RECORDING OF THE MONTH

BBC MUSIC CHOICE

FIERY TRIO: Karina Gauvin (left), Max Emmanuel Cencic (centre), Julia Lezhneva (right)

A dazzling Handel rarity

Alessandro is packed with showstopping musical numbers, finds **Paul Riley**

HANDEL
Alessandro
Max Emanuel Cencic (countertenor), Julia Lezhneva (soprano), Karina Gauvin (soprano), Xavier Sabata (contralto), Juan Sancho (tenor), In-Sung Sim (soprano), Vasily Khoroshev (countertenor), Armonia Atenea; The City of Athens Choir/George Petrou. *Decca 478 6499 (190 06 mins (3 discs)*
BBC Music Direct *£29.99*

Caution. These discs should come with an asbestos slipcase, so incendiary is the performance they convey. And they force you to question why *Alessandro* is not as familiar a mainstay of the Handelian stage as, say, *Ariodante*, *Alcina* or *Giulio Cesare*. Given a score of such richness, variety and passion, it's puzzling too that there have been only three recordings in as many decades, the first conducted by Sigiswald Kuijken in the 1980s, with a certain René Jacobs in the title role.

Each of the three leads is outstanding at times stupendous

Faced with the opportunity to unite the fiery Italian divas Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni alongside the equally crowd-pulling castrato Senesino, Handel was firing on all cylinders for this 1726 operatic take on Alexander the Great, his provocative claims to be the son of Jove, and his conquests in India (sin and all the battlefield). Showstopper follows showstopper in a dazzling array calculated to exploit the phenomenal talents so obligingly to hand.

Indeed, the opera's been regularly plundered whenever the heroines of Cuzzoni and Bordoni have pondered heavy compilation albums. Decca however has gone to Greece and done the piece proud. Each of the three leads is outstanding, at times stupendous. But for all the star quality, the performance remains a supremely ensemble effort, singers and instrumentalists striking sparks off each other under the energized and energising musical direction of George Petrou. In the title role countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic is imperious but bloodcurdling, personified (the sheer spleen at the line 'Io mi offendo' – 'If I'm offended' – leaves no doubt that the 'if' is superfluous, and the aria 'Vano amore' is an commanding as its athleticism is secured). Julia Lezhneva (Rossane) negotiates Act III's 'Bella nell'alma' with intoxicating *joie de vivre*. And perhaps best of all is Karina Gauvin's utterly disarming Lisaura, her coloratura dazzling, her bright soprano full of personality. Act I's 'Quanto dolce amor' utterly ravishes while the surging virtuosity of 'No, più soffrir non voglio' is surfed with jaw-dropping aplomb. Just as thrilling is the visceral playing – on period instruments – of Armonia Atenea. Pert and incisive, the overture crackles with energy and no holds are barred as the wall of Ovidiaca spectacularly succumbs to Alexander's mighty battering ram. Virgil gut it so wrong: never beware Greeks bearing gifts as manificeant and cat-opening as this! A revelation.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

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Q&A

GEORGE PETROU

REBECCA FRANKS *talks to the Greek conductor about bringing Handel's Alessandro back into the spotlight*

Why do you think *Alessandro* has been so slow to catch on?
I guess the most important reason is that this is a real *tour de force* for the three protagonists, Alessandro, Lisaura, and Rossane, as it was composed for three of the greatest singers of Handel's time. The demands are so complicated and almost superhuman, so finding singers to deal with these roles is difficult. But the soloists we have – countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic, soprano Karina Gauvin and mezzo Julia Lezhneva – are fantastic, and so technically proficient and profoundly musical. I think we have the best.

It's a long opera, and your recording flizes with energy. How do you keep up that level of intensity?
It's something I've given over the years. Certainly the orchestra's motivation meant that they play in the recording as they play live: they don't lose that energy. They give everything, which I want to thank them for. There were three good takes. In fact sometimes it was really difficult to choose which was best. And in the recitatives, during which I improvise a lot with the continuo group, there's a lot of creativity, changing moods and colours. We don't just accompany a text to follow the action, but to underline it. So then there's also an issue about which takes to choose, because each is really different. There were different improvisations and even different combinations of instruments.

