



Sospiri
CECILIA BARTOLI

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SOSPIRI

CECILIA BARTOLI AND THE ALLURE OF A SIGH

Roger Pines

What accounts for the unique flame that blazes in Cecilia Bartoli whenever she performs? Her irrepressible vitality and the all-embracing quality of her presence are both, of course, inestimable assets. Even more crucial, however, are her passionate conviction and excitement regarding the music she performs. Sitting even in the highest balcony of a vast concert hall or opera house, every listener will have the distinct feeling that Bartoli and her voice are only a few feet away, so immediate and palpable is her vocal artistry.

Audiences tend to place singers in standard categories and judge them in relation to their predecessors as "the new Signor X" or "the new Mme Y". Occasionally, however, someone breaks the mould and, to paraphrase *Star Trek*, "boldly goes where no one has gone before". Cecilia Bartoli is that kind of performer. Early on, as a young Italian singer rapidly ascending to international prominence, she concluded that a great deal of the operatic, concert and recital repertoire expected of a mezzo-soprano would neither suit her vocally nor give full rein to her voracious musical curiosity. In painstakingly seeking out material that she can truly make her own, she has continually sought to fulfil all the possibilities of her voice and to invigorate her profound intellect, while at the same time renewing the enthusiasm of her multitudes of fans internationally.

Bartoli's reputation as a musical trailblazer has been repeatedly confirmed through marvellously thought-out programmes of unjustly neglected material. On disc and subsequently in live concerts, she has centred these programmes on specific composers (Vivaldi, Gluck, Salieri); particular singers (opera's illustrious castratos in *Sacrificium*, the nineteenth-century prima donna Maria Malibran in *Maria*); or a specific musical milieu (early eighteenth-century Rome in *Opera proibita*).

Each programme has spurred Bartoli's musical and historical curiosity into high gear. Several highly respected scholars have provided invaluable assistance, but in every case the conception and much of the research have been hers. For example, in planning *The Vivaldi Album* (1999) she spent hours at the National Library in Turin, poring over the composer's

manuscripts. This new anthology, *Sospiri*, includes one of the most extraordinary Vivaldi pieces she has brought to light: the title role's despairing monologue from *Farnace*, ennobled by Bartoli in possibly the most vocally luminous and emotionally shattering performance in her entire discography.

The above-mentioned programmes all include much virtuosic music, in keeping with the florid ability for which Bartoli is renowned. She has always excelled in projecting emotion, from boundless joy to fearsome wrath, through the breathtaking speed and precision of her coloratura. For this anthology, however, she has chosen to emphasise the intimate aspect of her art: the album's Italian title, *Sospiri*, means "sighs". That is no less demanding vocally and – as Bartoli has often reiterated in conversation – arguably more difficult in terms of musical expression. She brings astonishing control to this introspective, melancholy, nostalgic music, revelling in the spacious tempos and producing spine-tingling, often barely audible phrases. Bartoli also repeatedly stresses that this kind of singing requires a supreme technical ability in projecting the deep emotions that lie within such pieces.

Especially stunning is the miracle of expressive simplicity that is George Frideric Handel's "Lascia la spina, cogli la rosa" (more familiar in its subsequent reworking as "Lascia ch'io pianga" from the opera *Rinaldo*). This performance is taken from *Opera proibita* (2005), for which Bartoli turned to music premiered in Rome, her birthplace. At the height of the Baroque era, opera was viewed by the Vatican as immoral and consequently banned. It fascinated Bartoli that various opera-loving cardinals had written their own librettos for operatically oriented oratorios, performed for their own enjoyment to music commissioned from important musicians. Bartoli concentrated on Handel, Antonio Caldara and Alessandro Scarlatti, with her CD including no fewer than eight world premiere recordings.

