

Handel – Theodora HWV 68 (Christie)

Written by bluesever

Sunday, 10 March 2013 17:27 -

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Disc: 1 1. Overture 2. Trio 3. Courante 4. Recitative: Tis Diocletian's Natal Day (Valens) 5. Air Go: My Faithful Soldier, Go 6. Chorus: And Draw A Blessing Down (Heathens) 7. Recitative: Vouchsafe, Dread Sir, A Gracious Ear (Didymus, Valens) 8. Air: Racks, Gibbets, Sword And Fire 9. Chorus: For Ever Thus Stands Fixed The Doom 10. Recitative: Most Cruel Edict! 11. Air: The Rapture'd Soul Defies The Sword 12. Recitative: I Know Thy Virtues 13. Air: Descend, Kind Pity, Heav'nly Guest 14. Recitative: Tho' Hard, My Friends 15. Air: Fond, Flatt'ring World, Adieu 16. Recitative: O Bright Example Of All Goodness 17. Air: Bane Of Virtue 18. Chorus: Come, Mighty Father 19. Recitative: Fly, Fly, My Brethren 20. Air: As With Rosy Steps The Morn 21. Chorus: All Pow'r In Heav'n Above 22. Recitative: Mistaken Wretches! 23. Air: Dread The Fruits Of Christian Folly 24. Recitative: Deluded Mortal! 25. Accompagnato: O Worse Than Death Indeed! 26. Air: Angels, Ever Bright And Fair 27. Recitative: Unhappy, Happy, Crew! 28. Air: Kind Heav'n, If Virtue Be Thy Care 29. Recitative: O Love, How Great Thy Pow'r 30. Chorus: Go, Gen'rous, Pious Youth

Disc: 2 1. Recitative: Ye Men Of Antioch 2. Chorus: Queen Of Summer, Queen Of Love 3. Air: Wide Spread His Name 4. Recitative: Return, Septimius 5. Chorus: Venus, Laughing From The Skies 6. Symphony 7. Recitative: O Thou Bright Sun! 8. Air: With Darkness Deep As Is My Woe 9. Symphony 10. Recitative: But Why Art Thou Disquieted, My Soul? 11. Air: Oh, That I On Wings Could Rise 12. Recitative: Long Have I Known 13. Air: Tho' The Honours That Flora And Venus Receive 14. Recitative: O Save Her Then 15. Air: Deeds Of Kindness To Display 16. Recitative: The Clouds Begin To Veil The Hemisphere 17. Air: Defend Her, Heav'n 18. Recitative: Or Lulled With Grief 19. Air: Sweet Rose And Lily, Flow'ry Form 20. Recitative: O Save Me, Heav'n 21. Air: The Pilgrim's Home, The Sick Man's Health 22. Accompagnato: Forbid It, Heav'n 23. Recitative: Or Say, What Right Have I 24. Duet: To Thee, Thou Glorious Son Of Worth 25. Recitative: 'Tis Night, But Night's Sweet Blessing 26. Chorus: He Saw The Lovely Youth

Disc: 3 1. Air: Lord, To Thee, Each Night And Day 2. Recitative: But See The Good, The Virtuous Didymus! 3. Air: When Sunk In Anguish And Despair 4. Chorus: Blest Be The Hand 5. Recitative: Undaunted In The Court 6. Accompagnato: O My Irene, Heav'n Is Kind 7. Duet: Whither, Princess, Do You Fly 8. Recitative: She's Gone, Disdaining Liberty And Life 9. Air: New Scenes Of Joy Come Crowding On 10. Recitative: Is It A Christian Virtue, Then 11. Recitative: Be That My Doom 12. Air: From Virtue Springs Each Gen'rous Deed 13. Air: Cease, Ye Slaves, Your Fruitless Pray'r 14. Chorus: How Strange Their Ends 15. Recitative: On Me Your Frowns 16. Recitative: And Must Such Beauty Suffer! 17. Air: Streams Of

