

Rameau - Castor et Pollux (Mallon) [2004]

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Disc 1 Rameau, Jean-Philippe Bernard, Pierre-Joseph, lyricist(s) Castor et Pollux 1. Overture 00:04:05 2. Act I Scene 1: (Cleone, Phebe) 00:05:26 3. Act I Scene 2: (Telaire) 00:02:51 4. Act I Scene 3: (Castor, Telaire, Pollux) 00:05:23 5. Act I Scene 4: (Choeur des Spartiates) 00:02:04 6. Act I Scene 4: Air tres pointe, deux menuets 00:04:48 7. Act I Scene 4: Ariette (Castor) 00:03:11 8. Act I Scene 4: Deux gavottes 00:03:39 9. Act I Scene 4: Deux tambourines 00:02:29 10. Act I Scene 5: Entr'acte (Un Spartiate, Castor, Pollux, Choeur, Combat, Telaire) 00:02:00 11. Act II Scene 1: (Troupe de Spartiates) 00:03:24 12. Act II Scene 2: Tristes apprets (Telaire) 00:05:12 13. Act II Scene 3: (Telaire, Phebe) 00:02:11 14. Act II Scene 4: March (Pollux, Choeur) 00:03:25 15. Act II Scene 5: (Pollux, Telaire) 00:04:47 16. Act II Scene 5: Air pour les athletes 00:02:52 17. Act II Scene 5: Air tres gai 00:02:58 18. Act III Scene 1: Ritournelle et Air (Pollux) 00:03:34 19. Act III Scene 2: (Le Grand Pretre, Pollux, Jupiter) 00:01:48 20. Act III Scene 3: Descente de Jupiter (Pollux, Jupiter) 00:05:56

Disc 2 Rameau, Jean-Philippe Bernard, Pierre-Joseph, lyricist(s) Castor et Pollux 1. Act III Scene 4: Entree d'Hebe (Choeur des Plaisirs Celestes) 00:02:49 2. Act III Scene 4: Recitative (Pollux, Choeur des Suivantes d'Hebe) 00:01:29 3. Act III Scene 4: (Une suivante d'Hebe) 00:02:46 4. Act III Scene 4: Recitative (Pollux); Air gracieux (Hebe) 00:03:13 5. Act III Scene 4: Gavotte 1 & 2; Recitative (Pollux) 00:03:02 6. Act IV Scene 1: Prelude (Phebe, Choeur des Esprits) 00:02:55 7. Act IV Scene 2: Descente de Mercure (Mercure, Pollux, Phebe) 00:01:51 8. Act IV Scene 2: (Phebe, Cleone, Pollux, Choeur et Air des Demons) 00:05:39 9. Act IV Scene 3: (Phebe) 00:01:11 10. Act IV Scene 4: (Castor) 00:04:20 11. Act IV Scene 4: (Choeur des Ombres Heureuses) 00:02:47 12. Act IV Scene 4: Menuet (Une Ombre) 00:02:01 13. Act IV Scene 4: Passepied 1 & 2, Choeur derriere le theatre 00:02:05 14. Act IV Scene 5: (Castor, Pollux); Gavottes 00:09:59 15. Act V Scene 1: Ritournelle (Telaire, Castor) 00:04:24 16. Act V Scene 2: (Telaire, Castor, Choeur) 00:01:22 17. Act V Scene 3: (Telaire, Castor) 00:01:58 18. Act V Scene 3: Tonnerre (Telaire, Castor) 00:03:12 19. Act V Scene 4: (Jupiter, Castor, Pollux, Telaire) 00:02:12 20. Act V Scene 5: (Jupiter) 00:01:13 21. Act V Scene 5: Chaconne 00:04:51 22. Act V Scene 5: Ariette gracieus (Castor, Choeur) 00:03:20

Castor – Colin Ainsworth (tenor) Pollux – Joshua Hopkins (baritone) Télaïre – Monica Whicher (soprano) Phébé – Meredith Hall (soprano) Jupiter – Giles Tomkins (bass-baritone) Cléone – Renée Winick (soprano) Hébé – Meredith Hall (soprano) Une Suivante d'Hébé - Renée Winick (soprano) Une ombre - Renée Winick (soprano) Le Grand Prêtre – Brian McMillan (baritone) Mercure – Joey Niceforo A Spartan soldier – Michael Lee (tenor) A

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Spartan soldier – Matthew Zadow (baritone) A voice – Lorelle Angelo (soprano) Another voice – Catherine Lippitt Erickson Opera in Concert · Aradia Ensemble Kevin Mallon - conductor

Rameau revised his 1737 opera *Castor et Pollux* in 1754, at the height of the raging debate, the so-called *Querelle des Bouffons*, over the relative merits of French and Italian opera. Long regarded as Rameau's crowning achievement, it won immediate popular success, not only striking a significant blow for French music over Italian music but for the supporters of Rameau who looked to him to take over Lully's mantle as composer of the French national style. Whereas the operas of Lully had been limited to simple subjects based around romantic love, Rameau took French opera to a greater level of complexity both in subject matter and in musical style. With its wider emotional range and dissonant harmonies, *Castor et Pollux* is a tense drama of brotherly and romantic love that brings its own heroic rescue of Castor from the Underworld, as Pollux encounters the devils and monsters that try to bar his way. ---naxos.com

Rameau came to fame at the age of fifty, with his first opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* which was premiered in 1733. So at a time when his contemporary Handel was abandoning opera for oratorio, Rameau found himself, for the next twenty years, presenting around twenty more operatic productions. To the French musical establishment, those supportive of the operas of Lully, Rameau's music was daring and unorthodox; music to move the emotions as compared to Lully's music to move the senses. Rameau's choice of subject matter was no less unorthodox. His second opera, *Castor et Pollux*, took as its subject matter the love and friendship between two brothers, rather than the more common romantic love.

