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<h1>ARIODANTE</h1>		
   		
(1995) 202 min. HMU 907146.48 		July 21, 2009 <i>Sponsorship Available</i>
by S. James Wegg		

Excellence at every turn

One of the most difficult art forms to produce is opera. Rarely do schedules, budgets, temperaments and skill sets combine into the perfect storm of excellent realization.

How lucky the audiences were that attended the 1995 Göttingen Handel Festival to hear and see the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson at the height of her powers, performing the title role of Ariodante. Fortunately, Harmonia Mundi had the presence of mind to hold the conductor, cast and orchestra over for a few more days and record Handel's tale of love, deceit, duty and faith. The three-disc result is a miracle of art that must be part of any serious music lover's collection. Having the text in four languages, conveniently laid out in the accompanying booklet (which also features an extensive essay by Mark W. Stahura, synopsis by Frederick Hammond), several production photos as well as five alternative versions of the usually-performed numbers add even more value.

The famed mezzo-soprano's impeccable phrasing/breath control "Con l'ali di costanza," change of register and melismatic artistry as well as stellar dynamic range and dramatic delivery ("Cieca note") set a standard of quality that inspires her talented colleagues to reach as high as they dare. Playing the role of Ginevra (Ariodante's intended—gender-bending in the theatre is not the exclusive domain of men donning wigs and frocks), Juliana Gondek's flexible soprano is a constant pleasure whether contemplating imminent death ("Da dubbia infausta sorte") or blending easily in the duet of love, constancy and faith ("Bramo aver mille vite") where the reunited couple weave the abundant triplets of musical garlands into an unbounded expression of joy—perfectly and metaphorically reinforced at the unisons.



As the villain, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Lane crafts a convincing characterization of Polinesso. Only an occasional nasal twinge mars the tonal production (“Coperta la frode”); “Se l’inganno sortisce” is wonderfully fluid and notable for the discrete use of ornamentation; the ambitious suitor’s “Dover, giustizia, amor” is a marvel of secure, confident treachery and music making. Indeed, a hallmark of this recording is the cast’s collective willingness to convey the dramatic sentiment as well as vocal excellence: little “stand, sing and deliver” here.

In the supporting roles, once bass Nicolas Cavallier finds focus for the lower register (“Voli colla sua tromba”) his King is a model of nobility. Tenor Rufus Müller demonstrates his impressive dynamic range (not afraid to pull back near “niente” to underscore the text: “Del mio sol vezzosi rai”) and marvellously sustained legato lines (“Tu vivi, e punito”). As Odoardo, tenor Jörn Lindemann utilizes his appealing timbre and pacing sense to keep the action moving steadily forward during the recitatives. Soprano Lisa Saffer brings the naive Dalinda to engaging life with her assured, easy-flowing tone (“Il primo ardour”) and excellent ensemble skills in the duet with Lurcanio (“Dite spera, e son content”).

None of the splendid results above would have been possible without conductor Nicholas McGegan and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. In nearly every track (“Neghittosi or voi” almost slips the leash as the betrayed Dalinda begs the heavens for revenge), the tempi are ideal, favouring both the singers and the composer. The wide variety of rhythmic devices, ornaments and orchestration are laid out masterfully and with the compelling sense that McGegan most certainly understands the harmonic implications and sees the opera as a complete work rather than a collection of pieces (much easier said than done: see “temperaments” above). The musicians exude a most welcome sense of collaboration in every bar. Particularly noteworthy are the oboes (Katharina Arfken, Alyson Gangler), McGegan and Bernward Lohr’s inventive—never intrusive—harpsichord and the extra bits of theorbo colour from Björn Colell.

Add to all of that the sympathetic/strategic microphone placement and mix from the recording team and the ever-so elusive goal of achieving artistic perfection comes tantalizingly close to the ear. **JWR**

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Conductor - Nicholas McGegan

Cast - Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Juliana Gondek, Lisa Saffer, Jennifer Lane, Nicolas Cavallier, Rufus Müller, Jörn Lindemann

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