

Handel - Flavio (Jacobs) [1990]

Written by bluesever

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Flavio, Rè di Longobardi, opera, HWV 16 Disc 1 Atto I 1 Ouverture 3'17 2 Scena 1. Teodata, Vitige: "Ricordati mio ben" 5'44 3 Scene 2 & 3. Ugone, Lotario, Teodata, Emilia, Guido. Emilia: "Quanto dolci" 6'39 4 Scena 4. Guido: "Bel contento" 6'09 5 Scena 5. Ugone, Teodata, Flavio Teodata: "Benchè povera donzella" 6'20 6 Scene 6 & 7. Lotario, Flavio Lotario: "Se a te vissi fedele" 5'03 7 Scena 8. Flavio, Vitige Flavio: "Di quel bel che m'innamora" 3'40 8 Scena 9. Vitige: "Che bel contento sarette aurore" 3'13 9 Scene 10 & 11. Guido, Ugone Guido: "L'armellin vita non cura" 7'21 10 Scene 12 & 13. Emilia, Guido Emilia: "Amante stravagante" 6'08

Atto II

11 Scene 1-3. Teodata, Flavio, Ugone Ugone: "Fato tiranno e crudo" 6'32 12 Scena 4. Emilia, Lotario Lotario: "S'egli ti chiede affetto" 4'20 13 Scena 5. Emilia, Guido Emilia: "Paro, sì, ma non sò poi" 9'10 14 Scena 6. Guido: "Rompo i lacci" 5'33

Disc 2 Atto II

1 Scena 7. Flavio, Vitige Flavio: "Chi può mirare" 5'40 2 Scena 8. Vitige, Teodata Teodata: "Con un vezzo, con un riso" 5'39 3 Scena 9. Vitige: "Non credo instabile" 5'44 4 Scene 10 & 11. Lotario, Guido, Emilia Emilia: "Mà chi punir desio" 10'57

Atto III

5 Scena 1. Flavio, Emilia, Ugone Emilia: "Da te parto" 8'01 6 Scena 2. Flavio, Vitige, Teodata 3'51 7 Flavio: "Starvi accento" 7'46 8 Scena 3. Vitige: "Sirti, scogli, tempeste" 4'31 9 Scena 4. Emilia, Guido 4'05 10 Guido: "Amor, nel mio penar" 6'25 11 Scene 5 & 6. Teodata, Vitige, Flavio, Guido 1'53 12 Scena 7. Teodata, Vitige, Flavio, Guido, Emilia Duo Emilia, Guido: "Ti perdono" 8'23 13 Flavio: "E tu Vitige" 3'05

Ensemble 415: Chiara Banchini - Leader, Violin Gian Paolo Fagotto - Tenor (Vocal) Bernarda Fink - Mezzo-Soprano (Vocal) Jeffrey Gall - Counter Tenor (Vocal), Vocals Christina Hogman - Soprano (Vocal) Lena Lootens - Soprano (Vocal) Ulrich Messthaler - Bass (Vocal) Derek Lee Ragin - Counter Tenor (Vocal) René Jacobs - Conductor

Flavio is possibly the most delectable of all Handel's operas. I am usually inclined to fight shy of the comparisons that writers are apt to make between Handel and Mozart, because the two composers' operatic and expressive worlds are so far apart; but Flavio demands it, through its

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charming mixture of humour and seriousness, of delicately drawn amorous feeling and passionate grief. Its situations are half-jocular, at least to start with, but they soon begin to involve emotion of real depth, and the music matches it. The plot is about Flavio, King of Lombardy, whose unruly passion for Teodata interferes with the lives of all around him, imperilling the loves of two couples and leading to the dishonour of one of his counsellors and the death of the other. Although the opera dates from Handel's 'heroic' period, the high days of the Royal Academy of Music in London (it immediately precedes *Giulio Cesare*, in fact), its prevailing mood is lightish, with slender textures, dance rhythms and short-phrased yet graceful melodies, a sensitive response to the character of the Venetian libretto on which the opera is based. *Flavio* was never much of a success, I suspect for this very reason; English taste was more for the grand, serious style. It had a run of eight performances and was only once revived. Its first modern revival in this country was at Abingdon in 1969; since then it has also been seen in London and Cambridge.

