL (1778–1837), FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

PIANO QUINTETS

The Music Collection / Susan Alexander-Max

Chandos CHAN 0800, 2014; one disc, 65 minutes

The recent revival of interest in the music of Johann Nepomuk Hummel, evident in the range of recordings of his piano concertos, piano sonatas, chamber music and operas produced since the early 1990s, has been counterpointed by an equally vigorous scholarly fascination with the composer, especially given the correspondences between his compositional style and that of Franz Schubert. To this end, musicologists have begun to examine the ways in which Schubert was influenced by the older composer, sometimes drawing upon Hummel's works as models for his own – a welcome development, one which confronts the time-worn practice of employing Beethoven's instrumental music as a benchmark against which to judge Schubert's contributions.

While this disc's pairing of Hummel's E flat minor Quintet, Op. 87, and Schubert's A major Quintet, the 'Trout', D667, is not novel – the pieces have been recorded side-by-side by three individual ensembles – it none the less contributes to this emerging picture of artistic affinity. No direct relationship exists between the quintets: as Susan Alexander-Max's liner notes rightly clarify, it was Hummel's Op. 74 quintet (published in 1816), and not Op. 87, which acted as a model for Schubert's 'Trout'; Schubert's acquaintance Albert Stadler recalled that

[Schubert] wrote [D667] at the special request of my friend, Sylvester Paumgartner, who was absolutely delighted with the delicious little song. At his wish the Quintet had to preserve the structure and instrumentation of the Hummel Quintet, *recte Septour*, which at that time was still new. (Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends*, trans. Rosamund Ley and John Nowell (London: Black, 1958), 148)

Indeed, given that Op. 87 was published in 1822, three years after the most likely date of composition of D667, it would be difficult for Hummel's quintet to have held any direct influence over Schubert's. None the less, these two works reveal a stylistic kinship, and their shared instrumentation (for fortepiano, violin, viola, cello and double bass) is an obvious point of contact, making this an apt and delightful coupling. Alexander-Max is overly generous to Hummel when she suggests that it was he 'who first employed the innovative instrumentation' and made 'use of the double-bass in a way that had not been heard before' (liner