



January



'Vinci's reputation is emphatically rehabilitated by this advocacy of Artaserse masterminded by Max Emanuel Cencic'

David Vickers greets a landmark premiere of a countertenor-rich opera

Vinci

Artaserse
Philippe Jaroussky *countertenor* **Artaserse**
Max Emanuel Cencic *countertenor* **Mandane**
Daniel Behle *tenor* **Artabano**
Franco Fagioli *countertenor* **Arbace**
Valer Barna-Sabadus *countertenor* **Semira**
Yuriy Mynenko *countertenor* **Megabise**
Swiss Radio and Television Chorus; Concerto Köln / Diego Fasolis

Virgin Classics © 3 602869-2 (3h 8' • DDD • S/T/b)
 The rehabilitation of Leonardo Vinci (c1696-1730) has been long overdue. He trained at the Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo in Naples, where he made his debut as an opera composer in 1719. During the next decade Vinci worked for prestigious opera houses in Rome and Venice, and his swift ascent coincided with that of his influential literary collaborator Metastasio. Their ambitious new serious opera *Artaserse* was unveiled on February 4, 1730, at Rome's Teatro delle Dame, where it was performed by an all-male cast on account of the peculiarities of papal dislike of women appearing publicly onstage in the Eternal City. At the apex of his meteoric career Vinci died suddenly in Naples, aged only about 34 and under suspicious

circumstances; it was rumoured he had been poisoned.

Posterity has been unkind to the Neapolitan master, although he was esteemed highly by his contemporaries Vivaldi and Handel, who retained 20 of Vinci's numbers when he adapted *Artaserse* for the London pasticcio *Arbace* in 1734. The odd aria and a few chamber cantatas have been recorded here and there, and some inroads were made by Antonio Florio's recordings of the comic opera *Li zite 'ngalera* (Opus 111) and, more recently, *La Rosmira fedele* (mistitled *Partenope* on its premiere recording – Dynamic, 10/12). Now the composer's visibility and reputation are emphatically rehabilitated by this advocacy of *Artaserse* masterminded by Max Emanuel Cencic.

The only mild obstacle to dramatic clarity during this outstanding performance is Cencic's determination to replicate Vinci's all-male cast by initiating a countertenor-laden experiment; he chooses for himself the 'prima donna' role of Mandane. To be fair, the five countertenors are cast shrewdly to sound dissimilar; but Philippe Jaroussky's sweet Artaserse is more effeminate than his love interest Semira (the gutsier Valer Barna-Sabadus). Perhaps seeing drag queens onstage

would clear things up but the plethora of countertenors singing varying gender roles makes it essential to follow Metastasio's fine libretto closely: it is an archetypally tangled political thriller that offers scope for dramatically powerful scenes exploring themes of injustice, loyalty, treachery and love that appealed to many composers for years to come (Metastasio later affectionately called *Artaserse* 'the most fortunate of all my children'). Arbace loves Mandane, the daughter of the disapproving Persian king Xerxes, who has banished him from the palace at Susa. He returns secretly to see his lover but is inadvertently framed for his father Artabano's assassination of the king. The new monarch



Diego Fasolis

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