

Artaserse loves his friend Arbace's sister Semira, and is embroiled in political difficulties and emotional conflicts when the deceiver Artabano plots to overthrow him. The sinister schemes of the traitor are foiled eventually by the honest hero Arbace, who until then has been torn between pressures of filial duty, friendship and love.

An abundance of masterfully contrasted arias poignantly convey the emotional conditions of the respective protagonists. Arbace's anguish upon discovering his father Artabano's assassination of the king ('Fra cento affanni') is sung spiritedly by Franco Fagioli. Act 1 climaxes with a fantastic sequence of concise arias: the unjustly accused Arbace is renounced robustly by his treacherous father, reluctantly by his tender sister and venomously by his lover Mandane ('Dimmi che un empio sei', featuring biting strings and spectacular coloratura from Cencic), after which the bereft hero sings an emotive accompanied recitative and powerful *aria di bravura* with potent low horn notes ('Vo solcando un mar crudele'). During Act 2, trumpets and timpani gang up with Artabano to bully his daughter to accept a man she does not love ('Amalo e se al tuo sguardo'), whereas the strings in Mandane's beguiling 'Se d'un amor tiranno' suggest she is struggling to relinquish her love for the man she believes murdered her father. The prison scene that begins Act 3 indicates that Vinci was one of the finest opera composers of his age.

Concerto Köln deliver orchestral accompaniments with their customary punchiness, although I doubt that a bassoon really played during all of the villainous tenor's recitatives. The entire cast produces exceptionally good singing. Cencic and Jaroussky give a masterclass of dramatic countertenor singing, and Valer Barna-Sabadus and Yuriy Mynenko (the dastardly Megabise) are not far behind. Other listeners might find Fagioli's mannered vowels more pleasing than I do but the technical assurance of his coloratura is impressive. The lone tenor Daniel Behle brings the treasonous Artabano vividly to life and offers excellent declamation of Metastasio's poetry.

Diego Fasolis ensures that the pacing of the drama is spot-on, and it is intriguing to experience an original and unabridged setting of a Metastasio libretto that reveals fascinating virtues and eloquently developed ideas in the dramatic poetry. The discography of front-rank native Italian opera composers of the early 18th century has been woefully inadequate since Edison first tinkered with sound recording (Handel was not Italian and some might not count Vivaldi as front-rank) but it is bolstered immeasurably by this sensational landmark recording. **G**

## January Gramophone Choices



**PROKOFIEV**  
Violin Works  
Janine Jansen, Boris Brovtsyn  
vns Itamar Golan, pf  
LPO / Vladimir Jurowski  
Decca 478 3546DH  
‘The highlight of the disc is the First Violin Sonata...Its sombre power is fully revealed in Jansen and Golan’s account.’



**BEETHOVEN**  
Symphonies Nos 5 & 7  
ORR / John Eliot Gardiner  
Soli Deo Gloria SDG717  
‘John Eliot Gardiner and his resplendent Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique rejoice here in the sheer physicality of the music, the bounding rhythms, the stomping accents.’



**HANDEL**  
‘Finest Arias for Base Voice’  
Christopher Purves bass  
Arcangelo / Jonathan Cohen  
Hyperion CDA67842  
‘Possessing in effect two voices in one – a ringing, high baritone with a sonorous bass extension – Purves veils his tone to convey bemusement, even pathos.’



**ELGAR**  
‘The Longed-For Light’  
Susan Gritton *sop* Simon Callow *spkr* BBC Concert Orchestra / John Wilson  
Somm SOMMCD247  
‘Wilson’s treatment of *Sospiri* (1914) is intoxicating, with some beautifully judged, “old school” string *portamento* worthy of Barbirolli himself.’



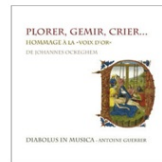
**KNUSSEN**  
‘Autumnal’  
Soloists; Birmingham Contemporary Music Group; BBC SO / Oliver Knussen  
NMC NMC178  
‘There is an edgy blend of lamentation and celebration that is the more affecting for its directness and economy.’



**‘ROMANTIQUE’**  
Opera Arias  
Elina Garanča *mez* Bologna Teatro Comunale Philharmonic Orchestra / Yves Abel  
DG 479 0071GH  
“O mon Fernand!” expresses shame and despair. Garanča sings the slow section with artless simplicity and the cabaletta with passion.’



**FAURÉ Requiem JS BACH**  
Solo Violin Partita No 2  
Soloists; Tenebrae; LSO Chamber Ensemble / Nigel Short  
LSO Live LSO0728  
‘The performance is elevated into something quite remarkable; I have no hesitation in labelling this the very best Fauré Requiem on disc.’



**‘PLORER, GEMIR, CRIER’**  
‘Homage to Johannes Ockeghem’  
Diabolus in Musica / Antoine Guerber  
Aeon AECD1226  
‘This performance is so well judged that it positively invites repeated listening. The *Credo* is particularly impressive.’



**‘NOUVEAU MONDE’**  
Baroque Arias and Songs  
Patricia Petibon *sop*  
Kevin Greenlaw *bar* La Cetra / Andrea Marcon  
DG 479 0079GH  
“Nouveau monde” is a tightly thought-through, compelling programme, a *tour de force* for its performer/compiler, most atmospherically recorded.’