Antonio Vivaldi - Griselda (2006)

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Marie-Nicole Lemieux (contralto) – Griselda Veronica Cangemi (soprano) – Costanza Simone Kermes (soprano) – Ottone Philippe Jaroussky (counter-tenor) – Roberto Stefano Ferrari (tenor) – Gualtiero Iestyn Davies (counter-tenor) – Corrado Ensemble Mattheus
Jean-Christophe Spinosi - Conductor

In December 2006 the Italian magazine Classic Voice reached issue 200; the issue carried a specially prepared 2 CD set under the title Il nuovo Vivaldi, an anthology of highlights from the ongoing Naïve Vivaldi Edition, which is based on the huge collection of Vivaldi manuscripts preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin. The sub-heading of one of the magazine's essays on this important project proclaimed Jean-Christophe Spinosi's presentation of Vivaldi's music as "energiche e ipervitaminiche" – which puts it very well! The project merits such celebratory attention and Spinosi's contribution certainly merits such adjectives.

Griselda was a mature work, first performed at the Teatro S. Samuele in Venice in 1735, a theatre from which Vivaldi's work had hitherto been excluded, for reasons elaborated in Frédéric Delaméa's valuable booklet notes. Some thirty-four years earlier Apostolo Zeno had written a Griselda libretto, first performed in Teatro S. Cassiano in Venice in 1701, in a setting by Antonio Pollarolo. The subject was strikingly popular; Delaméa tells us that between 1701 and 1735 there were more than thirty settings of the libretto. Tomaso Albinoni (1703), Alessandro Scarlatti (1721) and Niccolo Porpora (1726) were amongst the distinguished composers who wrote Griselda operas. The popularity of the story doubtless reflects the archetypal nature of its narrative (as considered in Lois DE. Butler's The Tested Woman Plot, Ohio State U.P., 2001) which concerns the grossly unkind treatment of 'patient' Griselda by her unreasonable husband, treatment which she survives and over which she finally triumphs. With its roots in folklore, the story came into the world of modern Italian literature with a version in Boccacio's Decameron (c.1351), of which Petrarch made an adaptation in Latin. Chaucer retold the story as The Clerk's Tale in The Canterbury Tales. In all of these medieval versions of the story, the husband's behaviour seems entirely random, or simply sadistic. Chaucer's narrator is moved to explain that his story isn't really about a husband and wife at all – that these figures are essentially allegorical, and that his tale is really 'about' how the human soul should accept the dealings of Divine providence, confident in its final benevolence. Eighteenth-century Venice demanded something closer to the realities of quotidian social life, at least so far as motivation was concerned. In Zeno's version the husband is a king, whose people object to his marriage to a woman of humble birth; the king – Gualtiero – tests his wife, through a series of savage challenges, so that the people will see just how constant and patient she is. 'Patience' – as represented, for example, in the late plays of Shakespeare – carried much more weight than our modern use of the word does; it was a Christian virtue of some force and importance. St. Paul advised Timothy that "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness." (2 Tim. 2:24-25). It was with something of this force that the Italian composers of the eighteenth century told the story of Griselda, without ignoring the opportunities for pathos and for (albeit crude) characterisation that the narrative offered.

The commissioning of Vivaldi's Griselda was the occasion for a revision of Zeno's libretto by no less a figure than Carlo Goldoni, less than thirty but already making a reputation as a poet; Goldoni left two entertaining accounts of his dealings with Vivaldi.

The resulting opera is a work of considerable beauty and power. Vivaldi invests the narrative with real psychological understanding and expressivity; passion abounds, but the music doesn't forget the larger moral dimensions of the story. There is a tragic awareness at work here, most obviously in the music given to Griselda, here sung with ravishing brilliance by the Canadian soprano Marie-Nicole Lemieux. There are plenty of set-piece arias, but what is perhaps most astonishing is the consistently high standard of the recitatives. Vivaldi's poignant presentation of Griselda is a million miles from mere sentimentality, the sense of personal suffering never entirely denuded of something yet more universal, in the recurrent sense that her sufferings say something about the universal human condition, for all the near-absurdity of their extremity.

From the opening bars of the Sinfonia one is aware of being in safe (though risks are taken!) musical hands. The Ensemble Matheus plays with vigour and precision throughout and many of the orchestral colours are gloriously vivid – the effect helped by a crystal clear recorded sound. The treatment of the recitatives is particularly impressive and refreshing; rarely have I heard an opera recording in which the recitatives are so gripping; narrative tension is never lost as instrumental resources support a top quality line up of soloists.

Marie-Nicole Lemieux interprets the title role with intense dramatic commitment and utter vocal assurance. This was a role written for Anna Giró, Vivaldi's protégée - and perhaps his mistress – but Lemieux persuades one that it might just as well have been written for her. She has a voice of electrifying presence, capable of conveying both a great inner calmness and a fierce passion. Lemieux's dark – but not heavy – contralto is beautifully complemented by the two sopranos. Simone Kermes sings with quite breathtaking virtuosity, her high notes shining with a transcendent light, her control of pitch and register in the savagely difficult aria 'Dopo un'orrida procella' a minor miracle. The slow aria 'Vede orgogliosa l'onda', in Act I, shows off her voice at its purest. The Argentinian soprano Veronica Cangemi maintains the high standard set by her colleagues, not least in the fiendishly difficult 'Agitata da due venti' in Act II. Throughout she sings with great tonal beauty. Nor do the men let the side down. Iestyn Davies strengthens his growing reputation as an up-and-coming countertenor, intelligent in his handling of text, vocally gorgeous in 'La rondinella amante' and dazzling in the hunting aria 'Alle minacce di fiera belve', holding his own against the forceful orchestration. I don't find Philippe Jaroussky's voice quite so tonally attractive – though other do, taste in countertenors seems particularly subjective! - but he sings with passion, agility and strength. Stefano Ferrari has a lightish tenor voice, particularly good at the top of its range, and brings to the role of Gualtiero both a keen dramatic understanding and singing of considerable technical skill. Just occasionally I wondered whether Spinosi's tempi weren't going to prove too demanding for him but he passes test after test –

beginning with the rhythmically demanding ‘Se ria procella sorge dall’onde’, the opera’s first aria. He brings vocal and dramatic subtlety to the Act II aria ‘Tu vorresti col tuo pianto’. I haven’t heard Ferrari previously – I look forward to further encounters.

The booklet notes, texts and translations are of a high quality – my only complaint is that the CD case collapsed at the very first time of opening!

All in all, this recording puts as compelling a case for Vivaldi’s operas as one could very well imagine being made on CD. There is an abundance of sumptuous singing, some outstanding instrumental writing, outstandingly played; but there is also a real dramatic tension, so much so that it makes one very eager to see – as well as to hear – a sympathetic production of this marvellous piece. ---Glyn Pursglove, musicweb-international.com

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