

The older versions, too, have their individual flavour. Casciolini was a Roman singer-composer: his is an *alternatim* setting, i.e. polyphony alternating with plainsong. But the polyphony comes in two different shapes, the multi-voice verses being alternately five-part and in quadruple time, then four-part and in a (charming!) freely flowing triple time. The final verse becomes a full-throated prayer, with ecstatic melismas on the word 'Gloria'. And the famous ten-part setting by Domenico Scarlatti is a minor miracle of vocal ingenuity, with solo and full sections in abundant variety (all well taken by singers from within the group); a discreet continuo of organ, theorbo and harp adds to the sheer richness of sound. Of this work there have been plentiful earlier versions: John Eliot Gardiner, Paul Agnew, Roger Norrington and Rinaldo Alessandrini are all still in the catalogues, along with a 2007 recording on the Coro label from Christophers. But the present version, sumptuously recorded in the generous acoustic of St Augustine's, Kilburn, is full of as much life and vigour as one could possibly want.

An excellent booklet note by Michael White, helpful about the old as well as the new, sits alongside a short contribution from the conductor and a brief benediction from the Archbishop of Westminster. This is indeed a fascinating compilation, one that brings new life to a familiar subject. **Piers Burton-Page**

### Fede e Amor

New

**Caldara** Joaz – Così a fiume. Morte e sepoltura di Christo – Languire, morire. **Casati** Salve regina. **Conti** Il David perseguitato da Saul – Fuggo d'una in altra selva. La Distruzione d'Haj – Se potesse la mia mente. **Fux** Jesu Christo nell'orto – Dal limbo già ti chiama. Sonate a 3 – E68; K365; K379. **Porsile** Il Trionfo di Giuditta – La sovrana eterna mente. **Tůma** Sonata a 4. **Ziani** Alma redemptoris mater.

**Alex Potter** (countertenor); **Ensemble La Fontaine**.

**Ramée RAM1304** (full price, 1 hour 20 minutes). Italian/Latin texts and English/French translations included. *Website* www.outhere-music.com. *Producer/Engineer* Rainer Arndt. *Date* October 2012.

Amidst the current deluge of discs featuring countertenors singing opera arias by Handel and, latterly, Caldara and Porpora, this disc is a breath of fresh air. Not only is the English countertenor Alex Potter on outstanding form on this disc, but the music he sings is as excellent as it is unfamiliar. He is also accompanied by an outstanding team of instrumentalists. Thus, although this disc is a little long in the tooth (it was issued in October 2013 but slipped through our reviewing net on its initial release), it deserves a review – and also an IRR Outstanding recommendation.



The core of the programme is several arias for alto extracted

from Italian oratorios performed during Lent at the Viennese Imperial Court in the decade from 1718 to 1728, when this form approached opera as the most prestigious musical form. The oratorio was a relative latecomer to the Court. It replaced the Holy Week *sepulchro* around 1705 and also introduced a more operatic drama and musical language. These arias by a mixture of well-known and obscure composers active in Vienna are for voice and obbligato instruments. Like Venice and Hamburg, in around 1700 Vienna adopted the operatic fashion for obbligato instruments in arias. Thus both familiar and more exotic instruments, such as the chalumeau or the pantaleon (a massive hammered dulcimer named after its inventor, Pantaleon Hebenstreit), appeared in operas, serenatas and chamber cantatas performed in Vienna during the first decades of the eighteenth century. I am told there is even a small cupboard's worth of arias with obbligato or theorbo from the period.

In the Viennese Lenten oratorio, the solo instrument of choice was the trombone, long associated with mourning and penance. But it was not restricted to Lent: a pair of obbligato trombones also features in the magnificent Marian antiphon settings by the oldest composer on the disc, Marc Antonio Ziani, and the obscure and much younger singer, Pietro Casati, which supplement the programme. From the mid-seventeenth century the Viennese Court's musical establishment boasted several trombone virtuosos of almost legendary skill. The trombone parts in five of the arias and both antiphons are extremely demanding. One of the arias, Antonio Caldara's 'Così a fiume' from the oratorio *Joaz*, combines a trombone with an equally tested bassoon. The bassoon also has a prominent role in the Ziani. In the aria by Ignazio Maria Conti, 'Se potesse la mia mente' from *La Distruzione d'Haj*, there is no trombone at all: instead the highly acrobatic bassoon tumbles about amidst gentle pizzicato strings while the voice floats sublimely overhead – one of the recital's most affecting moments.

The period-instrument Ensemble La Fontaine's two trombonists, Simen Van Mechelen and Catherine Motuz, are simply wonderful. They play both alto and tenor trombones and have a complete

mastery over their athletic instruments, with flawless intonation, perfect phrasing and total sympathy with Potter and the rest of the ensemble. Equally impressive is the bassoonist Carles Cristobàl. In the Conti, amidst all the impossibly lengthy flurries of rapid notes, his tone and phrasing on his breath-hungry instrument are unfailingly steady.

Although Motuz, Van Mechelen and Cristobàl might seem sometimes to steal the show, this is essentially a vocal recital. Potter is not cut from the same cloth as Philippe Jaroussky and other operatic countertenors around these days. However, while perhaps not matching their acrobatic élan, Potter combines a very attractive voice with musical intelligence and a real flair for the dramatic. His voice is rich and he deploys it very expressively without the overuse of vibrato and extreme tonal and dynamic shifts that affect the performances of too many of his colleagues. He also ornaments beautifully in his *da capos*, balancing dramatic floridity with Lenten restraint.

It is not only the high calibre of the performances that delights. It is difficult to overstate the quality of the music. These arias and antiphons have everything: inspired melodies, jaunty rhythms, finely crafted yet lightly worn counterpoint, a superbly balanced interchange between singer and instruments and (in the arias) strong character delineation. The absolute masterpieces are without doubt the two arias by Caldara, surpassing even the great Johann Joseph Fux, whose nobly pleading yet catchy aria with a single trombone and strings, 'Dal limbo già ti chiama', opens the programme. Yet, even the most obscure figures on the disc are revealed as superlative composers.

The organist Johannes Strobl deserves particular praise for his sensitive basso continuo realizations on a gentle, chuffing organ, especially in the pulsing deep bass line in Caldara's sombre 'Languire, morire'. The strings are also given the opportunity to shine in two Sonatas a 3 by Fux for two violins and basso continuo, one of which also has a separate trombone part simultaneously doubling and embellishing the bass line. Both are remarkable for their oratorio-like writing: one keeps expecting Potter to start singing. The instruments are equally impressive in the intriguing Sonata a 4 for two violins and two trombones by the Bohemian composer František Ignác Tůma.

The sound engineering within a mildly resonant acoustic is excellent, with each musician clearly placed within the sound-stage and a perfect balance maintained between singer, obbligato instruments and the rest of the ensemble.

This somewhat neglected disc is unquestionably worthy of an 'Outstanding' accolade. Now, my review written, all I have to do is stop humming the arias.

**Christopher Price**