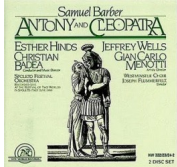


Samuel Barber - Anthony and Cleopatra (1992)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 19 August 2011 15:00 - Last Updated Monday, 19 August 2013 12:49

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CD1 1. Act I, Prologue 1:55 2. Act I, Scene 1 2:49 3. "I am sick and sullen" 3:25 4. Act I, Orchestral Interlude 1:31 5. Act I, Scene 2 5:29 6. Act I, Scene 3 5:50 7. Slaves' dance 7:30 8. Act I, Scene 4 3:30 9. Aria - "When first she met Mark Antony" 2:32 10. Vision of Cleopatra's barge 3:16 11. Act II, Scene 1 2:41 12. Act II, Scene 2 2:53 13. "Hush, here comes The Queen and Antony" 4:24 14. Act II, Scene 3 3:57 15. Act II, Scene 4 1:32 16. Duet - "Oh take, oh take those lips away" 4:53 [play](#) CD2 1. Act II, Scene 5 3:33 2. Aria - "Hark! The land bids me tread no more upon it" 3:24 3. Act II, Scene 6 4:29 4. Act II, Scene 7 1:46 5. Aria - "O sov'reign mistress" 3:03 6. Act II, Orchestral Interlude 1:26 7. Act II, Scene 8 4:55 8. "Where's Antony?" 2:36 9. Act III, Scene 1 6:41 10. Trio - "My lord, my lord! Noblest of men" 5:32 11. "The breaking of so great a thing" 2:52 12. Act III, Prelude 2:18 13. Act III, Scene 2 3:28 14. "Here is a rural fellow" 2:12 15. Aria - "Give me my robe" 5:33 [play](#) 16. Death of Cleopatra 4:23

Cleopatra - Esther Hinds Antonius - Jeffrey Wells Enobarbus - Eric Halfvarson Agrippa - C. Damsel Charmian - Kathryn Cowsdrick Iras - Jane Bunnell Spoleto Festival Orchestra Westminster Choir Christian Badea - conductor, 1983

Densely opulent, hypocaut hot and smokingly romantic.

The shadows cast by the failure of Antony and Cleopatra at its premiere at the newly-opened Lincoln Centre are long and debilitating. While the opera Vanessa has now had three commercial recordings - all on CD - his most voluptuously grand operatic example has endured comparative neglect.

When Slatkin was with the BBCSO – not the orchestra's finest moment, I confess - he did great work in introducing British audiences to the delights of the USA's concert life of the era

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1930-1960. The Chandos Barbican Centre recording of Vanessa which Slatkin directed was rightly well received (CHSA5032) as was the Naxos competition that came out at the same time. Few mentioned the torridly recorded RCA-BMG-Sony original of Vanessa by Mitropoulos (Sony Opera House 88697446172).

I first heard something beyond the Leontyne Price excerpts from Antony and Cleopatra in the early 1980s when I exchanged the equivalent of “food parcels” of off-air tapes with like-minded North Americans. My education galloped forwards. Included in the bundles of cassettes were two of the 1975 Juilliard revival of Antony and Cleopatra, again with Esther Hinds; this time with James Conlon conducting. I was captivated. After that I heard a similarly fine and vigorous Antony and Cleopatra from ORTF forces conducted by Jean-Pierre Marty. French radio are good with neglected operas – witness their recent revival of Herrmann’s *Wuthering Heights* as *Les Hauts de Hurlevent*.

