

## Héloïse Mas—Anachronistic Hearts: Handel Arias

Excerpts from *Agrippina*, *Parnasso in festa*, *Alcina*, *Amadigi di Gaula*, *Ariodante*, *Teseo*, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, *Hercules*; *La Lucrezia*. London Handel Orchestra, c. Laurence Cummings. Muso mu 045 (one CD)

Anachronistic Hearts? The title is only one of several puzzling aspects to this CD. Héloïse Mas is a French mezzo who has concentrated mostly on French 19th-century repertoire, including the roles of both Carmen and Mercédès. The singer's brief note in the booklet ties the project in with something called 'Matters of the Hearts' but gives no clue as to why she chose Handel for a debut CD. Then there is the repertoire chosen; the arias from four of the works involved (*Agrippina*, *Alcina*, *Teseo* and the serenata *Parnasso in festa*) in addition to the cantata *La Lucrezia* were written originally for soprano. While it is true that nomenclature was far less rigidly applied in Handel's day it is evident that a number of the arias do not lie well for Mas's voice. The Handel scholar Suzanne Aspden's notes at times read like a feminist tract, in doing so rather overlooking the fact that no fewer than three of Mas's protagonists are male.

Although Mas's vocal tone is intrinsically engaging, especially in its middle register, where particularly in cantabile it has an appealing creamy quality, the continuous vibrato is too wide for this repertoire. While capable of the necessary agility in quicker music, Mas's spirited upper range is too strong and uncontrolled for Baroque music. Ornaments are not well articulated in general—though she surprises with a nicely turned trill in the da capo of Medea's 'Morirò ma vendicata'—and the added embellishments in repeats are often, well, anachronistic. Exceptionally in *Ariodante*'s marvellous 'Scherza infida' Mas hints there may be a Handel singer lurking.

She is not helped by Laurence Cummings's deliberate tempos and enervated rhythms. A final surprise comes with an unannounced encore, 'O ma lyre immortelle' from Gounod's *Sapho*, where the singer sounds considerably more comfortable.

BRIAN ROBINS

## OPERA BOOKS

### Gigli: The Master Tenor

By Colin Bain. Edited and published by Barry R. Ashpole. 576pp. C\$85. ISBN: 978-1-774390-1-9

This well-written, attractively illustrated and painstakingly researched biography of one of the best-loved tenors of all time can be recommended to all those seeking a compellingly detailed and lucid account of a remarkable life and career. The author Colin Bain—who died in 2007 but whose work was made available to the editor and publisher Barry R. Ashpole by his widow—brought a number of revealing documents

to light and had the opportunity to interview many people who were closely associated with Beniamino Gigli during his lifetime (1890-1957). The narrative that unfolds in these pages is both psychologically convincing and historically informed. Bain moreover was a genuine lover of singing (Gigli's in particular) and his familiarity with all of the tenor's recordings enables him here to trace with impressive accuracy the

evolution and decline of a voice that delighted audiences for over 40 years. In dealing with the controversies that tarnished Gigli's reputation—sparked by his departure from the Met in 1932 after refusing to accept the pay cut proposed by the general manager Gatti-Casazza and by his willingness to perform at symbolic events for the Fascist and Nazi regimes—Bain unambiguously sides with the tenor. But he does so persuasively, documenting the deviousness of Gatti-Casazza's money-saving policy and clarifying Gigli's vulnerably neutral position in Rome during one of the most complex and strife-ridden periods of Italian history (1944-5).

The author strangely fails to mention Gigli's unsuccessful bid to become a member of the Italian parliament for the Christian Democrats in 1953: an episode that is dealt with extensively in Luigi Inzaghi's remarkable 608-page chronology of the tenor's life and career, published in Italian by Zecchini Editore in 2005. Another, more serious, lacuna in Bain's work is the lack of notes indicating the exact sources of what often amounts to inside information. The only section of the book that is annotated is the opening extract from his essay 'The Aesthetics of the Recordings of Beniamino Gigli', presented in an appendix, at the end of which we are irritatingly invited to go to the website [www.giglihemastertenor.com](http://www.giglihemastertenor.com) in order to finish reading it! That website does contain some interesting extra material (interviews by James Drake), but the essay itself is a petulant and weakly argued attempt to dismiss those critics who have pointed quite justifiably to the stylistic solecisms in Gigli's performances. Bain himself is much more successful as a biographer than as a



Beniamino Gigli

critic. He claims, on the final page of the biography, that Gigli's 'singing still sounds modern', but if that is the case, why—one wonders—are his recordings not more popular today, particularly since no more recent tenor has possessed such a phenomenally beautiful voice backed by an equally phenomenal technique?

In such a long work, a few errors are almost inevitable. We are repeatedly told, for example, that Gigli interpolated a high C in the cadenza to Nemorino's 'Quanto è bella' in *L'elisir d'amore* (it was in fact a B) and that he took Nadir's aria up a semitone (when in fact he took it down) in *Les Pêcheurs de perles*. And when Bain shifts the focus away from his favourite singer momentarily, he proves rather less reliable: Tetrizzini did not die in poverty and Callas did not physically assault Tebaldi in Brazil in 1951. Moreover, a certain number of Italian names are repeatedly misspelt, occasionally in a manner that could generate confusion: witness Fiorella La Guardia (this decidedly male politician was a great friend of Gigli's) and Largo di Garda. If the book is reprinted in the future (as it fully deserves to be), some extra editing would be welcome.

STEPHEN HASTINGS

### Lowering the Tone & Raising the Roof

By Raymond Gubbay. Quiller Publishing Ltd. 224pp. £18.99. ISBN: 978-1-84689-352-0

The author of this autobiography retired five years ago from a highly successful

business in promoting classical music, opera, ballet and other entertainment