And how did you work on ornamentation and embellishment?
The singers mainly worked with me on this. I tried to avoid the idea of rewriting the line, but tried to use ornaments that could have been improvised. It's a free improvisation on the written texts. We let ourselves be a little more adventurous with the cadenzas. But I think the effort to make it sound exactly like Handel did is really not worth it. We are children of our age, used to much louder music, faster speeds and electronic sounds; we have Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Bartók in our ears. We need the knowledge of historical performance practices, but we have to create our own music for the 21st century.

Photo: Decca

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l'événement

Au soleil d'Alessandro

Premier opéra que Handel destina aux *« rival queens »* Cuzzoni et Faustina, Alessandro n'attendait donc, pour triompher, qu'un chef et... des voix !

Après avoir donné au King's Theatre de Londres trois chefs-d'œuvre consécutifs (*Giulio Cesare*, *Tamerlano*, *Rodelinda* de janvier 1724 à février 1725 !), Handel cherche une idée. Ce sera une voix. Trois saisons durant, la Royal Academy of Music ne comptera donc plus une seule prima donna mais deux, que le compositeur devra servir à parts égales. Le premier des cinq titres ainsi élaborés est aussi le plus spectaculaire, les personnages y confondant jusqu'au délire la scène et la ville. Un contrat qui se croit le centre de l'univers (Senesino, premier Alessandro) rangue deux sopranos, celle qui vient de partager ses triomphes (Cuzzoni, Ister Cleopatra, aujourd'hui la princesse scythe Lisaura) et la jeune recrue (Faustina, future Madame Hasse, ici la princesse persane Rossane) : où est le théâtre, où est la vie ?

UNE FÉERIE VOCALE

Avant même de voir le spectacle (Athènes et Versailles au printemps prochain), il paraît évident que Max Emanuel Cencic, initiateur et vedette de l'opération, a saisi l'enjeu : mélanomphorer une joute banale en féerie vocale. Lounange du capitaine Clément à Alexandre le Grand : « Fils de Jupiter, monarque suhumain, invincible, augustre, inaccessible, pieux, divin... » : peut-on mieux incarner le hubris démoclient et fat que Max Emanuel Cencic ? Les doubles-croches (de « *Risolvo abandonar* » notamment) vous coupe-rone le souffle, par le sien. De ses deux conquêtes, Alexandre observe que « l'une est barbare, l'autre exclave ». Voilà comme une diva doit se tenir : enchaînée aux notes mais la rage au ventre. Ainsi font Karina Gauvin, asset suvvoge pour les cabrioles de « *No, più soffrir non voglio* », assez fine pour la sicilienne « *Che insania d'Amor* », et Julia Lezhneva, oiseau de paradis (« *Alla sua gabbia d'oro* ») d'une maîtrise stupéfiante dans la colorature comme dans le phrasé (« *Bella nell'alma* »). Jusqu'au furtif Cleone, les comparses ne sont pas moins bien traités. Et comme, depuis le panticcio Orcan, le jeune chef grec George Petrou occupe une place centrale dans la galaxie hardellienne, notre cœur ne balance plus. Regrettonons-nous ici ou là un rien d'affectation (« *Vano amore* »), quelques allegros cravachés à l'identique, un italien variable et de menus accrocs dans le montage ? Assurément non. Malgré le charme du pionnier Kuijken (avec le trio Jacobs-Boulin-Poulenard, DHM 1994), malgré le récitatif (hybride) de Michael Fiers (cf. page 94), non seulement ce coup de soleil qu'est *Alessandro* n'a jamais pris ni halé, mais l'opéra hardélien espérait un tel hommage depuis... depuis trop longtemps.

