

# AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

independent critics reviewing classical recordings

## STRADELLA: Ester

Jessica Gould (Ester), Sonia Tedla (Speranza Celeste), José Lemos (Mardocheo), Gabriele Lombardi (Aman), Salvo Vitale (Assuero); Camerata Grimani/ Jory Vinikour

Navona 6629 [2CD] 79 minutes

Alessandro Stradella's 1673 oratorio based on the biblical heroine Esther has been heard only rarely in modern times. There were performances in New York City in 1985 and then a recording in 2001 by a group called Il Concento that was released on the Brilliant Classics label. Barker found the cast variable, from "quite effective" to "lackluster", and lamented that the chorus sounded like they were in "a room next door" (J/F 2013). This new recording by Camerata Grimani led by Jory Vinikour goes a long way to upgrade the oratorio's standing in the audio catalog, with a superb ensemble captured in the vivid acoustics of the Sala della Carità in Padua. (The production is based on performances presented by Salon/Sanctuary Concerts in 2019 and 2020.)

Perhaps due to the shortcomings of the earlier recording, Barker added the disclaimer that "this is not oratorio in its later Handelian glories, but modest-scale good fun and enjoyable musical listening". The present recording brings Stradella's score to life in a way that begs a different perspective. There may not have been the Handel we know were it not for the influence of Italians like Stradella, with his rich melodic invention and sharp character delineation. When Esther prepares to appear unbidden before the King to plead for the salvation of her people, she contemplates the dangers in the haunting 'Miei fidi pensieri', followed by a faster-tempo aria of resolve, 'Su dunque'. It's a prototype not just for many of Handel's most bewitching soprano arias, but also a precursor to the ubiquitous aria-and-cabaletta formula that developed even later. For some reason, this crucial *scena* was not included in the Brilliant recording, so it is heard here for the first time, in Jessica Gould's persuasive delivery. And, whether consciously or not, Handel replicates Stradella's device of characterizing the evil Haman with virtuosic runs and "illogical intervals" (a phrase from the excellent notes by Gould and Eugenio Refini) in his own Esther oratorio.

The recording boasts a nearly all-Italian cast. Sonia Tedla as Speranza Celeste (Heavenly Hope) sings with pristine tone, remarkable agility, and a fine balance of brightness and warmth. Baritone Gabriele Lombardi projects Haman's menacing bluster without exaggeration and tosses off the role's vocal demands with aplomb. Salvo Vitale sings the role of King Ahasuerus with a smooth and powerful bass. In this streamlined telling of the story, the role of Mordechai, Esther's advisor (often interpreted as her uncle), is short. But Brazilian countertenor José Lemos, one of the two non-Italians in the cast, brings a fine sense of urgency to the scene where he urges Esther to approach the King ('Vanne al piè'). Another bass, Guglielmo Buonsanti, makes a fine impression as the Narrator, singing with clarity and resonance extending below the bass staff.

The other non-Italian in the cast is, appropriately enough, the Jewish-American soprano Jessica Gould (also a fluent Italian speaker) in the title role. Her opulent voice combines dramatic weight with the precision and finesse needed for the delicate florid passages, such as in the scene of Esther's supplication to the King. Esther is already Queen when the oratorio opens, so the sensuous beauty of Gould's timbre and the tear in her voice not only distinguish her from the other singers but also paint a picture of a stronger and more mature Esther than the passive virgin we encounter at the beginning of the Biblical narrative.

The oratorio is well structured. Act I ends with an exciting duet for Heavenly Hope and Haman, where the former warns the villain that his plot to kill the Jews of Persia will backfire on him. The real meat of the drama is in Act II, which opens with Esther's audience with the King and includes Haman's piquant response to the King's ire ('Apprendetel da me'). Under Jory Vinikour's direction, the oratorio bubbles with excitement, and there's enough elasticity of tempo for the singers to emphasize musical and dramatic points. The small chorus is an elite group of five, who at times blend into a homogeneous whole, and, at other times, retain their individuality so that we almost seem to "see" the faces of each character. The informative notes explore, among other topics, the paradox of how Catholic Counter-Reformation aristocrats viewed this tale of a Jewish woman's triumph over enemy forces.

ALTMAN