

Charles-Simon Catel – Semiramis (2012)



CD1 1. *Semiramis: Ouverture* 2. *Semiramis: Act 1. Air avec chœur. Arzace, par sa valeur...* 3. *Semiramis: Act 1. Recit. Mais d'ou vient que la paix...* 4. *Semiramis: Act 1. Recit. O voiles de la mort!...* 5. *Semiramis: Act 1. Chœur. Sois sensible a notre douleur...* 6. *Semiramis: Act 1. Recit et air. J'avais cru que ces dieux...* 7. *Semiramis: Act 1. Marche des Pretres* 8. *Semiramis: Act 1. Recit. Reine et grands, écoutez...* 9. *Semiramis: Act 1. Ensemble. O sentence cruelle!* 10. *Semiramis: Act 1. Marche et scene. Mais j'entends retentir les trompettes,,,* 11. *Semiramis: Act 1. Chœur. Quelle pompe!...* 12. *Semiramis: Act 1. Scene. Reine, ces etendards...* 13. *Semiramis: Act 1. Andante* 14. *Semiramis: Act 1. Danse pour les Africains* CD2 1. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Que m'a dit Oroes?...* 2. *Semiramis: Act 2. Air. et recit. Oui, je viens des champs de la gloire...* 3. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Objet de tous mes vœux...* 4. *Semiramis: Act 2. Duo. De tant d'amour...* 5. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Mais Assur paraît...* 6. *Semiramis: Act 2. Air. Que l'eclat de votre naissance...* 7. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Ont-ils fait l'un et l'autre...* 8. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Tous les grands de l'Etat...* 9. *Semiramis: Act 2. Air. S'il est vrai que votre vengeance...* 10. *Semiramis: Act 2. Marche* 11. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Princes, mages, guerriers...* 12. *Semiramis: Act 2. Air. Maitresse de mon diademe...* 13. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Que de ce grand hymen...* 14. *Semiramis: Act 2. Chœur. Oui, nous jurons...* 15. *Semiramis: Act 2. Chœur. Pretresses de l'hymen* 16. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Vous dont la noble audace...* 17. *Semiramis: Act 2. Recit. Tu regneras Arzace...* 18. *Semiramis: Act 2. Finale. Grands dieux!...* 19. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Non, ne differons plus...* 20. *Semiramis: Act 3. Ensemble. Que le mystere et le silence...* 21. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Le ciel m'a tout ravi...* 22. *Semiramis: Act 3. Duo. Songe qu'a toi je me confie...* 23. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Venez, reirons-nous...* 24. *Semiramis: Act 3. Ensemble. Frappez, punissez le coupable...* 25. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Non, je ne reviens point de cet etat...* 26. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. On n'attend plus que vous...* 27. *Semiramis: Act 3. Duo. Eh bien, ne tarde plus...* 28. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Mais c'est trop differer...* 29. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Ciel! ou suis-je?* 30. *Semiramis: Act 3. Recit. Viens me venger...* 31. *Semiramis: Act 3. Chœur. O terrible destin!...*

Gabrielle Philiponet (Soprano) [Azéma]
Maria Riccarda Wesseling (Mezzo Soprano) [Semiramis] Nicolas Maire (Tenor) Mathias Vidal (Tenor) [Arzace] Andrew Foster-Williams (Bass Baritone) Nicolas Courjal (Bass) [Assur] Le Concert Spirituel Hervé Niquet (Conductor) Live: Opéra-Berlioz Le Corum, Montpellier 7/15/2011

Sémiramis dates from 1802, two decades before Rossini's much more famous treatment of the same story. There is no question that Rossini was a genius and Catel merely a very good composer, but this music does deserve occasional hearing, and it is capable of bringing real pleasure to any lover of French vocal music looking for a new discovery. Catel's strong interest in harmony shows itself in many ways in *Sémiramis*, with a great deal of emphasis on harmonic change and on the effect of harmonic development on the drama. The very ending of the opera is a stark example. As *Sémiramis* dies, the chorus sings: "Oh terrible fate, oh lamentable end of her disastrous greatness. Thus there are crimes which the gods in their wrath never forgive." The music is slow, grave in atmosphere, and is followed by a soft orchestral postlude that is very advanced harmonically for 1802, and striking in its darkness. Throughout the work, adventurous harmonic language is evident. There is, though, also real melodic invention, and many of the ensembles stay in the memory. Because of his interest in harmony, Catel used fewer arias and traditional set pieces, which cost him popularity in his day. But what he did create were some strikingly imaginative orchestral accompaniments to declamatory passages or pure recitatives, which allowed for an uncommon dramatic vitality.

One aspect of Catel's style is its compactness. *Sémiramis* is direct, impactful, and doesn't linger much. Even when he writes an aria, it is not just there for vocal exercise or pleasure. Apparently Azéma's aria from the first act was subject to the following criticism in its day: "[Catel has] moved away from the unity of tone that holds the opera-lover's attention, while the use, or rather the abuse, of variety in the modulations within the same aria is bewildering and distracting, making the audience uncomfortably aware of the changes made and the rules applied in making them, rather than allowing it to concentrate on the interest of the situation." That same critic also said "melody and simplicity are to everyone's taste, and without them there is, to my knowledge, no real music." Catel was composing at a time when there was a real divide between the "melodists" and the "harmonists," and he defined himself as one of the latter. But to infer that there is no melodic imagination or inspiration in this opera would be to make a big mistake. Its strength may well be in its ensembles and in the choral writing, but that strength is considerable, and in the end, this is a work that makes an impact, that has a real musical and theatrical presence about it.

The performance is a fine one, with taut but expressive leadership from Hervé Niquet that gives shape and momentum to a score that would drag with uninflected note-reading. Niquet manages a performance that incorporates the stately, the majestic, and the incisive, and his orchestra plays well throughout. Mezzo-soprano Wesseling exhibits a wide vocal range, a warm but focused voice, and she sings with abandon in the title role. Much the same can be said for soprano Philiponnet as Azéma. Both ladies also blend their voices nicely in duets. Tenor Vidal also sings well, with fluidity and shape, as Arzace, though I would prefer a slightly less reedy, richer timbre. As Assur, Courjal displays a reedy bass voice that could use more support, but he too sings accurately.

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The audience in this live recording is unobtrusive, with applause reserved only for the end of the opera. The recorded sound, a product of Radio France, is very well balanced and smooth. One has to make no accommodation for it being live. There is a fine essay on Catel and this work, though it is not gracefully rendered in English, and a full libretto and English translation. Highly recommended. ---FANFARE: Henry Fogel, arkivmusic.com

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