Jean A. Alessandro

DIAPASON | 83

George Frideric Handel
9.65 059
Alessandro.
Max Emanuel Cencic (Alessandro), Julia Lezhneva (Rossane), Karina Gauvin (Lisaura), Xavier Sabata (Tassile), Juan Sancho (Leonato), In-Sung Sim (Clito), Vasily Khorushev (Cleone), Armonia Atenea; George Petrou. Decca 478 6499 (3 CD) ⏱ 2 01. 11 : 3 h 10'.
Technique : 2/5
Enregistré par Ulrich Vette et Hans Ulrich Hoitz au Dresden Philharmonie Hall d'Athènes. La prise de son manque un peu de lisupidin de rondeur. De la profondeur mais pas beaucoup d'éloignement des plans. Image de chanter superposée à celle de l'orchestre.

Plage 3 de notre CD

Max Emanuel Cencic, maître d'œuvre de deux parutions lyriques d'importance : le *moto-cl* d'Arianne de Vinci chez Virgin (cf page 102), et cet *Alessandro* pour Decca.

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Rezensionen > Dezember 2012 > Koloraturen seidenweich

Koloraturen seidenweich

Wenn man die fantastische junge russische Sopranistin Julia Lezhneva mit der Arie der Rossane „Brilla nell'alma" hört, dann glaubt man sogleich, dass der Sopranistinnen-Wettkampf, den Händel bei der Uraufführung seiner Oper „Alessandro" 1726 in London veranstaltete, die Opernenthusiasten in Verzückung brachte. Faustina Bordoni trat als Rossane gegen die legendäre Francesca Cuzzoni an in der Rolle der Lisaura. Beide buhlen in dem Stück um die Gunst Alexanders des Großen. In „Brilla nell'alma" schöpft Rossane erneut Hoffnung, und Julia Lezhneva tut dies mit einem seidenweichen Koloraturen-Feuerwerk, fein zurückhaltenden Spitzentönen, angedeuteten Portamenti in einem unglaublichen Tempo. Sie ist Star der Aufnahme. Das ist fast ungerecht gegenüber Karina Gauvin, die die Lisaura verkörpert, die ihre etwas dunklere Stimme mit fast ebenso viel Farbigkeit aufblühen lässt. Die dritte Hauptrolle gehört natürlich Alessandro. In dieser Spitzenproduktion wächst Max Emanuel Cencic über sich hinaus; selten hat man ihn so koloraturensicher, so warm tönend (wie ein echter Mezzosopran) erlebt, z. B. in der Arie „Vano amore". Auch die anderen Rollen sind so besetzt, dass man von neuer Referenzaufnahme sprechen kann. Das griechische Ensemble Armonia Atenea, der Ableger für historische Aufführungspraxis der Athener Camerata, und der Dirigent George Petrou, der bisher Händel-Opern bei Dabringhaus und Grimm aufgenommen hat, sind ein Gespann, das die Sängerpflanden intelligent kommentiert und die Vokalakrobaten zugleich weich bettet. Petrou lässt diese Oper mit ihren zahllosen schönen und schönsten Nummern nie aufdringlich, aber immer in einer praesenten und durchsichtigen Klangklichkeit fließen. Dazu kommen eine kluge Tempowahl und die Kunst, die Motive auch im Ensemblieverband affektgenau, man könnte auch sagen emotional, zu artikulieren. Live ist diese Produktion bei den Händel-Festspielen Halle 2013 zu erleben.

Richard Lorber

NEW
Max Emanuel Cencic sumpte parmi les centre-ténors les plus talentueux de sa génération.

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Händel, Alessandro: Max Emanuel Cencic, Julia Lezhneva, Karina Gauvin, Armonia Atenea, George Petrou (2011): Decca/Universal 3 CD 0289478 6499 4 (197 ')

LES CHOCS DU MOIS

Un grand « Alessandro »

LE CONTRE-TÉNOR MAX EMANUEL CENCIC, AVEC L'AIDE D'UN ÉTONNANT JEUNE CHEF, GEORGE PETROU, NOUS LIVRE LA VERSION DE RÉFÉRENCE DE L'« ALESSANDRO » DE HAENDEL.

Max Emanuel Cencic sumpte parmi les centre-ténors les plus talentueux de sa génération.

