

Opera on DVD and Blu-ray

Lohengrin, Wagner

Anna Netrebko (*Elsa*), Evelyn Herlitzius (*Ortrud*), Jana Hohlfeld, Monika Harnisch, Annett Eckert, Masako Furuta (*Four Pages*), Piotr Beczala (*Lohengrin*), Tom Martinsen, Simeon Esper, Matthias Henneberg, Tilmann Rönnebeck (*Four Noblemen of Brabant*), Tomasz Konieczny (*Friedrich von Telramund*), Derek Welton (*Herald*), Georg Zeppenfeld (*Henry the Fowler*), Sächsischer Staatsopernchor, Staatskapelle Dresden, c. Christian Thielemann, p. Christine Mielitz, d. Peter Heilein, video director Tiziano Mancini. Deutsche Grammophon DVD 073 5319/Blu-ray 073 5322 (215 minutes)



Rumours abounded when the cast for this *Lohengrin* revival was announced that it would be a try-out for Piotr Beczala and Anna Netrebko ahead of singing their roles for Christian Thielemann in Bayreuth. Each was not only singing their part for the first time, but singing a major Wagner role on stage for the first time too. It has since been revealed that the conductor had a different trick up his sleeve for 2018's new production in casting Roberto Alagna as the swan knight (and luring Anja Harteros to the Green Hill as Elsa). This film nevertheless makes

for fascinating viewing; the two Wagnerian debutants are mightily impressive, backed up by a cast that could hardly be bettered.

Thielemann's conducting and the playing of the Staatskapelle are major glories, too. Wagner's score is communicated with a sense of gripping dramatic urgency and grandeur. The conductor's vision has impressive weight and scale, but manages never to feel overblown or portentous. One notices, in particular, how he maintains the tension not only in the big moments, but also throughout the recitative. The orchestral tone is rich and shimmeringly beautiful, and the massed chorus sings powerfully.

Netrebko's Elsa is undoubtedly more earthy than ethereal—this is a real human being rather than a Desdemona-like paragon of innocence. She doesn't quite float as some do through the lyrical sections of the first half of Act 2, and has a slightly chewy way with her German, but she sings excitingly and acts movingly. It's a refreshing and constantly engaging performance. Beczala offers a Lohengrin who is dramatically a great deal more straightforward, but he sings with rare clarity of line and diction, his lyricism remaining unruffled as he negotiates the role's tricky tessitura. Evelyn Herlitzius's gripping Ortrud is fearlessly and thrillingly sung, as one would expect, but she commands attention as a glowering, malevolent presence on stage throughout—even when silent. Tomasz



Konieczny is impressively forthright as Telramund and Georg Zeppenfeld is an urbane, classy König Heinrich, his bass sounding smooth and generous.

The booklet describes the staging as 'after the original production by Christine Mielitz, premiered in 1983', with Angela Brandt credited as 'director of performance'. Presumably Brandt should take the credit, then, for the fact that this show has been much better rehearsed for these performances (the booklet gives a range of dates from May 2016) than when I saw it in a tired revival in 2013. The set and costumes have a certain mellow mustiness to them, particularly when it

comes to Lohengrin's dog-eared swan. But it's still an interesting production, placing as it does a powerful emphasis on the militaristic (the designs suggest some time in the first half of the 20th century) and strongly hinting at some sort of impending catastrophe: a situation, it's made clear, that is in no way going to be resolved by the reappearance of Gottfried at the close. Clearly a lot of time has been spent on *Personenregie*, too, with plenty of detailed and telling touches on the cast that make this release not only musically compelling, but also dramatically convincing. Highly recommended.