In *Maria* (2007), Bartoli's only album celebrating a single artist, she pays eloquent homage to Maria Malibran, the greatest diva of the early nineteenth century. The music performed here was written for Malibran (even, in some cases, by her). Muse of many composers of early Romantic opera, Malibran was seemingly the Bartoli of her day – glamorous to behold, spectacularly charismatic and, above all, fabulously gifted vocally, musically and intellectually. *Sospiri* includes three pieces from the Malibran album that could hardly be more touchingly delivered than in Bartoli's performances: "Cari giorni" from Giuseppe Persiani's gloomily tragic opera *Ines de Castro*; "Casta diva", the priestess's prayer to the moon from Bellini's Druid opera *Norma*; and "Ah ritorna", the intimate middle section of Felix Mendelssohn's concert scene *Infelice*, where the mezzo's voice converses intimately with the violin of Maxim Vengerov. Her collaboration with the original-instrument ensemble La Scintilla does much to ensure the authenticity of style that is invariably this singer's top priority in any project she undertakes.

Sacrificium (2009) is an exploration of repertoire written for the castrato voice during the years when that (thankfully now extinct) vocal category reigned supreme. In the remarkable depth of the album's presentation, as well as in her performances, Bartoli illuminates this artistically exceptional but ethically and sociologically disturbing period of music history. Here again, many gems have been rediscovered – for example, Caldara's exquisitely plaintive "Quel buon pastor" and Geminiano Giacomelli's despairing "Sposa, non mi conosci". The latter aria approaches the status of a masterpiece in Bartoli's singing, at once vocally luminous and dramatically shattering.

In *Sospiri* little-known material is complemented by several tried-and-true items, to which Bartoli invariably brings a special freshness. Handel's immortal "Ombra mai fu" is here, as are several Mozart excerpts reminding listeners that Bartoli has triumphed on many occasions in the Mozart/Da Ponte operas. "Là ci darem la mano", the seduction duet from *Don Giovanni*, brings us a delectable souvenir of a 1999 album, *Cecilia Et Bryn*, pairing her with a cherished colleague, the Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel. We're reminded, too, of Bartoli's innate affinity for *bel canto* repertoire, as heard in the familiar but deeply affecting arias from Bellini's *La sonnambula* and *Norma* (whose formidable title-role Bartoli added to her repertoire in a 2010 concert in Germany). The "Cherry Duet" from *L'amico Fritz* – Bartoli's only recording of any work by *verismo* master Pietro Mascagni – is given a notably affectionate performance: gallantly partnered by Luciano Pavarotti's Fritz, the mezzo beautifully adapts her sound to the lyric-soprano role of Suzel.

Bartoli is less known as a performer of sacred music, which she sings with the utmost dedication. *Sospiri* includes excerpts from a series of sacred albums launched with *A Hymn for the World* (1997) and featuring Bartoli, Terfel and Andrea Bocelli. In these much-loved works of Bach, Mozart, Rossini, Duruflé, Franck and Fauré Bartoli again shows the magnetic vocal and interpretative powers that characterise all the pieces in this anthology. This music demonstrates how persuasively she can de-emphasise her voice's trademark Italian warmth in favour of a feather-light, sweetly angelic sound. In doing so, she makes each of these popular melodies an intensely moving experience.

Also included in this anthology are performances of two florid pieces – both released for the first time – which demonstrate that, more than two decades into her career, Bartoli is, if anything, more dazzling than ever in her vocal dexterity. Originally recorded for *Sacrificium*, Leonardo Vinci's exhilarating "Cervo in bosco" (a world premiere recording) is one of the most popular showpieces written for Farinelli, the most celebrated castrato of all. Like Maria Malibran before her, Bartoli is closely associated with the role of Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*, and it was for Maria that she recorded a "fresh" version of the Rossini

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heroine's delicious "Una voce poco fa". Even in this familiar piece there are major surprises: responding to the light, clear instrumental textures of *La Scintilla*, Bartoli offers entrancing ornamentation while giving her characterisation unexpected intimacy and wonderful spontaneity, almost as if she were improvising each phrase.

Sospiri presents singular evidence of Cecilia Bartoli's glorious qualities as singer, musician and stylist, but what seems most gratifying is her magnificent individuality. May she continue to blaze new trails, drawing her grateful audiences with her into one new adventure after another.

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