

Massenet - Herodiade (Gergiev) [1995]

Written by bluesever

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CD1 1. *Hérodiade (Oper In 4 Akten)* 2. *Alerte! Levez-vous! Le Palais Est Ouvert!* (5:15) 3. *Encore Une Dispute* (3:30) 4. *Ah! Salomé! Dans Ce Palais* (6:29) 5. *Jérusalem! Salut! Ville Fortunée!* (0:58) 6. *Introduction - Elle A Fui Le Palais* (1:24) 7. *Salomé, Salomé! Reviens, Je Te Veux!* (1:10) 8. *Venge-moi D'une Supreme Offense!* (6:31) 9. *Frappe Donc!* (1:42) 10. *Calmez Donc Vos Fureurs* (8:41) 11. *Roi, Tu Peux T'assoupir* (4:01) 12. *Danse Babylonienne - Que Ce Philtre Amoureux* (2:00) 13. *Maitre, Bois Dans Cette Amphore* (2:22) 14. *Vision Fugitive Et Toujours Poursuivie* (6:51) 15. *Voilà L'homme Qui Fait Trembler Tout En Empire!* (2:00) 16. *Explique-moi D'abord Le Mal Que Je Ressens!* (4:25) 17. *Roi, Que Ta Superbe Vaillance* (4:55) 18. *Aux Romains Orgueilleux* (1:04) 19. *Vous Qui Tenez Conseil* (1:21) 20. *Ah! Le Romain!* (0:38) 21. *Mon Approche Quel Trouble* (3:42) 22. *Hosannah!* (1:30) 23. *Je Tiens Ma Vengeance! Toute Justice Vient Du Ciel!* (1:49) CD2 1. *Dors, O Cité Perverse!* (4:39) 2. *Ah! Phanuel!* (3:16) 3. *Si Dieu L'avait Voulu* (3:12) 4. *Prélude* (1:42) 5. *Hérode, À Toit Ces Palmes, À Toi Ces Fleurs!* (4:10) 6. *Charme Des Jours Passés* (2:49) 7. *C'en Est Fait! La Judée Appartient À Tibère!* (4:46) 8. *Que M'oses-tu Dire?* (3:26) 9. *Marche Sainte* (5:13) 10. *Scène Religieuse: Schemah Israael! Adonai Eleheinou!* (3:01) 11. *Peuple Juif! Rends Justice* (1:00) 12. *Achève Donc Ton Oeuvre* (1:42) 13. *Comme Il Est Beau Dans Sa Misère* (1:37) 14. *Homme, Quel Est Ton Nom?* (3:17) 15. *C'est Dieu Que L'on Te Nomme* (3:45) 16. *Frappez Donc, Frappez Les Apotres* (1:18) 17. *Qu'ils Meurent* (2:04) 18. *Ne Pouvant Réprimer* (5:18) 19. *Salomé! - Jean!* (3:10) 20. *Ami, La Mort N'est Pas Cruelle* (2:31) 21. *Quand Nos Jours S'éteindront* (2:59) 22. *Romains! Nous Sommes Romains!* (2:30) 23. *Ballet. Les Gauloises* (1:29) 24. *Ballet. Finale* (1:29) 25. *Pourquoi Me Retirer Cette Faveur Supreme* (3:05) 26. *Ses Pleurs Ont Calmé Ma Fureur!* (1:02) 27. *Laissez-vous Émouvoir!* (2:51) Renée Fleming (Soprano) Dolora Zajic (Mezzo Soprano) Juan Pons (Baritone) Kenneth Cox (Bass) Hector Vásquez (Baritone) Plácido Domingo (Tenor) San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus Valery Gergiev - conductor

Until a few months ago, there was little choice if you wanted to listen to *Hérodiade*, Massenet's first major work. Either you found a pirate of a 1970s French radio broadcast which was inadequately cast and incredibly cut, or a pirate of a 1980s Barcelona performance which was

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also cut and with the unlikely cast of Caballé, Carreras, Vejzovic and Pons. New recordings have now been released by Sony and EMI which are complementary rather than competitive. Michel Plasson and his Toulouse forces on EMI (3 discs) definitely offer the stronger version, but suffer at one crucial point, the duel of the prima donnas, as Cheryl Studer is simply no match for Renée Fleming. Studer is correct, sings more than well and continues to show an affinity for the French repertoire which she is given little opportunity to exploit in her public appearances. Fleming matches her point for point but seems far more to be living her role (is the fact that the recording was made during a series of performances at the San Francisco Opera a contributing factor?). Her voice also has a shade more body and the light vibrato is not unpleasant; moreover she does not hold back, which is sometimes the case with Studer.

One could make a case for Valery Gergiev (Sony) whose affection for the French repertoire has never been a secret. He comes close to Plasson in sustaining a single line from start to finish of the large curve that forms the first two acts, and he succeeds in finding the rubato which is essential to making this music live even though it doesn't always have the naturalness of Plasson. The affinities of *Hérodiade* with certain works in the Russian repertoire become even more apparent.

The Sony version is ruled out when we get to the men, because of the bullish bleatings in some unrecognizable language by baritone Juan Pons - no match for the suavity of Thomas Hampson on EMI - the inelegance of Placido Domingo who still refuses to observe the niceties of French pronunciation, a woolly bass in the role of Phanael. On all three points the competition scores, with newcomer Ben Heppner in the role of John the Baptist showing that he can observe the markings of a score and sing persuasively in more than correct French. Hampson's virtues have been highly praised after each of his previous ventures into the French repertoire and this recording shows him maintaining the same high level. José van Dam may not have the lush bass voice envisioned by Massenet when he expanded the role of Phanael for Edouard de Reszke, but his awareness and artistry compensate more than adequately.

The two women in the title role are more evenly matched, Dolora Zajick for Sony giving a whale of a performance, her vocalism very much in the "old" style, no less enjoyable for that, but when compared to Nadine Denize's way with the text - and she has never been known for subtlety or comprehensibility - there is definitely something lacking. And Mme Denize is no slouch vocally, even at this stage of her career.

The fact that Sony has fit the opera onto two CDs as opposed to EMI's three should not dissuade anyone but diehard Domingo fans or the burgeoning number of Fleming devotees from acquiring the Plasson version as first choice, the snips of the scissors which disfigure the

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last two acts on Sony becoming more and more egregious as the work reaches its conclusion.

But when, EMI, are you going to reissue the highlights record made in the early 60s with Crespin and Gorr under the baton of Georges Prêtre? What a pity that a nearly ideal cast that was also familiar with the tradition was not given the opportunity to set down for posterity the definitive version.

As a sidelight, Amadeus Press of Portland, Oregon, recently published Demar Irvine's *Massenet: A Chronicle of his Life and Times*, a work with a curious history. Irvine originally wrote his study in the early 1970s but could not find a publisher so he made a number of photocopies which he then distributed to various libraries. In the early 90s, the publisher came across a reference to this version in a French bibliography of Massenet and became so intrigued that Irvine, a resident of nearby Washington (the state) and an acquaintance from musicological conferences, had produced a work that had remained virtually a state secret. The result is a handsome publication which lives up to its title, debunking many of the myths which have accrued to the Massenet legend over the years. Our only regret is that almost nothing is said about the music, but there is ample compensation in the many photos and illustrations which are dispersed throughout the text. Highly recommended. --- Joel Kasow, culturekiosque.com

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