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Admeto re di Tessaglia (review)

Brooke Bryant

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VIDEO REVIEWS

EDITED BY LESLIE ANDERSEN



This semiannual column presents reviews of significant video releases of interest to the field of music and to music libraries, as well as occasionally briefly noting other interesting titles. All genres of music in all video formats will be covered, with a preference given to those in DVD. All Web sites accessed 18 November 2009.

George Frideric Handel. *Admeto re di Tessaglia*. DVD (Blu-ray). Howard Arman / Das Händelfestspielorchester Halle. With Matthias Rexroth, Romelia Lichtenstein, Mechthild Bach, Tim Mead and Raimund Nolte. [Germany]: Arthaus Music, 2009, 2006. 101 258. \$39.99.

Directed by counter-tenor Axel Köhler and conducted by Howard Arman, this video captures a live performance presented at the Händel-Festspiele in Halle, Germany in 2006. Handel's *Admeto* is played by the thirty-three-piece Händel-festspielorchester and stars Matthias Rexroth in the title role, with Romelia Lichtenstein as Alcestis, Mechthild Bach as Antigona, Tim Mead as Thrasymedes and Raimund Nolte as Hercules.

Admeto, which premiered in London in 1727, relays the story of a king who becomes tangled in a complex love triangle. Admeto's wife Alcestis sacrifices her life so that her ill husband might live. When Antigona—whom Admeto had earlier refused to marry—learns that Alcestis is dead, she attempts to woo him. Just as she captures his affection, however, Hercules rescues Alcestis from the underworld. Thrasymedes, who himself loves Antigona, complicates matters.

This video makes available one of Handel's lesser-known operas, showcasing superb performances of exquisite musical writing. Alcestis's Act III rage aria features coloratura that rivals Cleopatra at her most virtuosic. Lichtenstein's final cadenza is a thrilling display befitting Faustina Bordoni, for whom the role was created. Mead performs recitative and aria with a pure and vibrant vocal tone, impeccable phrasing and highly developed acting skill.

The production values combine historical performance practice with ultra-modern

costumes and stagecraft. Niels Niemann trained the singers to use Baroque gesture alongside modern movement. Köhler makes several unusual staging choices, including Lichtenstein singing two demanding arias while lying flat on her back. Action is located in a bleak modern hospital where Admeto is recovering from a coma; in Act II, the hospital doubles as the underworld, where a cannibalistic three-headed doctor functioning as Cerberus threatens Hercules's ability to free Alcestis.

Köhler's direction pairs slapstick humor—such as Admeto falling out of bed while singing a heroic aria—with unsettling drama. In Act II, the courtier Orindo drugs Alcestis and throws her unconscious body onto a bed, ripping her stockings and nearly raping her. Thrasymedes intervenes, only to attempt to rape her himself during his subsequent aria. The juxtaposition of comedy and violence makes it somewhat difficult to absorb the production's goals. Its aesthetic might be off-putting to those who are unfamiliar with Baroque opera or prefer a more traditional approach.

Musically, the opera remains faithful to mainstream conceptions of Baroque performance practice. The orchestra is comprised of period instruments, showcasing the color and scope of an early eighteenth-century ensemble. *Da capo* sections are ornamented tastefully, though somewhat conservatively overall. While arias are colorful and impassioned, performances of recitative do not always successfully emulate

speech. While text expression is of paramount importance in Baroque recitative, several singers do not enunciate clearly, and the pacing often drags.

In addition to a clear picture, the Blu-ray format offers stunning sound quality. The disc is organized in a way that makes the opera accessible. Each piece receives its own chapter, enabling straightforward navigation for classroom use. Viewers may

watch a synopsis, which is read over a montage of scenes from the opera, providing a useful overview of plot and characters. The disc features subtitles in English, Spanish, French, German and Italian and is accompanied by a booklet providing a history of the opera and a summary of each act.

BROOKE BRYANT

City University of New York Graduate Center

Gioachino Rossini. Early Operas. DVD. Gianluigi Gelmetti / Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra. With David Kuebler, Vito Gobbi, Amelia Felle, Alessandro Corbelli, Alberto Rinaldi, Oslavio di Credico, Carlos Feller, Janice Hall, John del Carlo, Monica Bacelli, Robert Gambill, Susan Patterson, Natale de Carolis, Stuart Kale, Jane Bunnell, Luciana Serra. [Germany]: EuroArts, 2009. 2057388. \$34.99.

For more than fifty years, the Schwetzingen Festival has presented operas from the Rokokotheater at Schwetzingen castle, which served as the summer residence of the elector Palatine Carl Theodore. The intimate theater eliminates the need to project to the upper balconies of a larger house, permitting the cast to deliver performances that contain many acting and vocal subtleties. Through its various programs and numerous radio broadcasts, the festival also has become the world's largest radio classical music festival. From the festival's performance archives, EuroArts has released *Rossini: Early Operas*, a DVD set containing four of the five one-act *farsas* (*Il signor Bruschino*, *La cambiale di matrimonio*, *L'occasione fa il ladro*, *La scala di seta*) that Rossini wrote for the Venetian Teatro San Moisè, which specialized in the genre, as a teenager (all were written before he reached the age of 21).

Director Michael Hampe, whose credits include productions at Salzburg, Paris, Milan, Edinburgh Festival and London-Covent Garden, combines his wealth of experience with the superb talents of a well-rehearsed ensemble company to present these operatic trinkets. Among the principal male singers are Alessandro Corbelli, Alberto Rinaldi and David Kuebler, talented actors as well as singers; representing the female singers are stars such as Luciana Serra, Susan Patterson and Monica Bacelli. The soloists are ably supported by members of Oper du Stadt Köln and the Stuttgart

Radio Symphony, conducted by Gianluigi Gelmetti. Three of the four operas are quintessential Rossini, worthy of a regular place in the repertoire.

La cambiale di matrimonio, Rossini's first professional work for the stage and the weakest in the collection, foreshadows elements of wit and sentiment that are refined in his later works. Rossini also benefited from the experience of librettist Gaetano Rossi in this collaboration, as well as from the musical style of Giovanni Paisiello and Giovanni Simone Mayr, whose style he studied and parodied here. The sets are wonderfully elaborate and realistic, with extravagant costumes. The singing is of the highest quality, with a coterie of *bel canto* specialists that offsets the generic nature of the musical ideas. Rossini liked the *cabaletta* of Fanni's to such an extent that he reused it virtually intact in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

La scala di Seta, the third Rossini *farse* and an excellent collaboration with the librettist Giuseppe Foppa, is an operatic treasure for a host of reasons. First, because certain aspects of the story invoke French comedy, notably the plays of Beaumarchais and points to Rossini's long association with French theater. Second, the plot of *La scala di Seta* is delightful—firmly from the world of amorous intrigues, wily servants, forced betrothals, secret marriages and deceived older men. Finally, Michael Hampe and the cast are both charming and witty in their 1990 rendition of the score, which employs the then-recent critical edition