

beating *The Mikado's* record of 672 and sending a rattled Gilbert & Sullivan back to the drawing board to create *The Yeomen of the Guard*.

So this premiere recording fills a genuine gap. *Dorothy* is a 'pastoral comedy opera' set in rural Kent, where the miserly Squire Bantam's daughter Dorothy and niece Lydia spurn arranged marriages, but find themselves falling in love with two handsome strangers who turn out – you guessed it – to be their intended fiancés, *incognito*. The period is the 18th century: a popular choice for turn-of-the-century comedies, though Cellier's genial score can't quite muster the roistering verve of, say, Edward German's *Tom Jones* or the Cajun spice of Victor Herbert's *Naughty Marietta*.

But Cellier does a nice line in lilting ballads and waltz-songs; and, with Richard Bonyngé at the helm of an orchestra that would have done any Victorian theatre proud, we can enjoy both the graceful swing of Cellier's melodies and his luminous little touches of colour: a radiant evening chorus in Act 2, a sequence of country dances in Act 3 and an ensemble built around chiming clocks. Cast and chorus sound fresh, and there isn't an unenjoyable voice here. You don't expect or need heavyweight singing in this repertoire, though Majella Cullagh has richness to spare as Dorothy and John Ieuan Jones, as Harry Sherwood, brings warmth to the show's big hit number, 'Queen of my heart'.

If Edward Robinson (as Bantam) and Michael Vincent Jones as the bailiff Lurcher (the main comic relief) perhaps sound a little too bright and young for their characters, that's understandable in the context of this recording, where the emphasis has clearly been less on creating the illusion of a theatrical production than giving the finest possible musical performance of a neglected score. In that, Victorian Opera certainly succeeds, and the individual voices blend well in the numerous gracefully written ensembles.

Spoken dialogue is omitted – perhaps mercifully, having read the libretto, which is not included in the booklet but can be downloaded from the Naxos website. Alternatively, for £2 you can purchase a nicely illustrated 'souvenir booklet' direct from Victorian Opera and contribute in a small way to future adventures in this delightful repertoire.

Richard Bratby

M-A Charpentier

Les arts florissants.

La couronne de fleurs (excs)

Maïlys de Villoutreys *sop*..... La Musique/Roselie

Virginie Thomas *sop*..... La Poésie/Flore

Jonathan Spicher *ten*..... La Peinture

Anaïs Bertrand *mez*..... L'Architecture/Hyacinthe

David Witczak *bar*..... La Discorde

Cécile Achille *sop*..... La Paix/Amaranthe

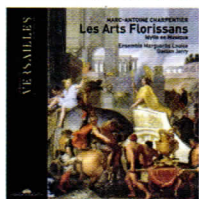
Virgile Ancely *bass*..... Warrior

Ensemble Marguerite Louise / Gaétan Jarry

Château de Versailles Spectacles © CVS001

(59' • DDD)

Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



Charpentier's pastoral entertainments *Les arts florissants* and *La couronne de fleurs*

(1685) were commissioned by the Mademoiselle de Guise to celebrate Louis XIV's recent military victories and the restoration of peace. They were performed by her household ensemble of about 15 musicians, whereas Gaétan Jarry and Ensemble Marguerite Louise field somewhat larger forces for a performance recorded in connection to an outdoor production at the palace of Versailles in summer 2017; photos of the dress rehearsal make one wish one had been there.

La couronne de fleurs is an adaptation of Charpentier's prologue to Molière's *comédie-ballet Le malade imaginaire* (1673). Concise extracts depict shepherds celebrating the return of peace after the horrors of war; a few more were recorded by Paul O'Dette and Stephen Stubbs with their Bostonians. Nevertheless, Jarry's main attraction is a gently sensual interpretation of the idyll *Les arts florissants* – an allegorical *divertissement* in which Music, Poetry, Painting and Architecture proclaim how their respective arts glorify the Sun King. Its first recording for nearly 40 years has elegant sensuality, nowhere more so than in Music's softly harmonious accompanied recitative 'Que mes divins concerts' (sung gorgeously by Maïlys de Villoutreys), and even the clamorous interruption of a chorus of warriors soon resolves into sweet relief at hearing Music's 'celestial melodious accents'. Likewise, Poetry (sung soothingly by Virginie Thomas) and the chorus observe that 'It is better not to say anything than to say something feebly'. The disturbance generated by Discord (the extrovert baritone David Witczak) and the Furies expressing their bitter hatred of the happiness created by the king threatens everyone's contentment until they are banished calmly by Peace (the ideally

serene Cécile Achille). Poetry restores the blissful mood, celebrated by all four flourishing arts and the chorus in a lovely chaconne – suggesting that anything Lully can do well, Charpentier can do better.

David Vickers

Les arts florissants – selected comparison:

Arts Florissants, Christie (6/82⁸) (HARM) HAF890 1083

La couronne de fleurs – selected comparison:

Boston Early Music Festival, O'Dette, Stubbs

(9/14) (CPO) CPO777 876-2

Handel

Acis and Galatea

Jeremy Budd *ten*..... Acis

Grace Davidson *sop*..... Galatea

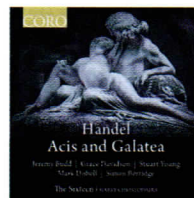
Stuart Young *bass*..... Polyphemus

Mark Dobell *ten*..... Damon

Simon Berridge *ten*..... Coridon

The Sixteen / Harry Christophers

Coro © 2 COR16169 (89' • DDD • T)



As David Vickers pointed out in his *Gramophone* Collection article last October, it

took a long time for recordings of Handel's delightful pastoral to come round to essentially the same forces – and even roles – that the composer wrote it for; this newcomer becomes only the fifth since 2007 to cast five singers in five roles and then use those same singers as the chorus alongside a minimal orchestra. Indeed, Harry Christophers's may be the smallest yet, for its tiny band is strictly one-to-a-part, the only luxury among its nine players a harp in the continuo section.

Such matters do not count for everything, though, and it certainly doesn't stop the larger-scale versions by John Eliot Gardiner (Archiv, 9/78) and William Christie (Erato, 9/99) from being rightly celebrated and enjoyed for their dramatic flair and fine singing. But there is no doubt that the smaller forces bring not only greater clarity and sweetness but also uplifting drafts of clean air that seem entirely appropriate to the work. There is greater human vulnerability and sympathy in the choruses, too.

As you might expect in a performance cast from the members of The Sixteen, the singers are not the operatically outgoing sort. Rather, they offer an uncomplicated vocal beauty and intimacy which, together with that of orchestra, seems appropriate to the nature of a piece more closely related to Handel's early Italian cantatas and serenatas than to his more recent London operas. There are pluses and minuses, of course: Grace Davidson's Galatea sounds