



### Antonio VIVALDI (1678-1741)

*Serenata Veneziana - Andromeda Liberata*

● Simone Kermes, as Andromeda (soprano)

Katerina Beranova, as Cassiope (soprano)

Anna Bonitatibus, as Meliso (mezzo)

Mark Tucker, as Daliso (tenor)

Max Emanuel Cencic, as Perseo (counter-tenor)

La Stagione Armonica/Sergio Balestracci

Venice Baroque Orchestra /Andrea Marcon (direction and harpsichord)

Recording: Toblach / Dobbiaco, Kulturzentrum Grand Hotel,

Gustav-Mahler-Saal, Lienz, Austria. Jan 2004. DDD

world premiere recording

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Whenever there is a mystery about a newly discovered score found languishing in some dusty archive in the depths of some library, Vivaldi often seems to be involved. It can be difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction in these matters despite much detective work by musicologists. Elaborate hoaxes can never be ruled out. Described in the accompanying CD booklet as a 'long lost baroque masterpiece' this release of the *Serenata, Andromeda liberata* provides yet another mystery which despite this recording has still not been satisfactorily solved.

Olivier Fourés, a musicology graduate of Lyon University has discovered several important Vivaldi manuscripts notably the cantata *Tremori al braccio* RV 799 in Vienna in 1999. During his researches in the archives of the Conservatorio Benedetto Marcello in Venice in 2002 he came across a manuscript of an anonymous, early 18th-century *Serenata* entitled *Andromeda liberata*. Certain aspects of the score struck Fourés as being particularly Vivaldian. He undertook a direct study of the work and discovered that one of the *arias* of the *Serenata* is identical to the *aria* by Vivaldi with violin *obbligato* titled *Sovvente il sole* RV 749.18. The autograph manuscript of that *aria* exists in the same Venetian archives and its original context is known. The discovery that this *Serenata* or part of it may have been composed by Vivaldi has caused a great deal of interest and debate in the classical music world.

The *Andromeda liberata* was nearly consigned to the sad fate that had befallen countless other unknown manuscripts held in archives throughout Europe and condemned to hundreds more years of obscurity. The mystery of authorship still remains. Can we deduce from the *aria, Sovvente il sole* that the entire *Serenata* is by Vivaldi or is the score a *pasticcio* that compiles works by different composers? A *Serenata* is a musical genre that originated in the middle of the seventeenth century which lies roughly half-way between a cantata and an opera. Often performed outdoors and in an evening a *Serenata* was frequently accompanied by magnificent banquets with other entertainments

such as masked balls, fireworks and games. The primary intention was to celebrate a notable event such as a wedding, birthday or significant anniversary. The *Andromeda liberata* would almost certainly contain symbolic and political references in the libretto and music to the person or persons around whom the event revolved.

The work's fantastic scenario originates from a free interpretation from Greek mythology of the heroine Princess Andromeda's marriage to the hero Perseo, the young son of Jupiter and Danae, Princess of Argos. Andromeda is the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiope, the rulers of Ethiopia. Before the action begins Queen Cassiope's vanity arouses the indignation of the Nereids (sea-nymphs), who regard themselves as even more beautiful than she is. Revenge comes swiftly and the sea-god Poseidon sends a sea-monster to ravage Ethiopia. In his despair King Cepheus asks an oracle how he can save his country, and is told that the only way is to sacrifice his daughter. Princess Andromeda is left naked and chained to a rock to be devoured by the sea-monster. The hero Perseo is on his way home to the island of Seriphus after having slain the gorgon Medusa. Perseo looks down and beholds the Princess Andromeda in her plight. He slays the monster and turns it to stone by showing it the Medusa's head, releases Andromeda from her terrible plight and promptly falls in love with her. The *Serenata* commences and we discover that Andromeda is already in love with Daliso, a young foreigner. After various vicissitudes there is a happy ending. In gratitude for rescuing Andromeda, the King and Queen of Ethiopia bestow on Perseo their daughter's hand in marriage.

The date of 18 September 1726 entered on the manuscript score together with other historical evidence suggests that this *Andromeda liberata* was composed in honour of a music-loving and distinguished Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (1667-1760). It was performed shortly after his celebrated and controversial return to Venice on the 21 July 1726. Cardinal Ottoboni had suffered political banishment from Venice in 1712 for an infringement of the Republic's laws. He had a great love of music and championed the works of many composers, including Corelli, Alessandro Scarlatti and Handel. The Cardinal was also a leading member of the eminent Accademia Arcadiana in Rome and the dedicatee of numerous musical works. He wrote librettos for many well-known composers and owned a major collection of scores.