Georg Friedrich Haendel (1685-1759)
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Decca 4 22 478 6499 (universal), 2215. 3 h 10'
Nouveauté ★★★★★
Prise de son très réussie, belle et chaleureuse

En l'espace de deux mois, l'*Alessandro* de Haendel connaît donc deux nouvelles réalisations discographiques. La présente version dépasse notre espérance en réunissant les qualités vocales de la distribution Kuijken (1984), auxquelles s'ajoute l'urgence dramatique propre au live paru il y a peu chez Pan Classics. Il faut pourtant faire preuve d'une insigne bonne volonté pour s'intéresser à l'intrigue du libretto Paolo Antonio Rolli : Lisaura et Rotane se disputent trois heures durant l'amour d'Alexandre, lequel finit par se prononcer en faveur de cette dernière. Récitatifs-airs structurent cette équation à trois conçue pour mettre en valeur la joute vocale des deux sopranos stars du moment : Faustina Bordoni et Francesca Cuzzoni. À quoi tient l'incandescence de ce nouvel *Alessandro* ? George Petrou, malgré son jeune âge, fait partie des ces grands chefs d'opéra à même de faire oublier les faiblesses dramatiques d'un livret par une direction d'une perpétuelle inventivité. Accusant les contrastes de tempos, il alterne les accents rageurs (la sinfonia de l'acte : soulève la tempête) ou langoureux (le « *Che insania d'Amor* » à l'acte II), quand il ne met pas en valeur le tracé subtil de l'accompagnement (l'aria « *Mon fidèle* » d'Alexandre). Il ne manquait plus que de grandes voix ; nous les avons. Max Emanuel Cencic a la bravoure, le panache nécessaire au difficile rôle titre grâce à sa projection ample. Julia Lezhneva enchaîne les vocalises stupéfiantes (l'aria « *Alla sua gabbia d'oro* » qui imite l'oiseau chanteur semble tailler sur mesure pour elle). La Lisaura crémeuse de Karina Gauvin, peut-être en raison d'un chant trop soigné (sent-on vraiment la jalousie poindre ?), doit beaucoup au soutien instrumental de l'Armonia Atenea dans la caractérisation des atmosphères. Devant une si éclatante réussite, on a plus que jamais les yeux – et les oreilles ? – tournés vers la Grèce pour de futures réalisations haendéliennes susceptibles d'égaler ce qu'on peut considérer comme la référence moderne d'*Alessandro*. ★

Jérémie Bigorie

Le choix de Radio Classique
radio classique
Georg Friedrich Haendel
Alessandro
Max Emanuel Cencic, Julia Lezhneva, Karina Gauvin, Armonia Atenea, dir. George Petrou
3 CD Decca 478 6499 (Universal) *Classica n° 148*
Cette année a été faite pour le contre-ténor Max Emanuel Cencic. Après avoir brillé dans l'*Arianne* de Leonardo Vinci aux côtés, notamment, de Philippe Jaroussky, il endosse le rôle d'Alexandre le Grand vu par Haendel. Et il le fait avec la bravoure et le panache d'un conquérant. Julia Lezhneva, elle, enchaîne les vocalises stupéfiantes. Quant au jeune chef grec George Petrou, il est dans la cour des grands, constamment inventif, alternant les accents rageurs ou langoureux. La Grèce deviendrait-elle terre d'élection haendélienne ?

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CLASSICA, 1 APRIL 2011

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OPERA NEWS, 15_05_2013

Elegant, Beautifully Performed Handel

Review by: Robert Levine

*Artistic Quality: **10***
*Sound Quality: **10***

Handel's Alessandro is practically a comic opera despite having as its hero the not-particularly-amusing Alexander the Great. Rather than focusing on his warrior image, the plot centers on two women who love him and vie for his affection; he manages to keep them both enchanted until he chooses one at the opera's close. Its premiere in 1726 in London was meant not only to showcase the greatest castrato of his time, Senesino, who sang the title role, but also to bring together both a London favorite, soprano Francesca Cuzzoni, who sang Lisaura, and newcomer Faustina Bordoni (a mezzo-soprano) as the rival lover Rosanne. The women already had built up a heady rivalry in Italy a few years before, and box office was hoping for sparks. It worked brilliantly: there were 13 performances (and would have been more had Senesino not been taken ill), and the rivalry between the women continued.