HUGO SHIRLEY

Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno, Handel

Sabine Devieille (*Bellezza*), Sara Mingardo (*Disinganno*), Franco Fagioli (*Piacere*), Michael Spyres (*Tempo*), Le Concert d'Astrée, c. Emmanuelle Haïm, p. Krzysztof Warlikowski, d. Małgorzata Szczęśniak, video director Stéphane Metge. Erato DVD 9029581936/Blu-ray 9029581929 (138 minutes)

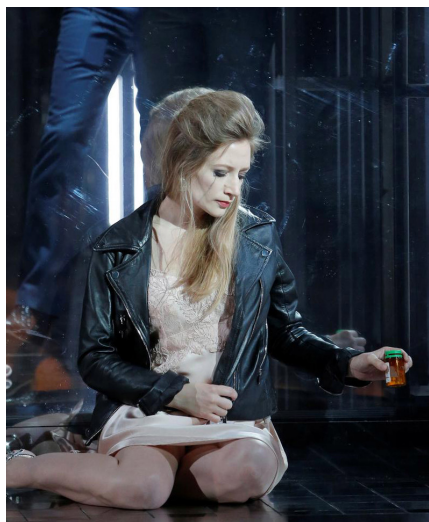
Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili's libretto for Handel's first oratorio, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707), presents discussions between Beauty and three figures who attempt to alter her path. Combatting the dangerous allure Pleasure poses to her, Time and Disillusion spend much time persuading Beauty to 'enter the palace where Truth resides'.

Everyone's thoughts are revealed through singularly apposite music. Beauty's arias give voice to her dilemma with a distinctive blend of vulnerability and defiance. Time's formidable set pieces exude authority, while Disillusion offers one gravely lovely legato number after another. In Pleasure, a predictably flamboyant role musically, the great surprise is the memorably intimate 'Lascia la spina', adapted by Handel a few years later as 'Lascia ch'io pianga'.

The 2016 Aix-en-Provence production is given a riveting contemporary vision by the director Krzysztof Warlikowski. We initially observe Pleasure, the party

girl Beauty, and Beauty's nameless, wordless boyfriend at a disco, dancing sexily and popping pills. After the boyfriend collapses and dies, we find ourselves in an environment combining elements of a hospital, where his naked body is eventually seen lying on a gurney, and a cinema, where Beauty and other party girls periodically sit sulkily. Time and Disillusion lecture Beauty as worldly-wise parents might. Once those two win her over, she's dressed by her friends in a demure white dress, but she then slits her wrists during her heartstoppingly touching final aria.

To my astonishment, the entire presentation works brilliantly (including a few minutes of discourse from the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida, shown on video prior to the work's second half). The principals outdo themselves, above all the wide-eyed Sabine Devieille (*Bellezza*), an exceedingly courageous actress, singing exquisitely throughout. Michael Spyres (*Tempo*) staggers the ear with unfailingly firm tone over an



■ Sabine Devielhe as Bellezza at Aix

extraordinarily wide range, unlimited in dynamic control and flexibility, his singing imbued with true gravitas. Sara Mingardo (*Disinganno*) looks elegant and lavishes on her music ideal directness of address, abundant musicality, and lusciously smooth contralto timbre. Franco Fagioli (*Piacere*)—male mezzo rather than alto—often turns tonally unfocused, but he compensates with unexpectedly lovely *mezza voce*, stupendously full-toned upper extension, and fabulous boldness as a stage personality.

Leading her superbly stylish, technically adroit Concert d'Astrée, Emmanuelle Haïm engages in a true collaboration with the singers. Enhancing the DVD are especially outstanding video direction, plus admirable sound and subtitles. A landmark production, not to be missed.

ROGER PINES

Lucrezia Borgia, Donizetti

Joan Sutherland (*Lucrezia Borgia*), Anne Howells (*Maffio Orsini*), Alfredo Kraus (*Gennaro*), Francis Egerton (*Rustighello*), Stafford Dean (*Alfonso d'Este*), Royal Opera Chorus, Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, c. Richard Bonyngé, p. John Copley, d. John Pascoe and Michael Stennett, video director Brian Large. Opus Arte DVD OA1237D (147 minutes)

Back in 1980 Donizetti's *melodramma* was revived by the Royal Opera as a vehicle for the 52-year-old Joan Sutherland. Visually, John Copley's ultra-traditional production is hampered by her unconvincing acting in the title role, by Alfredo Kraus's stylized-to-the-point-of-mannerism movement as her son Gennaro, and by Stafford Dean's stagey malevolence as her husband Alfonso d'Este.

Anne Howells's suave and altogether more natural Maffio Orsini works better; she is compelling in her narration 'Nella fatal di Rimini' in the Prologue, in the Brindisi 'Il segreto per esser felici' in the final scene, and elsewhere.

