

Recording

Colin Clarke takes us through the latest news from the studios



Christophe Rousset on the Neapolitan School of composition

It is always a pleasure as well as a privilege to talk with Christophe Rousset. I know of his eloquence and enthusiasm having previously interviewed him around the time of his superb Strasbourg performances of Legrenzi's opera *La divisione del mondo* for another publication. Here, we discuss his recent Alpha release with his group Les Talens Lyriques of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* and works by Porpora and Leo.

Coupling the Pergolesi with these composers brings the focus onto the Neapolitan School. It's interesting to hear how Rousset came to this music, as a way to understand the genius of Domenico Scarlatti ('as you know, I'm a harpsichord player,' he modestly reminds me). 'Of course, his father Alessandro was probably his main inspiration, but I had to understand the background better. I discovered Leo, Porpora, Jommelli, and Traetta. I was really enthusiastic about their music, so inventive, so modern, looking forward to Mozart and later music, their very specific harmonic worlds, and very appealing melodic lines.'

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Previously, Rousset recorded Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* for Decca, with Bonney and Scholl, coupling it with two of that composer's *Salve Reginas*. This time it is more diverse: 'I thought it was a better idea

Les Talens Lyriques



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Rousset conducting

to find unpublished pieces in the same kind of flavour. I love those two composers and I think they deserve to be better known.' Although the critical reception of the Decca recording was magnificent, one wonders how interpretations change. 'I didn't listen again to the previous one, but I have the feeling I am doing exactly the same thing. But of course I can't, you never do the same, especially with different singers. Probably it is more dramatic, more mature because I have done more dramatic music.'

The soprano, Sandine Piau, is world-renowned; the counter-tenor Christopher Lowrey, less so, but he fits the recording like a glove. He had also sung in the Legrenzi above and has worked with Rousset on a number of Handel operas. 'He's a fantastic counter-tenor and this was an opportunity to bring him forwards and to show how he deserves to be known. I love his singing, I like the person, and I think he will have fantastic career in the future.' The key, though, is the way the singers work together. As Rousset

says, 'They have this perfect intonation. With all those harmonic suspensions and dissonances they have to, otherwise it's painful. They are incredible.'

As to the couplings, the Porpora *Salve Regina* in G is a soprano piece. Rousset introduces it: 'As singing teacher in Naples, Porpora taught many of the castrati and he was known around Europe, and while staying in Vienna he gave lessons to Haydn. The first Porpora piece I ever performed was 'Alto Giove' from *Polifemo* for the movie *Farinelli*. It's now a hit, everybody sings it. He's a very appealing composer, especially for the singing lines. The *Slave Regina* is very complex, very florid. Sandrine is incredible, she is the perfect singer to make all of those ornaments make sense. She has lightness and focus.'

But the revelation for me was the Leo *Beatus vir qui timet*, which has some musical similarities with Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* ('an echo', in Rousset's words. But Leo's piece is more dramatic and joyful, superbly sung by Lowrey: Rousset also previously recorded a disc of Leo for Decca. 'The music was deeper, more sombre and more devotional. And you had the young Sandrine Piau as well.' Quite the bonus.

Rousset and his group are due in London in April 2021 to perform the Pergolesi at the Wigmore Hall. Fingers crossed; meanwhile Mozart's *Betulia Liberata* with Piau is already in the can, due out September on Aparté: 'It's thrilling, the piece is fantastic; it's very difficult for the singers and I was very pleased with this version.'

Nicola Benedetti takes on Elgar's Violin Concerto with London Philharmonic

Any release of the Elgar Violin Concerto is an event; that Nicola Benedetti has partnered with the London Philharmonic under their charismatic principal conductor Vladimir Jurowski on Decca only adds to the frisson. Benedetti is surely one of the busiest musicians around at the moment, her work including not only a full concert career but also tireless educational work. I speak to Nicola Benedetti in a precious ten-minute break (it sneaks to 13), over Skype. 'I'm choking with the amount I'm doing at the moment' she says.



'Smitten': Benedetti rehearses with the LPO

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