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Pleasure Ever Flowing 18. *Recitative: Ere This Their Doom Is Past* 19. *Chorus: O Love Divine, Thou Source Of Fame*

Richard Croft (Tenor), Daniel Taylor (Countertenor), Nathan Berg (Baritone), Laurent Slaars (Baritone), Juliette Galstian (Mezzo Soprano), Sophie Daneman (Soprano) Les Arts Florissants William Christie - director

Theodora is an oratorio and not an opera. It is a pious piece, with an unambiguously Christian subject matter. It first appeared in 1750 at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden where it was a flop; indeed, it was only performed four times during Handel's lifetime. The librettist, Thoms Morell, quoted Handel: "The Jews will not come to it because it is a Christian story; and the ladies will not come because it is a virtuous one." Perhaps.

The story of the martyrdom of a Christian virgin and a Roman soldier is inherently dramatic, and in 1996 Glyndebourne presented it as an opera from which these CDs are taken (a video has been available for a few years). Director Peter Sellars updated the work to the present and centered it emotionally on the concept of peaceful resistance to a dictatorial, oppression-filled society: in this case, the United States. Valens, the brutal Roman president, is a radical US president, and Sellars has the chorus roar with approval at his ridiculous, prejudiced decrees. This recording therefore contains sounds that are not the opera itself—not just audience approval, but stage actions galore. This should not dissuade you from owning these CDs; this performance is ravishing.

The sheer number of superb arias is remarkable. They begin with Septimius' lovely "Descend, kind pity", which defines him as a sympathetic Roman; Theodora's "Fond, flattering world, adieu" is simplicity itself; Irene's "As with rosy steps the morn" is one of the most beautiful arias ever penned by anyone. The second part is a string of characterful, unique arias: Valens' vicious pronouncements (Sellars portrays him as a drunk in this scene); "With darkness deep", another moment of glorious stillness from Theodora; Septimius' exciting "Tho' the honours that Flora"; Didymus' stunning "Deeds of kindness to display"; Irene's prayer "Defend her Heav'n"; "Sweet rose", another gem from Didymus; and a duet for Didymus and Theodora. The third part is just as full of wonders.

Despite two other fine available performances—one led by Nicolas McGegan on Harmonia Mundi (with Lorraine Hunt in the title role) and the other, led, as is this one, by William Christie (Erato)—this Glyndebourne one is the preferred. It has the aura of a truly dramatic occasion and the singing is nothing short of magnificent. The one exception might be the Valens of Frode

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Olsen, but in context his gruffness is not only acceptable, but apt. David Daniels, in his early prime, is stupendous as Didymus, dispatching the long-lined arias as well as the faster showpieces; Richard Croft is a tenor who can handle the furious coloratura of Septimius with honeyed tone while still remaining in character.

Both women amaze. Dawn Upshaw has always struck me as too much the picture of a thoroughly modern diva—down to earth yet somehow arch and too pleased with herself. I find none of that in her undertaking of the title role. She is the soul of simple piety, never drawing attention to herself, devoid of any affectation, and singing with exquisite accuracy and tone. Vulnerability without fragility. She is bettered only by the lamented Lorraine Hunt. What a sound this woman makes! Irene, a sad priestess, is dignified yet always deeply involved, and Hunt manages to sing with both gravitas and great communicative power at once, never keeping the listener at any distance. And not since Janet Baker has a mezzo had so many levels of piano/pianissimo singing at her command. Every time she sings the air envelops her voice to the exclusion of anything else.

William Christie leads a splendid performance—alive, sharply accented without overstatement, with recitatives vivid and perfectly paced. There are occasional pauses—one assumes that these have to do with stage business—which makes you wonder, but no matter. And, as I said, overlook the audience/stage sounds (Handel himself supposedly “joked” when he was told that the Royal Theatre was half empty, “Never mind; the music will sound the better”) and you are left with one of Handel’s most entrancing works in an unforgettable performance.--- Robert Levine, ClassicsToday.com

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