

Domenico Sarro - Achille in Sciro (2007)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 01 April 2019 15:17 -

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1. Atto 1 2. Atti 2 e 3 Licomede - Marcello Nardis (tenor) Achille - Gabriella Martellacci (alto) Deidamia - Maria Laura Martorana (soprano) Ulisse - Francisco Ruben Brito (tenor) Teagene - Massimiliano Arizzi (counter-tenor) Nearco - Eufemia Tufano (mezzo-soprano) Arcade - Dolores Carlucci (soprano) Coro Slovacco di Bratislava Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia Federico Maria Sardelli - conductor 33^o Festival Della Valle d'Itria 2007 Palazzo Ducale di Martina Franca, 19 luglio 2007

The birth and death dates of Domenico Sarro (1679 and 1744) are very close to those of his more illustrious contemporary, Antonio Vivaldi.

If Vivaldi's operas haven't quite made the comeback that many of Georg Handel's have in opera houses around the world, some excellent recordings have appeared in recent years, in particular on the Opus 111 label. Leave it to the enterprising Dynamic label to look beyond Vivaldi and exhume Sarro's *Achille in Sciro*, a work unlikely to have been performed anywhere for over two and a half centuries.

A live recording from the 2007 Festival della Valle D'Itria, this Dynamic set shares the virtues and defects of many of the company's other ventures into rare repertory - it revives an opera worth hearing, with a less than ideal performance. Based on a libretto by Pietro Metastasio, *Achille in Sciro* weaves a handful of characters through three hours of misguided passion, jealousy, betrayal, and cross-dressing, as Achille dallies in love while his Greek compatriots try to get him to sail off to war with Troy. Sarro's music maintains an energetic creativity through the extended arias and occasional small group numbers. As with Vivaldi, rhythmic complexity dominates over harmonic development; still, the best of the numbers have appealing tunes. The score deserved respectful attention, which it gets from conductor Federico Maria Sardelli and the Orchestra Internazionale D'Italia, experienced hands in rare repertory.

The singers, on the other hand, create more ambivalent reactions. In the role of Teagane, counter-tenor Massimiliano Arizzi makes some very unpleasant sounds, and his act three aria, which probably should be a highlight, becomes eight minutes of distressful intonation and hootiness. Not that the mezzos in pants roles fare much better. In the smaller role of Nearco, Eufemia Tufano is only slightly more endurable than Arizzi. Gabriella Martellacci has the title role, and the booklet photographs reveal that she is a very feminine, attractive woman - helpful for the scenes of Achille disguised as a woman, but otherwise quite baffling. Her mezzo voice can reasonably pass for that of a proud warrior, given the conventions, but a heaviness weighs down the faster runs. Tenor Francisco Ruben Brito, singing Ulisse, barely manages his aria in act two, but the piping high notes in his final aria sound as if the singer were being goosed. A second tenor role, Licomede, goes to Marcello Nardis, who sounds painfully stretched anywhere outside a short middle range.

The best singing comes from Maria Laura Martorana as Deidamia, a soprano with a secure high range and ample agility. She appears a somewhat drab figure in the production photos of the booklet, but that may be the director's concept of the character. The photos evidence some sort of updated concept, but the booklet note is sparse on details of this performance, focusing instead on the singers in the 1737 premiere and a lengthy description of the arias, which includes mystifying analysis such as this: "Nearco alternates emotion and sighs "Tace il labbro e parla il volto" ... with fury..." Your reviewer listened closely, but could not identify any furious sighing.

With no likely competitors on the horizon, anyone interested in the contemporaries of Vivaldi and Handel should search out this recording of Achille in Sciro. With more attractive singing, the set would surely deserve a broader recommendation. ---Chris Mullins, operatoday.com

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