This long-established New World set from Badea starts with the gathered chorus warning Antony to cease his dalliance with the Egyptian queen. The music and choral writing is densely opulent, hypocaust hot and smokingly romantic. This carries over into the sable afflatus of the ecstatic hymn to Cleopatra’s beauty. One or two of the female cast suffer from a disfiguring vibrato but Hinds is excellent throughout no doubt taking some advantage from her previous performances leading the 1970s Juilliard revival. The Westminster Choir have been superbly drilled but not so much as to lose resilience. The words emerge with superb unanimity – quite an achievement for such a large chorus. The orchestral interlude (tr. 4) sports superheated writing for the massed strings and overtones of Bernard Herrmann and even Rozsa. Scene 2 shifts to the Senate in Rome with ragged-edged trumpet fanfares blaring in barbaric splendour. That trumpet motif with its propulsive echoes of Roy Harris will return. The senator Maecenas sports a true Puccinian squilla. As we move back to Cleopatra’s palace the writing becomes more subtly exotic for the first time with shimmering tintinnabulation. There are times when one thinks that this might have been the roman opera that Rozsa never wrote or that it in some way shadows the parody opera Herrmann wrote for Kane’s wife in *Citizen Kane*. Note the gleaming strings in *Good Night Dear Lady*. The final section of act 1 takes us to Cleopatra’s barge on the Nile – it conjures visions of triremes and quinquiremes with the sort of lavish grandiloquence found in Respighi’s *Vetrata di Chiesa*. Act II opens with that punchy Roy Harris motif for brass and the music ascends to even greater romantic heights. The throb in Hinds’ soprano adds to the eruptive overflow in the duet at tr. 16. It comes as no surprise that Hinds has also performed Barber’s *Knoxville* – one of the greatest classical works produced in the USA.

We move to CD 2 for the continuation of Act II. The brief orchestral interlude (tr. 6) is distinguished by lovely undramatic lyrical horn playing. The finale of act II has a doom-laden drum limning in the rhythmic pattern of the melody and providing a deep foundation for the music. Magnificently distraught tragedy lours over the latter sections of Act II and all of Act 3. A

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pyre of the emotions, the music proceeds intensely but with a flame that is slow to consume. It's the equivalent in sound of Peter O'Toole, in the film Troy, as the Trojan monarch looking out in despair over his city as it is despoiled and put to rape and the torch by the Greeks. That same boiling tragedy wells up in silvery passion in the two voices at tr. 9. Barber does well to sustain the mood over such a long span. It still has wings when we get to Give me my robe (tr. 15) as the harpist bard accompanies the curling smoke of a cremation of the vanities, unbearably sorrowing and with a tragic freight.

The present New World recording has been around for many years and indeed was first issued as an LP box. It's the only recording of Antony and Cleopatra but is much better than adequate. It was good to make its super-heated acquaintance again. Even so this is not the full opera – it was seemingly cut by about an hour for the Spoleto project. There's a full libretto and extensive notes including several photos and one of Christian Badea with his film-star looks in conversation with Barber.

The recording forms part of the Recorded Anthology of American Music. This lends it the gravitas of previous such projects including those LPs (some reissued by Bridge) of the Society for the Promotion of the American Musical Heritage. It was taped from four performances. You can hear the occasional cough but it's rare enough and you certainly tap in to the tension of a live event. And now how about New World recording Roger Sessions' opera Montezuma, the grand operas of Barber's life-partner Menotti (I am intrigued by The Hero) and Bernard Herrmann's Wuthering Heights. -- Rob Barnett, MusicWeb International

Antony and Cleopatra is an opera in three acts by American composer Samuel Barber. The libretto was prepared by Franco Zeffirelli based on the play Antony and Cleopatra by Shakespeare. It originally made use of Shakespeare's language exclusively.

It was first performed in New York City on September 16, 1966, at the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. The idea was to have a new opera by an American composer for the gala opening of the new house.[vague]

No expense was spared. Franco Zeffirelli was hired as stage director. Thomas Schippers was

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the conductor. The stage design and costumes were elaborate; the cast enormous including 22 singers, full chorus, and ballet dancers. The opera was badly received by the press, and not enthusiastically received by the public (Freeman 1997, 15; Heyman 1992b). This was because of the elaborate staging, gaudy costumes, and to a press focused more on the social glitter of the occasion than on the music (Heyman 1992a). The opera was dropped from the Met's repertory after the initial performances of the production.

Barber revised the opera, with text revisions by Gian-Carlo Menotti, Barber's long-time partner and librettist of his first opera, Vanessa (Heyman 1992a). This version was premièred under Menotti's direction at the Juilliard American Opera Center on February 6, 1975 (Freeman 1997, 15). There were further productions at the Spoleto Festival USA and Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto, Italy, in 1983, and the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1991 (Heyman 1992a).

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