Castor et Pollux was first performed in 1737 and had a successful run of 21 performances. It was revived in 1754 in a significantly modified form. For this revival, Rameau and his librettist (Pierre-Joseph Bernard) dropped the rather old-fashioned mythological prologue and replaced it by a new Act I. The remainder of the opera was tautened.

In the 1737 version, the brothers Castor and Pollux are both in love with the same woman, *Télaïre*. In this new version, Castor and *Télaïre* are in love, but she is betrothed to Pollux. Pollux gives her up to his brother, but Castor is killed in battle. Pollux ultimately appeals to their father Jupiter, to restore Castor. Jupiter does so, on condition that Pollux replaces him in Hades.

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Castor agrees to return to land of the living for just one day, to tell T elaire that he cannot take up Pollux's offer. Finally the Fates and Jupiter relent and the brothers are granted immortality.

For their recordings, both Nicolas Harnoncourt (on Teldec) and William Christie (on Harmonia Mundi) chose the 1737 version. So far the 1754 version has been represented in the catalogue by the intermittently available recording by Charles Farncombe on Erato and by a recording of the chamber version of this opera by Musique de Lumi eres on Audivis. So it is pleasing to have this additional performance of Rameau's final thoughts on the opera, recorded by the Canadian based Aradia ensemble. That this performance is available at super-budget price on Naxos is an added advantage.

Act I opens with Ph eb e (Meredith Hall) lamenting to her confidant Cl eon e (Rene e Winick) that Castor prefers T elaire to her. Hall has a lovely soprano voice and the opening scene is a winningly stately number. Ph eb e's rival, T elaire is played by Monica Whicher. She also has a fine voice, but there were hints of strain in the upper registers. The part of Castor was written for a haut-contre (a high tenor part that sits somewhere between tenor and alto and requires great flexibility in the upper register), a voice type that is now more common but which is still tricky. Colin Ainsworth has a creditably bright voice with a fine flexible technique though there was just the hint of strain in the upper registers. He does not always sound completely comfortable in Castor's more brilliant music. As his brother Pollux, Joshua Hopkins has a warm baritone voice. The chorus suffer from the rather resonant acoustic in which the opera seems to have been recorded. The resultant sound lacks focus and is rather untidy. All the singers have a good grasp of Rameau's style, but for most of this Act, I found the recitative was taken at rather too stately a pace. I prefer a slightly swifter delivery with greater emphasis on flexibility.

With Castor's death we progress to Act II and one of the most famous and moving scenes in the opera, where the participants lament Castor's death. Opening with a sombre and affecting chorus it leads to T elaire's aria *Tristes appr ets* with its lovely bassoon obbligato. Unfortunately Whicher's fine performance, with its good grasp of the music's underlying emotions, suffers a little as the sense of line, which is so necessary in this slow music, is marred by an occasionally too intrusive vibrato.

Act III opens with Pollux alone, offering a sacrifice to Jupiter in the name of friendship. Hopkins' is most moving here, but his ornamentation is not always ideal. When his father Jupiter (bass-baritone Giles Tomkins) appears the two baritones combine in powerful duet. Jupiter calls on the celestial pleasures to show Pollux what he will lose if he goes to Hades – cue for one of Rameau's lovely choral dance scenes, only marred by untidy choral work. Here, and throughout the recording, the Aradia ensemble accompany in crisp, flexible manner and deliver Rameau's

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myriad dance movements with a sense of infectious style.

At the entrance to Hades, in Act IV, the chorus of demons sounds a little flabby and rather less than monstrous, but Hall's Phébé is lovely, with a good sense of style. Finally Castor reappears sounding a little over-careful (understandable, perhaps, if you've been whisked to Hades and back). Here, as elsewhere, I wished for a greater sense of freedom and flexibility. Finally, in Act V, Castor and Têlaïre meet up again and their powerful duet is interrupted by Jupiter's thunder, to stunning effect, until all ends happily as expected.

This recording has a fine sense of Rameau's style and the Aradia ensemble is always a pleasure to listen to. If some of the soloists are a little less than ideal, we have probably been spoiled by the sterling work of William Christie. More problematic, is the lack of freedom and flexibility of delivery; one of the glories of Rameau's music is the way he blends the boundaries between recitative, arioso and aria, but this requires a good suppleness of delivery. Still, all the singers have a creditable feel for this music and it is lovely to hear it being sung with voices rather bigger than those preferred by Christie and others.

At super-budget price I can have no hesitation in recommending this recording. It is a good place to start if you do not know Rameau's fascinating operas. And if you do, it is a good way to fill in a gap. ---Robert Hugill, musicweb-international.com

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