The scenario and libretto could be considered to include a number of symbolic parallels and analogue references relating to Cardinal Ottoboni's celebrated return to Venice. The adventures of the hero Perseo, who serves as a saviour, a kind of 'mythological knight in shining armour', possibly represents the banished Ottoboni. In addition the heroine Princess Andromeda may symbolize the suffering city of Venice. Furthermore the antagonist Daliso is not in the original myth and is a character invented specifically for the *Serenata's* scenario. Daliso could denote the political obstacles that Ottoboni had to overcome in order to return to his beloved native city.

There is no evidence in the *Serenata* genre that one has ever been made up of the works of other composers in the *pasticcio* form. This could be a factor in favour of the work being by Vivaldi. Recently I read that Michael Talbot, the musicologist and Vivaldi specialist believes that there are identifiable signs that some of Vivaldi's leading Italian contemporaries such as Tomaso Albinoni and Giovanni de Porta were involved in the *Serenata*. In fact, on the amazon.co.uk website they have the composers of this release *Andromeda liberata* indicated as being by 'Vivaldi, Albinoni and Porta *et al*'.

*Andromeda liberata* is scored for five solo voices, chorus and an orchestra of trumpets, horns, oboes, strings, and *basso continuo*. Commencing with an orchestral *Sinfonia* the score is divided into two generally equal parts and comprises in total thirty-six typically short sections alternating *recitativo* and *aria*. The chorus is used exceedingly sparingly appearing in the opening and concluding *arias* of the score. Furthermore, all but one of the eighteen *arias* are for solo performers, of which there are five: the sopranos, Andromeda and Cassiope; Meliso, a mezzo-soprano; Perseo, a counter-tenor and Daliso, a tenor. Only one of the *arias* is for more than one performer and this the love-duet of Andromeda and Perseo which is positioned as the penultimate *aria* of the work.

Under the impeccable direction of Andrea Marcon the *Serenata* is given exceptional advocacy by successful late-baroque specialists, the Venice Baroque Orchestra. Their imaginative performance exudes refinement and controlled power. These new-generation Vivaldi specialists certainly deserve their position as one of the world's most outstanding period instrument ensembles. The twenty strong vocal group La Stagione Armonica continue to impress although the score demands that they are only required to accompany a soloist in two short *arias*. The five soloists have been skilfully chosen and come across as admirably suited to the late-baroque repertoire of Vivaldian Venice. **Czechoslovakian born soprano Katerina Beranova is clear, smooth and elegant in her interpretation of the role of Cassiope and sings particularly finely in the aria, *Quando chiudere pensai*.** Max Emanuel Cencic the Austrian counter-tenor, as Perseo, also impresses especially in the higher registers. Our hero Perseo's substantial *aria*, *Sovvente il sole*, which we know was composed by Vivaldi, is superbly sung with style and substantial character. As Meliso, the Italian mezzo-soprano Anna Bonitatibus is in fine condition and well controlled especially in her challenging *aria*, *Ruscelletti limpidetti*. Tenor, Mark Tucker, who I believe is English-born, offers a characterful and expressive interpretation in his role as Daliso. However I would have preferred less vibrato and more smoothness of line. I was delighted by a stunning performance full of drama, imagination and ardour from soprano Simone Kermes, as the heroine Andromeda. The part of Andromeda is a demanding one and with seven *arias*, including the love duet with Perseo, the German soprano's interpretations are extremely impressive and superbly controlled. Bright and even in line, Kermes has a beautiful colouring to her voice that is heard to great effect throughout.

The Archiv Produktion engineers have produced a really fine recorded sound: well-balanced and natural. The attractive double set includes top class annotation that is difficult to find any significant fault with. Is *Andromeda liberata* a work by Vivaldi? After listening to this release several times I can say that it sounds like it could be! I don't think the *Serenata* is a collaborative venture as I feel that it is the work of one hand. If the score is from Vivaldi it is not anywhere close to being one of his finest works as there is a sense of being hurried; perhaps to meet the deadline of Cardinal Ottoboni's return. But who knows, the enigma remains!

A fascinating, well performed and recorded release that will appeal to those interested in the Italian late-baroque.

***Michael Cookson***