

Antonio Vivaldi - La Fida Ninfa (Spinosi) [2009]

Written by bluesever

Tuesday, 27 October 2009 12:46 - Last Updated Saturday, 21 June 2014 11:13

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acts, RV 714: Act 2. Scene 10. Aria. Destin avaro 19. La Fida ninfa, opera in 3 acts, RV 714: Act 2. Scene 11. Recitativo 20. La Fida ninfa, opera in 3 acts, RV 714: Act 2. Scene 11. Aria. Non tempesta che gl'alberi sfronda 21. La Fida ninfa, opera in 3 acts, RV 714: Act 2. Scene 12. Recitativo 22. La Fida ninfa, opera in 3 acts, RV 714: Act 2. Scene 12. Quatuor. Così, su gl'occhi miei?

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Véronica Cangemi, soprano (Morasto) Sandrine Piau, soprano (Licori) Marie-Nicole Lemieux, alto (Elpina) Philippe Jaroussky, countertenor (Osmino) Topi Lehtipuu, tenor (Narete) Lorenzo Regazzo, bass (Oralto) Christian Senn, bass (Eolo) Ensemble Matheus Jean-Christophe Spinosi – conductor

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independent Naïve label. Its ultimate goal is to record all 450 autograph works of the composer as now collected in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria in Turin, where they have been at various stages of editing and publishing since the 1930s. The project issued its first CD in 2000 and is expected to continue until 2015 with many of the works made available for the first time since the eighteenth century. Even were it not for the quality of the recordings, this would be an enterprise to be supported given the current state of the recording industry, and the almost continual delight in "new" and otherwise unknown compositions by Vivaldi; these seem to serve only to elevate his standing with lovers of Baroque and wider music alike.

La fida ninfa (The faithful nymph), RV714, is a *dramma per musica* in three acts to a libretto, written 30 years previously, by Francesco Scipione Maffei. It was first performed in Maffei's home town, Verona, at the Teatro della Accademia Filarmonica there in 1732; at the theater's inauguration, in fact. For this recording La fida ninfa forms Volume 11 of the Vivaldi Edition's theatrical works. That Vivaldi's operas are of the same quality as the instrumental works for which he is better known bears repeating. If there's any justice in the world, they will achieve an analogous popularity to that which those of Handel have done in the past couple of generations.

For the music in La fida ninfa is full of melody, depth, pathos, invention and originality of instrumentation, vocal expressiveness and dramatic impact from beginning to end. So much so that, thanks to the perceptive and measured conception and direction of conductor Jean-Christophe Spinosi, Ensemble Matheus and the seven soloists, the work would make an excellent introduction for anyone open to expanding their appreciation of Vivaldi beyond his concerti; or for anyone who might have fallen for the canard that Vivaldi lacked, shall we say, sustained creative drive. After all, the operas (49 have so far been identified and authenticated) that Vivaldi wrote and produced between 1713 (the date of *Otone in villa*) and 1741 were hugely successful throughout (northern) Italy and beyond.

The circumstances of Vivaldi's commission and his otherwise fully committed workload meant that La fida ninfa had to be composed in a rush – as was so often the case with Baroque theatrical pieces. Verona was the Veneto's (the region in which Venice is situated) second city; the prestige of the Accademia was significant. To say that Maffei's pastoral libretto (brothers on Naxos unaware of their kinship) is "slight" is not too much of a slur. And that Vivaldi made something beautiful and significant of it no exaggeration.

Examples of Vivaldi's genius for extracting musically compelling invention from stock situations and characters abound. Osmino's aria "Qual serpe tortuoso" [CD.2 tr.17] is an example: overlaid on the perhaps somewhat "worn" biblical metaphor of the threat of the snake, Vivaldi has string triplets evoke sinuousness. But in a new and unique way. Surprisingly original and

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effectively. And squeezed for all he is worth by Philippe Jaroussky's perceptive countertenor too. But it's not that moments like these that carry an otherwise sagging whole. Although (almost) every number stands in its own right, it's the feeling at the end of each act, and of the whole opera, that something purposeful and fully indicative of the emotions, foibles and changes in attitude on the part of the characters has happened. And, until the last note of the work has sounded, that more such is inevitably to come. Yes, there is urgency and forward momentum. But it's the ways in which Spinosi and his strong cast of soloists and instrumentalists respect Vivaldi's modest intentions that make the performance such a success. No attempt to add, edit or abbreviate the vision which Vivaldi clearly allowed to inform his composition, however much it was written (to his mind, probably) for one occasion only.

Contemporary accounts of the performances in January 1732 suggest that the original singers found Vivaldi's writing for them somewhat challenging. Here Spinosi's success has been to assemble musicians who work as a team; yet the members of which each bring something clear, insightful and accomplished in their accounts. Indeed, at times one is struck by a slightly over-zealous commitment to the enterprise. A touch of breathiness or over-articulation in order to communicate an unfamiliar story. But these moments are few and do not detract. The beauty of Vivaldi's writing wins through repeatedly. It's not conventionally sumptuous; just transparently "fetching" in the way that Mozart's or Britten's operatic writing is. Elemental.

Nor is it only the presence of fewer da capo arias than usual that move the performance along. Spinosi is on top of every judgement of tempo without ever rushing. Such ruminative passages as the duet between Narete and Osmino in the third act's scene seven [CD.3 tr.13], for example, retain every drop of tenderness despite a sense of urgency otherwise induced by the tension of the situation. In all such moments (indeed throughout their arias and recitatives generally) each of the singers brings an individual personality and musical depth to their respective roles. Véronica Cangemi, Sandrine Piau and Topi Lehtipuu are particularly worthy of praise for their command of the at times difficult melodic lines; and for conferring upon their characters such conviction and believability.

The three-CD set comes with an excellent, well-produced and at times sardonically, though always appropriately and informatively written, booklet with the full libretto in French and English as well as the original Italian; details of the artists and useful background to the work and its historical context are there too. Given that *La fida ninfa* will be new territory for many, this is welcome. The acoustic of the *Église Notre-Dame du Liban*, Paris, is perhaps a little more "contained" than one might expect for an opera on this scale. But it works: we are able to concentrate without distractions on the soloists' every phrase, their interaction with the instrumentalists and indeed on the impact made by the few tutti and choruses which the opera contains.

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No-one who's been collecting the operas, and instrumental issues, in the Vivaldi Edition need hesitate before buying La fida ninfa, then. Anyone who's yet to be convinced of the profundity and beauty of the composer's operas would find this a compelling start to their conversion. Those who simply respond to outstanding Baroque singing and playing over an extended work which makes the most of its somewhat amateur libretto will not be disappointed. Warmly recommended. ---Mark Sealey, classical.net

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