I went to all those performances (the modern ones, that is), but have never enjoyed the music half as much as I have from these discs. This recording ranks with those of *Partenope* and *Alessandro* as the finest ever made of Handel operas and I am happy to be able to recommend it almost unreservedly. The casting is not spectacular—there are no really eye-catching names in the cast list above—but there is not a weak voice to be heard and the singing is beautifully unified in approach and style. The voices are light ones, as indeed the opera calls for. There is a general sense, not always common in this repertory, of a performance carefully thought out and thoroughly prepared. Of course, there is room for disagreement over some aspects of it, and while I much respect Rene Jacobs's direction I think that he is sometimes misguided over ornamentation (especially where he allows it in the orchestra) and that he is slightly too preoccupied with detailed shaping (the little *rallentando*, the hesitation before the critical chord and the like), possibly at the expense of broader rhythm. But his pacing of the whole is lively and dramatically motivated. I am also a little puzzled at his addition to the score of a handful of orchestral *sinfonias* at various junctures in the plot—Handel supplied nothing of the kind—and at one point an *arioso* for Flavio. But the orchestral playing (on period instruments) by Chiara Banchini's admirable Ensemble 415 as a whole is so shapely and so refined, and so alert, that it is a constant pleasure to listen to. The opera begins beguilingly, with a love-duet for the secondary couple, Teodata and Vitige, as he slips away from her room at night after an assignation: the singing of Bernarda Fink and Christina Hogman is not only tender and graceful but perfectly disciplined in its details of phrasing and the like. Fink distinguishes herself again in her later numbers, most of all in the delicious "Con un' vezzo, con un' riso", in Act 2, which is done very lightly, with charm and humour and excellent control. Hogman, as the royal attendant who is deputed to press Flavio's importunities on the girl he himself loves, also rises splendidly to her Act 2 aria, a finely written aria originally intended for the experienced Durastanti, which she handles subtly and with some exquisite detail. Her Act 1 aria is taken curiously quickly by Jacobs, but it works well enough, and she carries off her angry outburst in the last act in fine fashion.

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The prima donna and primo uomo roles were written for two of Handel's greatest singers, Cuzzoni and Senesino. Emilia is taken here by Lena Lootens, a clean, true singer who is always good to listen to (try the brilliant A major aria ending Act 1) and sometimes much more than that—as in her aria near the beginning of Act 2, "Parto, si, ma non so poi", one of the great moments in all Handel operas where suddenly real emotion floods to the surface: this, the first really slow aria in the opera, will inevitably recall "Comfort ye", in the same key of E major (Cuzzoni is said to have had a remarkable E, and Handel often exploited it, usually setting her music in a sharp key for the purpose). Later in the act too she has a deeply poignant siciliano-style aria, this time in F sharp minor. Lootens's expressive and natural singing is a real joy. Her partner here, as Guido, is the countertenor Derek Lee Ragin, a flexible and well controlled singer who does pretty well at a fiendish pace in his brilliant "Rompo i lacci" in Act 2 (the contrast with the slow middle section is arguably overdone), but rises particularly to his very last aria, a B flat minor expression of passion. The final duet for these two has some lovely, meltingly musical singing; at a tempo nearer to the specified andante it would, happily, have gone on for longer.

The other countertenor role, that of Flavio himself, is sung by Jeffrey Gall, who has a slightly firmer edge to the voice: a capable and rhythmic singer, pleasing in his opening gavotte aria, though he is required to sing too slowly in his aria in Act 2, which seems to me oddly interpreted. The two male parts are both quite modest: Gianpaolo Fagotto despatches the demanding semiquavers of Ugone's single aria very accurately and with no shortage of passion, while Lotario (who is murdered by his intended son-in-law) is done in duly fiery fashion by Ulrich Messthaler. The recitative is kept moving at a good pace, and sometimes a lute is used in the continuo team, to good effect on the whole. Appoggiaturas, of course, are properly in place. There are no cuts, in what is one of Handel's shortest operas; au contraire, in fact. The recording leaves nothing to be desired and the set is enhanced by an excellent booklet with a note by Winton Dean. Strongly recommended.' ---Stasmley Sadie, gramophone.co.uk

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