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'Brillez, astres nouveaux!' Arias and Other Excerpts from Eighteenth-Century French Operas by Rameau, Leclair, Boismortier, and Others. Aparte CD AP223, 2020 [review]

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Audio Review

“Brillez, astres nouveaux!” Arias and Other Excerpts from Eighteenth-Century French Operas by Rameau, Leclair, Boismortier, and Others. Aparte CD AP223, 2020.

Performers: Chantal Santon Jeffery, soprano; Purcell Choir and Orfeo Orchestra, conducted by György Vashegyi

One of the great advantages of a well-planned CD is that it can make available pieces of music that are little known or even previously unrecorded, performed with spirit and precision, and arrayed in a fashion that creates a meaningful hour-plus of musical experience. That is mostly what one encounters, with gratitude, in this aria-recital by Chantal Santon Jeffery, a Hungarian chorus, and a mostly Hungarian period-instrument orchestra, all under the direction of György Vashegyi, a conductor previously unknown to me. The concertmaster is the renowned English period-instrument violinist Simon Standage.

The CD offers a highly stimulating and varied tour of works that few listeners—even devoted CD collectors—will have heard before. The best-known excerpts are from works by Rameau, such as *Dardanus*, *Le temple de la gloire*, and *Les fêtes d’Hébé*. But we also encounter selections by composers of whom most of us know little or even (I myself confess) nothing: from the somewhat-known Boismortier, Leclair, and Mondonville to the more obscure Bury, Cardonne, Dauvergne, Gervais, and Royer.

Even some of the Rameau items are unusual: I had never before encountered anything from his *La naissance d’Osiris* or (though the work has been recorded by William Christie) his *Les paladins*. The earliest excerpt here is from Gervais’s *Pomone* (1720); the latest is from Cardonne’s *Omphale* (1769). Put a different way, the program extends from before Bach reached Leipzig (which wasn’t until 1723) until a year in which Mozart, then 13 years old, had already written three operas and eight symphonies.

The styles heard here do not, of course, vary as drastically as mid-career Bach does from early Mozart. These French composers were all participating in a continuous operatic culture, the result being many family resemblances. Still, the alert listener will notice shifts in expressive manner and means from one composer to the next and from one decade to the next.

These contrasts are not laid out chronologically. Instead, the recording jumps from one composer and work to another. Four excerpts from Cardonne’s *Omphale* are kept together, perhaps (or perhaps not?) in the order in which they appear in the opera, including a dance: “Air des magiciens.” The same is true for five excerpts from Daubergne’s *Canente* (1760), including its own “Air des magiciens.” But two arias from Rameau’s *Le temple de la gloire* (1745) are, respectively, tracks 4 and 31.



Chantal Santon Jeffery

The result of all this diversity is a kind of potpourri-concert, beginning with the overture to Bury's *Les caractères de la Folie* (1743) and closing with the title track: the soprano aria "Brillez, astres nouveaux . . . !" from the first version of Rameau's remarkable *Castor et Pollux* (1737; the Rameau work has been recorded at least six times, though more often in its 1754 revision). Relatively brief silences between tracks (often only one or two seconds) increase a sense of flow from one track—and from one work—to the next, heightening the built-in contrasts of style and mood, as when an aria by Rameau about the universal yearning for happiness is immediately followed by—almost interrupted by—a storm scene by Royer, with startling timpani and spiffy choral expressions of horror (tracks 4–5).

The contrast-laden contents make this well-packed CD a delight to listen to from beginning to end, yet also one to wander around in.

And now to the "mostly" in my first paragraph.

Jeffery (or Santon Jeffery; she originally hyphenated the two family names, but seems to have stopped doing it) is perhaps best known for performances of music of the Baroque era. Among her previous recordings that I have *not* heard are ones of music by Purcell, Campra, and—as here—Rameau. I have reviewed the soprano before, primarily in little-known nineteenth-century music. I noted her basically solid singing and enunciation, but I sometimes complained of a slight unsteadiness in her tone, including a slow (though not wide)

vibrato and a tendency to be slightly under-pitch on long notes (especially when loud).¹ I think of her as a kind of utility singer, willing to take on a variety of challenging tasks and never seriously disappointing. (She has participated in numerous newly commissioned works.)

It is perhaps not by chance that her one performance that seemed to me truly first-rate (from among the recordings that have previously come to me for review) was of an opera that—like the works recorded here—comes from the eighteenth rather than nineteenth century: Grétry’s opéra-comique *Raoul Barbe-bleue* (1789).² The Grétry recording, made after a run of stage performances, showed a singer transformed. Santon Jeffrey was there more specific, and even vocally more assured, than in any of the other recordings I had heard. Perhaps she profited from extensive coaching from the conductor (Norwegian early-music specialist Martin Wählberg) or from the stage director. (Her spoken dialogue there was superbly rendered.)

