

Three Baroque Tenors – Ian Bostridge (2010)

Written by bluesever

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Francesco CONTI (1681 – 1732) 1. *Gui sto appeso (Don Chisciotte)* [2.03] George Frideric HANDEL (1685 – 1739) 2. *Where congeal'd the northern streams (Hercules)* [2.03] 3. *From celestial seats descending (Hercules)* [5.57] Antonio VIVALDI (1678 – 1741) 4. *La tranna e avversa sorte (Arsilda)* [5.25] Francesco GASPARINI (1668 – 1727) 5. *Forte e lieto (Il Bajazet)* [4.09] George Frideric HANDEL (1685 – 1739) 6. *Forte e lieto (Tamerlano)* [5.09] Thomas ARNE (1710 – 1778) 7. *Rise, Glory, Rise (Rosamond)* [6.28] Antonio CALDARA (1671 – 1736) 8. *Lo so, lo so: con periglio (Joaz)* [5.15] 9. *D'un Barbaro scortese* [3.26] Alessandro SCARLATTI (1660 – 1725) 10. *Se non qual vento* [3.06] George Frideric HANDEL (1685 – 1739) 11. *Scorta siate a passi miei (Giulio Cesare)* [4.06] Antonio VIVALDI (1678 – 1741) 12. *Ti stringo in quest'amplesso (L'Amenaide)* 13. *Saziero col morir mio (Ipermestra)* [4.11] William BOYCE (1711 – 1779) 14. *Softly rise, O southern breeze* [4.38] John GALLIARD (1666 – 1747) 15. *With early horn (The Royal Chace)* [4.44] + 16. *Paradise Lost - Man so favour'd* 17. *Paradise Lost - He the gloom Princ*
Ian Bostridge (tenor) Sophie Danemen (soprano) (14) Madeleine Shaw (mezzo) (14) Benjamin Hulett (tenor) (14) Jonathan Gunthorpe (baritone) (14) The English Concert Bernard Labadie - conductor

As a follow-up to his disc of Handel arias, Ian Bostridge has come up with an anthology of

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music by Handel and his contemporaries. It was all written for three star tenors who worked at various times for Handel.

The trio featured on this disc, John Beard (1717-1791), Francesco Borosini (1688-1750) Annibale Pio Fabri (1697 – 1760), all had careers which encompassed the full range of the baroque stage. We have a tendency nowadays to see them through the prism of Handel's operas. All sang for Handel, though Borosini and Fabri did little more than a season each. But what seasons they were. Handel wrote the roles of Bajazet in Tamerlano and Grimoaldo in Rodelinda for Borosini, as well as converting the role of Sesto in Giulio Cesare to a tenor by writing new arias. Fabri, who came to London in 1724 some six years after Borosini, performed Sesto, Goffredo in Rinaldo, Grimoaldo and the title character in Scipione as well as having roles written for him in Lotario, Partenope and Poro.

It was Borosini who persuaded Handel to break the mould and create such a strongly dramatic part as Bajazet, complete with its on-stage death scene. Fabri did not inspire quite such revolutionary roles, but his sheer ubiquity in major characters in the operas Handel presented was revolutionary in its way. In having Borosini and Fabri in significant roles in the operas, Handel was laying the ground for the development of the tenor as main protagonist instead of the castrato.

Beard was around for far longer; he was a member of the group of English singers who were, in effect, trained by Handel. They formed a strong part of his repertory company when he was tackling oratorio. Though Beard did sing in Handel's operas, it is for his oratorio roles that he is known. His powers were such that Handel again broke the mould and created such parts as Samson for him. But Beard was a full-time theatre professional and acted as well as sang. The pieces written for him which Bostridge performs on this disc include arias by Arne and Boyce.

Beard's signature tune was the wonderful, With early Horn from John Galliard's The Royal Chace, a lovely piece of musical hunting extravaganza. No less delightful is Rise, Glory rise from Arne's Rosamond. But the most memorable of the non-Handelian roles showcased here is the lovely aria from Boyce's serenata Solomon. It has an extremely expressive independent bassoon part, and a concluding section which includes a vocal quartet.

