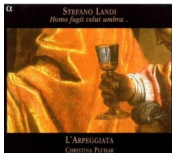


Stefano Landi - Homo Fugit Velut Umbra

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 09 February 2012 09:55 -

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1. *Homo fugit velut umbra (Passacaglia della Vita)* 2. *Augellin* 3. *Sinfonia* 4. *Invan lusinghi*
5. *Altri ancor fugga* 6. *Canzona detta La Pozza* 7. *T'amai gran tempo* 8. *A che più l'arco tendere*
9. *Alla guerra d'amor* 10. *Balletto delle Virtu* 11. *Canta la cicaleta* 12. *Dirindin* 13. *Quando Rinaldo*
14. *Quest'Acqua* 15. *Amarilli, deh! vieni* L'Arpeggiata: Johannette Zomer (soprano), Stephan Van Dyck (tenor), Alain Buet (bass), Marco Beasley (tenor), Christina Pluhar (direction, harp, theorbo, guitar), Eero Palviainen (archlute, guitar), Charles Edouard Fantin (theorbo, lute, guitar), Elisabeth Seitz (psalterion), Paulina Van Laarhoven (lirone, violone), Lorenzo Colitto, Mira Glodeanu (violins), William Dongois (cornet), Michèle Claude (percussions). Christina Pluhar – conductor

So who was Stefano Landi? Well, it depends what you read. To the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians he is 'One of the most important figures in the early history of opera and a leading Roman composer of his day'. But this recording focuses on another, less public side of Landi's art, the more personal books of arias (*Libri di Arie*). It looks into Landi's 'double life, the reverse side of life at court and its struggle for recognition...so we can discover in Stefano Landi's *Libri di Arie* pieces that on closer inspection lead the way into a universe all his own. These arias and villanellas, composed by a singer and continuo player, a rhetorician and philosopher, who accompanied his own songs on the harp or the Spanish guitar, constitute a miniature art form of concentrated perfection'.

This might sound like special pleading for a minor figure in Italian musical history, but I defy you not to warm to their cause as you listen to this enchanting cd.

The liner notes establish a useful human context for Landi's music: Landi was an alto in the papal choir, job-sharing with Grigorio Allegri, and one of the many musical employees of the wealthy and influential Barberini family. This meant he was surrounded by some of the finest

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artistic talent in Italy all gathered in the Barberini's unheated servants' quarters, all competing for the recognition, attention and exposure that would guarantee them a future.

This musical world behind the notes is the hidden universe of the shadows that gives the disc its title: Homo fugit velut umbra - man flees like a shadow - taken from the anonymous title track. After you've heard it, you're hooked; the performers breathe new life into Landi's musical world, with voices that seem to understand every nuance of the things about which they sing. The instrumental accompaniment is improvisatory, earthy and ingenious: lute, theorbo, guitar and harp continuo, plus up to a trio of violins, viola da gamba, a cornet and a gentle sprinkling of percussion.

There's imitative entertainment: Augellin (the little songbird) and Canta la cicaleta (the little cicada sings); opera-in-miniature (Quando Rinaldo invitto Armida abbandono); and songs of love disappointed, tortured and betrayed. This is punctuated with instrumental numbers that heighten the beauty of the singing around them. It all feels natural and unforced, yet this is truly sophisticated entertainment.

Style triumphs over content in a couple of ways: the cd is so keen on establishing context for the music it forgets to tell us which singers are which. There's such beautiful work from the tenors, Marco Beasley and Stephan van Dyck, it's almost insulting not to attribute the voices to the songs. Also, Landi's arie are taken from a number of sources, and we are not told which works are from where.

That apart, congratulations to Christina Pluhar, her singers and L'Arpeggiata, for illuminating the life of a little-known Italian master in such a beautifully rewarding way. The Paris-based label Alpha is a relative newcomer, but this joined-up contextual approach seems to be one of their main goals, as well as using interesting but not necessarily well-established artists and ensembles. I'll be keeping an eye on any future releases of theirs that come my way; this is one of the most pleasurable early music releases I've heard in an age. --- John Armstrong, bbc.co.uk

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