In the present CD she is singing music from several decades earlier than the Grétry, which I thought might allow her to shine. Instead, she seems to be back to “utility” status: singing capably but never enchantingly, and with little differentiation from one composer and one work to the next, basically alternating between placidity, cheerful excitement, and agitated distress, with few attempts at coloring specific words or enjoying a particular melodic fillip. The slight shudder and flatness frequently recur (e.g., in track 9).

I kept imagining how much more delectable this CD would have been if performed by a different light soprano of recent vintage: say, Kathleen Battle, Barbara Bonney, Patricia Petibon, Sandrine Piau, or Carolyn Sampson. Any one of them would likely have better demonstrated the combination of “roundness and lightness” that Charles de Brosses (in 1765) described as necessary for putting this kind of music across. And they would likely have differentiated more actively between the various musical numbers and the characters who sing them.

The orchestra makes attractive sounds throughout, sometimes cajoling (as in a delicious minute and a half of Mondonville, track 20), other times attacking forcefully. The

1. See my review of her performance of *La légende des ours*, a song cycle with orchestra by Marie Jaëll: *American Record Guide* 79, no. 5 (September/October 2016): 112–14; online at <https://newyorkarts.net/2016/11/generous-collection-works-marie-jaell-centre-de-musique-romantique-francaise-palazetto-bru-zane-veniceediciones-singulares/>. The recording is included in vol. 4 of the *Portraits* series published by the Centre de la musique romantique française (located at the Palazzetto Bru Zane, in Venice): Marie Jaëll: *Musique symphonique, musique pour piano* (Ediciones Singulares ES1022, 3 CDs). Other recordings in which she participated and which I reviewed include Charles Gounod, *Cantates et musique sacrée* (ES1030, 2 CDs), *American Record Guide* 81, no. 4 (July/August 2018): 95; online at <https://operatoday.com/2021/05/gounods-early-mastery-in-opera-and-sacred-music-world-premiere-recordings-of-scenes-and-choral-works/>; Charles-Simon Catel, *Les bayadères* (ES1016, 2 discs), *American Record Guide* 81, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 74–75; Félicien David, *Christophe Colomb, Musique de chambre, symphonique et sacrée* (ES1028, 3 CDs), online at <https://www.classical-scene.com/2019/01/19/felicien-david-revived-digitally/>; and Jacques Offenbach, *Maître Péronilla* (Bru Zane BZ1039, 2 CDs), *American Record Guide* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2020): 99–100; online at <https://artsfuse.org/212974/opera-album-review-offenbach-in-a-spanish-mood-in-a-top-notch-first-recording/>.

2. André-Modeste Grétry, *Raoul Barbe-bleue* (Aparte AP214, 2 CDs), *American Record Guide* 82, no. 3 (March/April 2020): 94–95; online at <https://artsfuse.org/208579/opera-album-a-deliciously-grisly-comic-opera-from-1789-the-year-the-french-revolution-began/>.

microphones balance the orchestra well, such that it neither overpowers the soprano and chorus nor disappears behind them. As captured here, the acoustics in Budapest's renowned Béla Bartók National Concert Hall (inaugurated in 2005, with some 1500 seats) leave nothing to be desired. I hope the venue sounds as good "live." The recording was made over three days in November 2017.

Benoît Dratwicky, Artistic Director of the production department at the renowned Centre de musique baroque de Versailles (and author of a major monograph on Dauvergne), provides an immensely helpful introductory essay, focusing on three renowned sopranos for whom various of the roles excerpted here were written. (Charles Johnston's translation of both the essay and the sung texts is admirable.) I only wish that Dratwicky had been allowed twice as much space, so he could have given us plot details and stylistic pointers about each track. Who are these characters who are urging soldiers on to victory, and why? What has just prompted this other character to enjoy the pleasures of springtime? And, in certain excerpts, is the soloist or the choral group not part of the plot but, rather, participating in a *divertissement* for the entertainment of certain on-stage characters who *are* part of the plot? Even if financial considerations restricted the booklet to a few pages, surely a fuller version could have been put up on the Internet. We're living in the age of Open Access, as the journal you are reading (*M&MP*) happily attests!

Puzzled listeners may appreciate at least two clues: The title of Rameau's *Les paladins*—as non-French-speakers may likely not know today—means "Christian knights," especially ones who fought in the Crusades. And the title of Dauvergne's *Canente* refers to the nymph—Canens in English usage—who was, in Roman mythology, the personification of song because, Ophelia-like, she sang as she drowned. (Much as Narcissus became a symbol of vanity for admiring his beauty in the stream.) I had to look Canente up myself. What other important information should I and others have been told here?

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