Of the many parts Handel wrote for Beard, Bostridge has included two arias from Hercules, where Beard sang Hylluss. This offers lovely lyric writing - from earlier in Beard's career - rather than the more dramatic Samson.

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Whereas Beard was trained by Handel, Fabri had a very conservative training with a castrato. He was well versed in all of the bel canto practices for which castrati were famous. It is Fabri's arias on this disc which perhaps take the most traditional trajectory. His talents were early exploited by Vivaldi. The arias from L'Atenaide and Ipermestra display Vivaldi's talent for writing attractive, often toe-tapping music. That said, you never feel that he gets to the nub of a character the way Handel could. In the aria from Scarlatti's Marco Attilio Regolo, Fabri would have got to show off his agility in delightful manner, though the music does rather skim over any characterisation.

Francesco Borosini by contrast had a voice which was positively baritonal in texture, but covered both the tenor and baritone ranges. However it was the intensity of his acting, and presumably the strength of his personality, which persuaded composers to break with tradition. The opening track on the disc is from a tragi-comic opera Don Chischiotte by Conti, which features the Don hanging awkwardly by one arm from a window whilst singing this aria! It's a delight and makes me wonder what the rest of the opera is like. Bostridge features just one role which Handel wrote for Fabri, Alessandro in Poro. Alessandro is almost the major character in the opera and the aria, D'un Barbaro scortese is demanding and must have shown Fabri off to his best. Note that though Alessandro is the major character, he is not the love interest.

In 1719 Borosini managed to persuade Gasparini to write a significant role for him in Il Bajazet. In doing this he created the first ever major on-stage death scene in baroque opera while also giving Borosini a chance to shine both histrionically and musically. When he came to London he brought the score with him. Handel was sufficiently impressed with Borosini's talents to perform a similar task on his unfinished Tamerlano and thus give us Bajazet's on-stage death scene. Bostridge has recorded here the same aria from both Gasparini's and Handel's operas, Forte e lieto. The comparison of the two displays the difference between talent and genius as it is Handel who manages fully to articulate the tragic figure of Bajazet.

When Handel decided to re-write Sesto for tenor he added new arias, rather than simply transposing the existing ones down. The results emphasise the transposition of the role from youth to man. Scorta siate a passi miei, with its leaps and angularities of line, displays this admirably. I remain puzzled as to why no-one has experimented with performing Giulio Cesare with Sesto as a tenor; the arias Handel wrote just cry out to be performed in context.

Perhaps because much of the material is less familiar, I found that Bostridge was rather less mannered than on his earlier Handel disc. It is a relief to find him singing material written for the

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tenor voice, rather than appropriating arias from other voice types. You get the feeling that the three baroque tenors featured here had rather more dramatic voices, in the line of Thomas Randle, Mark Padmore or John Mark Ainsley. Bostridge is a lyric tenor and though he sings with great intelligence, there is no disguising that some of the music is less than ideal for his voice. That said, he is never less than admirable and brings his customary intelligence to everything he does.

Labadie and the English Concert provide strong support and there is some attractive solo playing.

I could wish that the CD booklet had been produced with a little more care. Nowhere in the track-listings do they tell you which aria was written for which tenor. To find that out you have to go through the booklet article with a tooth-comb. Also, when Bostridge sang in concert at the Barbican as part of the tour to promote this disc, the programme note reprinted an extremely informative article by Bostridge himself, which had appeared in the Guardian. For some reason, this has not been reprinted here, which is a shame as Bostridge is as articulate in print as he is when singing.

There is no denying that not everything on this disc is music of the first water. Sometimes it descends into generic baroque knitting - something Handel was as capable of as anyone. But the point of the disc is to explore the range of music written for these three tenors and as such it works admirably. --- Robert Hugill, www.musicweb-international.com

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