But on their own terms there is no denying the visual magnificence of John Pascoe's sets, and particularly of Michael Stennett's ornate and riotously

multi-coloured costumes—even if the limitations of the period's video technology deny them distinctness and the stage lighting transfers poorly to the screen. Subtitles are in English only and cannot be edited out.

Sutherland was undeniably an extraordinary vocalist and she does some remarkable things here, with apparently limitless energy and some exceptional flights of coloratura fancy, radiant trills and unflawed high notes. What scuppers her Lucrezia as a dramatic entity is a level of enunciation that leaves one wondering, at times, what language she is supposed to be singing; without following a libretto one would be left guessing.

There can certainly be no difficulty in understanding each syllable and meaningful inflection of Kraus's Gennaro, and, though there have

undoubtedly been exponents of the role who can offer more sheer lyric beauty, few can turn phrase after phrase into object lessons in style as he does. Does it matter that in real life he was just one year younger than his stage mother? Dean's Alfonso is less than ideally

refulgent in tone and a bit woolly around the edges.

Bonyngé brings a straightforward sense of drama to his conducting, but the result is unlikely to persuade non-believers that Donizetti is the great musical dramatist others deem him to be.

GEORGE HALL

Béatrice et Bénédict, Berlioz

Sophie Karthäuser (*Héro*), Stéphanie d'Oustrac (*Béatrice*), Katarina Bradić (*Ursule*), Paul Appleby (*Bénédict*), Philippe Sly (*Claudio*), Frédéric Caton (*Don Pedro*), Lionel Lhote (*Somarone*), Georges Bigot (*Don Pedro*), Glyndebourne Chorus, London Philharmonic Orchestra, c. Antonello Manacorda, p. Laurent Pelly, d. Barbara de Limburg and Laurent Pelly, video director François Roussillon. Opus Arte DVD OA1239D/Blu-ray OABD7219D (118 minutes)

When unveiled at Glyndebourne last summer, Laurent Pelly's production of Berlioz's final opera inspired some slightly puzzled reactions. Here was a director with something of a reputation—at least from his work in the UK—for colourful, stylish stagings. His new Berlioz, though undoubtedly stylish, plumped for an array of greys: grey and white costumes, pale make-up and a set consisting almost entirely of grey boxes, out of which principals, chorus and props appeared unexpectedly and unpredictably.

It's a colour scheme that doesn't lend itself naturally to comedy, and, watched on the small screen unaided by the refreshments traditionally enjoyed at Glyndebourne, the humour can feel laboured. The fourth-wall-breaking escapades of Lionel Lhote as Somarone, the broadly caricatured music master, are a case in point, although you can hardly fault the commitment of those involved. The director also repeats his old joke—familiar from the various Duchesses de Crackentorp to, erm, grace his *Fille du régiment* at the Royal Opera—of interpolating the odd English or Franglais word into French dialogue.

The production does have the advantage, however, of allowing us to focus on the central plot, creating a concentrated, semi-abstract context in which it can unfurl without the

distractions that a load of period-costume froufrou might offer. And the great asset of the performance is its cast, which manages, with a good complement of French speakers, to keep the pace up through the dialogue as much as in the music, which is kept ticking along nicely by the conductor Antonello Manacorda.

The star is undoubtedly Stéphanie d'Oustrac as a wily, fiery Béatrice. The French mezzo, such a revelation as Glyndebourne's 2015 Carmen, has a distinctive, rich voice and holds the stage compellingly—for which, of course, the director should no doubt take some credit too. Paul Appleby's Bénédict feels as though he's already fighting a losing battle with such an outstanding adversary, but the American tenor sings stylishly with a clean, pleasing voice; he acts with an endearing twinkle in the eye. Sophie Karthäuser and Katarina Bradić offer an exquisite account of Héro and Ursule's Act 1 duet, during whose dreams of love Pelly does finally inject an appropriate warmth into his cool colour scheme.

There's excellent work from the London Philharmonic, even if others have brought a bit more anarchic fizz to this score than Manacorda does. This doesn't present the riot of colour some might want in this piece, but it's a welcome record of what's largely a stylish, smartly directed show.

HUGO SHIRLEY