

Recording

Colin Clarke takes us through the latest news from the studios



Damien Guillon talks Stradella

I meet countertenor and conductor Damien Guillon the day after he sang in Masaaki Suzuki's unforgettable St John Passion at the Barbican (he of course participated in the Suzuki BIS St Matthew Passion; see my recent article for *Classical Music*). Sadly, only three of the 11 scheduled St John performances occurred due to coronavirus; the London concert was the last of them.

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Meeting at Guillon's hotel the next morning, though, we speak mainly about his new recording of Alessandro Stradella's magnificent *San Giovanni Battista* (St John the Baptist) on the Alpha label, a complement perhaps to his magnificent 2017 two-disc set of Caldara's oratorio *Maddalena, ai piedi di Cristo*. Both releases feature Guillon's group, Le Banquet Céleste. Stradella's dramatic oratorio was written for Palm Sunday, 1675; the score was only rediscovered in 1949. Centuries before Richard Strauss got his hands on the story, here is Salome in all her glory. There's a lot of examination of the dynamics between the characters in the Stradella; what brought this choice of piece about? 'It's a piece I've known for a long time,' says Guillon. 'When I was a student in Versailles I studied it. When we decided to do this piece, we had a project with Rennes Opéra to do it staged. We did it with costumes and so on, in a setting adapted for churches, performing it more than 10 times; it helped a lot to see how deeply the characters work together, and exactly what's happening. We did the recording between two performances.' Which explains the live feeling of the disc.

Salome seems to have more layers than in Strauss's take. 'Yes, in the beginning she is like an innocent young lady; at the end she has the power and is the leader of the piece.' There's yet another layer: Stradella's life was notable for his romantic escapades and criminal adventure, plus a rather dramatic

end. 'Exactly, he was very interested by women. St John is going to the court to Herod, saying, "You can't live like that, it's not right, in luxury, in pleasures," so there is a sort of parallel with his life.'

Guillon points out the sophisticated nature of the score. Stradella was the first to

Renaissance man: Damien Guillon





use concertino and ripieno in oratorio; a little later, Corelli famously used it in his Concerti grossi. Stradella uses it for dramatic effect in many of Herod's arias, with concertino and ripieno in dialogue, and the concertino a lot with Giovanni's contributions.

A bit of a Renaissance man himself, Guillon started in a boys' choir before studying harpsichord and organ. More and more, he conducts, and this is the first project in which he plays harpsichord. His cast is superb; only the countertenor Paul-Antoine Benos-Djian as St John was known to Guillon (they shared a singing teacher); the others came through auditions, the decision to go for young singers deliberate. Plus, Guillon created the score from a variety of manuscripts, including Rome and Modena. One of the most exciting aspects of this work is that historical musicology comes to life: 'Exactly, that's the sense of this kind of project. As a conductor you have to make choices, and bring it back to life.'

There are many ideas going forwards: Stradella, for example, set *Susannah* in 1681 (London just enjoyed Handel's version at



Covent Garden's Linbury Theatre, just before the lockdown). Not to mention English music, Dowland and Purcell songs, with an acrobat (that should be worth seeing). Everything in the musical world is currently up in the air right now, of course, but we have Stradella and Caldara to keep us going.

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Voyage of a Slavic Soul: Natalya Romaniw on her new disc for Orchid Classics

My conversation with soprano Natalya Romaniw takes place over the phone; we were to have met at St Martin's Lane in London, but coronavirus closed the ENO, robbing me and many others of her *Butterfly*, the run curtailed. Having already experienced Romaniw at Opera Holland Park in

Tchaikovsky (title role *Iolanta* and Lisa *Queen of Spades*), expectations were high. 'Each of Tchaikovsky's heroines, each of them very different, have really struck a chord with me,' she says. *Butterfly*, she says, was great, though. 'The role grew each time I did it; most of that came with the pressure we were under, the risk of having that taken away from us, and we gave our all.'

'Voyage of a Slavic Soul'. Slavic culture encompasses the likes of Russian, Ukrainian, Czech and Moravian peoples. Asked what defines a Slavic soul, Natalya suggests that it 'secretly enjoys a bit of misery; or maybe not so secretly. We do like to indulge in a little bit of the sombre side of life and musically, Lada and I both come from Eastern European heritage. Something



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Romaniw's new disc *Arion*, with pianist Lada Valešová, will be released 1 May on Orchid Classics, shortly before Natalya had been due to return to Garsington to sing *Rusalka*. Taking its title from a brooding, tragic Rachmaninov song, it is subtitled

about Slavic music really touches us and I think I probably perform at my best when I'm singing in that repertoire. It's like an eternal sense of melancholy; but even in the melancholy some happiness could be found, somehow.'