Cuzzoni was a magnificent singer and apparently an enormously petulant, arrogant woman—Handel once threatened to throw her out of a window—but Bordoni was known for her sweet temperament. Nonetheless, during a performance of Bonincini's Astianatte in 1727, the two women resorted to punching one another and pulling each other's hair—or so it was reported. Ah, for the good old days.

And so the opera needs three great singers to make it work: Alessandro himself has eight arias and the two women have about an equal number of arias, plus a duet (and at one point one repeats the other's words and notes in recitative). The 36-year-old Croatian countertenor Max Emanuel Cencic sings the title role with absolute security, a good-sized voice of a fine color, and the ability to portray Alessandro's whimsy, uncertainty, and even warrior-like sides—and, I might add, with endless breath and not an aspirate within earshot.

Young mezzo (bordering on soprano—see my review of her debut recital) Julia Lezhneva, who sings Rosanne (the one Alessandro eventually chooses as his bride), can take your breath away: the voice is lovely, with a trill on any and every note, and the registers are even. Her introspective second-act aria "Aura, fonti…", sung in a garden, has a wistfulness to it that is glorious, and it isn't just her beautiful tone and fine technique. Lezhneva uses downward portamento with such smoothness and feeling that we're thoroughly seduced. Moments later she lets loose with fireworks in "Alla sua gabbia…"—but again, with incredible grace and taste.

No less fine is the more sensuous, grander-sounding Karina Gauvin as Lisaura, as impressive in fast music as in the lament "Che tirannia d'amor", a meltingly lovely aria. As Tassile, an Indian King who is politically aligned with Alessandro but is in love with Lisaura, countertenor Xavier Sabata has a warmly opaque sound and an expressive way with the text. Two conspirators, Leonato and Cleone, are sung well by tenor Juan Sancho and countertenor Vasily Khoroshev, the latter being particularly aggressive with his top register. Bass In-Sung Sim as Clito, a Macedonian captain, impresses with his authority.

George Petrou leading the 30-member-plus period-instrument group Armonia Atenea and The City of Athens Choir has a marvelous sense of the work's pace; he knows his singers and plays to their strengths. Accompaniments tend to be nicely delicate in reflective numbers without ever being sappy, and the outbursts have real energy. The opera itself may lack something in dramatic weight—there seems little at stake, nobody goes crazy or plots murder—but it's still super Handel.

Keen ears will note a similarity between the orchestral intro to Rosanne's first-act "Un lusinghiero…" and the more wild, aggressive "Tornami a vagheggiar" from Alcina of nine years later; indeed, Lezhneva adds a brief cadenza near its close that might have been taken from the later aria. The only other performance of this opera currently available is led by Sigiswald Kuijken and it can't compare with this one: As fine as René Jacobs is as a conductor, his days as a countertenor (he sings the title role) were not as impressive as Cencic's currently are, and I suspect that this new Decca set will not be bettered for some time.

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Recording Details:

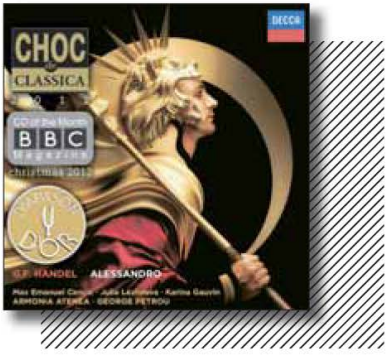
Reference Recording: This one

HANDEL, G.F.:
Alessandro

Cencic, Max Emanuel (countertenor)
Gauvin, Karina (soprano)
Lezhneva, Julia (soprano)
Petrou, George (conductor)
Armonia Atenea

OPERA

Trilli, virtuosismi del barocco



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