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### **Handel's "Acis und Galatea" arr. by Felix Mendelssohn, conducted by Nicholas McGegan with Festspiel Orchester and NDR Chor on Kultur CD**

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by Sam Juliano

Felix Mendelssohn was only 19 years old when he revised Mozart's arrangement of a greatly undervalued early masterwork by Georg Friedrich Handel, titled *Acis und Galatea*, which predated by a number of years his landmark revival of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, considered by many to be the greatest composition in the history of Western music. *Acis* was actually the only Handel opera to enjoy popularity at the time of his death, and modern musicologists can rightly point to its felicity of melody and a plethora of electrifying arias and choral pieces that make it at least the equal of *Israel in Egypt*, with which it shares some stylistic similarities

and length. The Mendelssohn revision was not found until 2005 by a music historian, and it is widely believed that the last time the score was heard was back in 1869, before vanishing.

There seems to be little doubt that two "anniversaries" fueled the decision to release this attractively-packaged single CD set by NDR Kultur, a German-based classical label. Firstly, 2009 marks the 250th anniversary of Handel's death in his 74th year, and the 200th of Mendelssohn's birth. The CD release marks the first time the Mendelssohn transcription has appeared on disc, and with the glorious complicity of Maestro Nicholas McGegan, whose brisk and vibrant tempo seems flawless, the release is essential for lovers of Handel, opera or choral music. The CD has terrific sound for a live recording. (It was recorded at the Handel Festival in Göttingen, shortly after the score was "discovered.")

Mendelssohn's contribution to Mozart's classical instrumentation includes the addition of drums, trumpets and flutes. The famed child prodigy was also a noted editor, as he paired down some longer passages and one entire number to hold the running time to about 72 minutes, extremely short for an opera.

Two of the opera's most beautiful arias were deftly executed by young American tenor Michael Slattery, (Damon) whose "Sieh, toricher Schafer" (track 21) and "Liebe kannst du nur gewinnen" (track 18) exhibit an ethereal beauty, and a sense of urgency. One of the world's foremost lyrical tenors, German Christoph Pregardien gives the vigorous Acis a truly inspired reading, while soprano Julia Kleiter is ravishing of voice. The bass Wolf Matthias Friedrich as Polyphemus gives a full-bodied performance as well, but the choral ensemble (the NDR Chor) deliver some of the work's most haunting passages. One example is the "Coro: Weint all ihr Musen" (track 25) which surely must rank among Handel's most gorgeous compositions. But there are several others here that are astonishing in harmonic perfection.

The singular performing star is conductor McGegan, who last month guided the New York Philharmonic in an all-Handel review with an infectious enthusiasm that seemed to motivate every musician in Avery Fisher Hall. McGegan is a bundle of energy and theatrical style, and he really seems to drive his orchestra and chorus to heights of artistic accomplishment with this engaging (and often moving) performance. Miraculously it's been captured with remarkable technical acumen by NDR/Kultur.



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