



**Danielle  
de Niese**  
handel  
arias

Les Arts Florissants  
William Christie



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Danielle de Niese creates electricity the moment she steps on stage. It's impossible to ignore her stunning face and figure, physical grace, and total assurance as an actress, but the excitement really ignites when Danielle sings: her shimmering lyric soprano projects an irresistible sparkle, a palpable joy in performing. Few artists today seem so grateful to share their love of music with their audience.

## Danielle de Niese Sharing the Joys of Handel

Roger Pines

Danielle's young career has already taken her to the Metropolitan Opera, New York, and many other leading opera houses, in both North America and Europe. She's sung a varied repertoire of leading roles, but it is above all with the heroines of Handel that she has made her name.

Foremost among them, Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare* has become a signature role, with performances in Amsterdam (role and European debuts combined) and Paris preceding a star-making triumph in David McVicar's award-winning production at Glyndebourne in 2005. Danielle has since reprised her Cleopatra at Glyndebourne in 2006 and at the Metropolitan Opera in 2007. Starring roles in *Rodelinda*, *Ariodante* and *Semele* have also enhanced her reputation as one of today's most accomplished Handelians.

Handel then is almost inevitably the hero of Danielle's Decca debut disc. In planning it, she explains, she wanted "to perform music that was beautiful to listen to, but also grounded in a theme: I picked a lot of *strong* heroines who sing the strongest melodic and dramatic music possible, while also looking for intelligent characters in some of the lesser-known Handel operas". Danielle finds that Handel nourishes the voice, enlightens singers about phrasing, and offers limitless outlets for truthful emotional communication.

Danielle aims to "flesh out not only a very personal, individual story in each character, but a *history*". Though she sees some similarities between Semele and Cleopatra, the first, she feels, is a woman "in a certain position in life but who dreams of much bigger things", while with Cleopatra "we see a queen, driven to protect her political status after her father's death. She knows exactly what she's doing. That's very different from Semele, who yearns to be a queen with all that power, but blindly goes forth without the *knowledge*. You can't help loving her, even though she spends ten minutes talking about herself while looking in the mirror!"

The unnerving intuitiveness of *Ariodante's* victimised Ginevra intrigues Danielle. She enjoyed a great success in this role when she first sang it for her debut at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: "It was that experience, as well as the advice of family and colleagues who had seen me in the role, that inspired me to add the aria to this album." In sharp contrast is a charming cantata aria sung by Daphne, mythology's most



captivating nymph: "My fascination with her started with William Walton's art song *Daphne*. It's taken from the Edith Sitwell poem, which I first studied and performed at age thirteen."

As for the four sorceresses, "they're not necessarily characters we relate to in real life, but it became clear to me in my musical research for this album that Handel had a soft spot for them. He paints Medea, Armida, Morgana and Melissa with such sympathy and humanity." Medea contributes immeasurable intensity to *Teseo*, one of Handel's lesser-known operas that attracts Danielle both musically and dramatically: "In including two of Medea's arias on the CD, I want to show how richly and diversely Handel drew this character, one of mythology's strongest and most complicated sorceresses. There is deep pain in her; regret, nostalgia for a time of innocence that is lost to her now — and that's all encompassed in the first two minutes of 'Dolce riposo'; The character's second aria, "Ira, sdegni, e furore", is described by Danielle as "a weird combination of pain, energy and love. I was totally exhilarated by it."

The recital gives full rein to Danielle's inventiveness as a musician — she generally writes most of her ornamentation herself. Of course, she wanted maximum musical interest throughout her programme. In that respect, "Ah, spietato" from Handel's lesser-known *Amadigi di Gaula* was an especially exciting discovery: "It's an absolutely gorgeous piece, and so heart-wrenching."

The disc also renewed Danielle's association with Les Arts Florissants and the French period-instrument ensemble's American-born director, William Christie, her colleague from *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne, as well as Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in Lyon and Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* in Paris. During the recording sessions, she recalls, "we talked about tempi, about colour. We rehearsed a lot, and the orchestra was fabulous. Bill has a dramatic instinct that is completely innate — it's his 'it' factor! — and an incredible ability to breathe with the singer. I adore his charisma and his general *happiness*. When I perform with him on the podium, I feel nothing but joy."

Above all, this recording marks the culmination of an odyssey that began in Danielle's birthplace, Australia. Once her parents recognised that her gifts deserved nurturing, there was piano study at age six, singing and dance lessons, and participation in singing contests, which Danielle regularly won. "My parents were so loving and supportive," she remembers. "That is what has been most fortunate in my life. They recognised that I loved to perform, to be open and to share. They enabled me to follow my dream by giving me every opportunity to learn and grow at my own pace."

Once her family resettled in Los Angeles, she thrived at the Colburn School of the Performing Arts. By the age of eleven she was studying music theory, analysis and counterpoint. She performed recitals "where I'd sing Mozart, Gounod, Haydn — I sang for the joy of it!" At thirteen she was the youngest person ever accepted into Tanglewood's programme for singers, and meanwhile her stage skills were developing rapidly.

Her dance instructors wanted her to concentrate on dancing, "but singing has always been my main focus, the thing I get the most joy out of. It's the ultimate way I can express myself." She performed in recitals during her high-school years, while also participating regularly in the Colburn School's "Musical Encounter" outreach programme, as well as in question-and-answer sessions that brought classical music to under-resourced inner-city schools in LA.

At fifteen Danielle sang her first leading role in opera (which was in fact her professional debut) in the world premiere of Lee Holdridge's *Journey to Cordoba* at Los Angeles Opera. As a freshman at New York's Mannes College of Music, she auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera. The youngest artist ever to be accepted into the company's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, she made her house debut as Barbarina in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, aged nineteen. During three years with the LYADP, Danielle observed and learnt from renowned performers. She remembers working at the piano with the Met's music director, James Levine, as being "one of the most treasured experiences of my life".

Despite the stardom she now enjoys, Danielle remains refreshingly stage-struck. During some recent time off, she heard some other artists performing and, she admits, "I was already getting the itch to be on stage again! I hope that never changes." She adores her profession, so "I tend not to complain about the price we have to pay. One of the costs is not seeing your loved ones as often as you'd like. Another is living out of a suitcase. It may be a nomadic existence but, because of my diverse upbringing, I feel a bit like a citizen of the world." She's comfortable working abroad for long periods; having determined to study three languages by the age of twenty-one, she now speaks fluent Italian and French — she's still working on her German!

In considering her future, Danielle first declares that "I want to be singing healthily ten years from now". She hopes to do more Mozart, Donizetti's Adina and Norina, "and I would die right now if I could sing Massenet's Manon". But, for the present, there are the joys of Handel, which Danielle hopes to share with a global audience. "I feel so strongly about every piece on this album. If the CD had two sides, I would have included more — there's so much music I want to share."

Roger Pines, dramaturg of Lyric Opera of Chicago, writes regularly for recordings, music magazines and opera companies. He has previously contributed essays to Decca discs by Renée Fleming and Nicole Cabell.