

Caccini: La Liberazione di Ruggiero CD review – first opera by a woman stands firmly on its own feet

Biscuola/Martellacci/Borgioni/Allabastrina/La Pifarescha/Sartori (Glossa)



Over-resonant ... conductor and harpsichordist Elena Sartori

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Francesca Caccini (1587-c1645) was in at the very beginnings of opera. She was part of a musical family who regularly played and sang at the Medici court in Florence, including performances of the earliest opera that survives more or less complete, Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, first seen in 1600. Her father, Giulio, contributed to Peri's score and published his own version of *Euridice* in 1602.

Caccini took her own first steps into musical theatre with music for the carnival entertainment *La Stiava* in 1607, and was hired by the Medicis as a singer, teacher and composer. She went on to contribute to more than a dozen court spectacles, and eventually became the highest-paid musician at the Florentine court. Yet only two of her scores survive – a collection of songs and duets, published in 1618, and the opera, *La Liberazione di Ruggiero dall'Isola d'Alcina*, which was first performed in 1625. With a libretto by Ferdinando Saracinelli based on an episode from Ludovico Ariosto's epic *Orlando*

Furioso, it's not only the first opera known to have been composed by a woman, it was also the first Italian opera to be heard outside Italy when it was staged in Warsaw in 1628.

The plot, which tells the rivalry of the sorceresses Alcina and Melissa for the attentions of the warrior Ruggiero, certainly has comic elements, and those were apparently emphasised in the work's UK premiere in 2015.

This recording, though, is a pretty strait-laced affair. There are echoes of Monteverdi's L'Orfeo in the score's canzonettas, strophic arias and madrigal-like choruses, and the use of straight recitative for Melissa and much more wide-ranging music to suggest the wiles of Alcina. As conductor and harpsichordist Elena Sartori's performance with the combined forces of musicians Allabastrina and La Pifaresche demonstrates, it's a work that stands very firmly on its own feet dramatically.

The one problem here is the over-resonant recording. Soprano Elena Biscuola and contralto Gabriella Martelacci as Alcina and Melissa, cut through effectively enough, but the finer points of the Ruggiero role, sung by bass-baritone Mauro Borgioni, are mostly lost in the acoustic mush. It's still well worth investigating, though.

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