

underscores the insidious beauty of the passages in which the Prisoner is deceived into believing liberty to be within his grasp: the seductive strings and tuned percussion that accompany the Jailer/Inquisitor's intimations of hope; and the woodwind flurries as the Prisoner, emerging into the prison's garden, feels the freshness of the air on his skin. Nosedá is helped immeasurably throughout both by his Danish orchestra, who play with marvellous commitment and finesse, and by Chandos's immaculate recording, ideal in its clarity and balance, vastly preferable to the slightly muddy sound of its principal rival, Antal Dorati's Decca performance (5/75) with the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington DC (of which Nosedá, ironically perhaps, is also now music director).

The cast, meanwhile, combine lyricism with declamation, reminding us that Dallapiccola's vocal writing, hovering between recitative and *arioso*, essentially takes his beloved Monteverdi as its starting point. Michael Nagy makes a fine, subtle Prisoner, taking us with him every step of the way on his harrowing emotional and intellectual journey. Anna Maria Chiuri is his anguished Mother, Stephan Rügamer the lethally dangerous Inquisitor, deploying a disquieting, honeyed *mezza voce* in moments of terrifying charm.

The Danish National Concert Choir sound tremendous, meanwhile, their opening 'Fiat misericordia tua, Domine' taking one's breath away as it breaks into Chiuri's opening monologue. They also provide the fillers – and indeed some much-needed emotional relief – with Dallapiccola's *a cappella* settings of rueful comments on marriage by Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (the artist's great-nephew) and the lovely *Estate*, to a text by the Greek poet Alcaeus. Overtly indebted to the Italian madrigal tradition, both works are ravishingly sung. It's an outstanding, essential album, every second of it. **Tim Ashley** (August 2020)

Eccles

Semele	
Richard Burkhard <i>bar</i>	Jupiter
Helen Charlston <i>mez</i>	Juno
Héloïse Bernard <i>sop</i>	Iris
Bethany Horak-Hallett <i>mez</i>	Cupid
Christopher Foster <i>bass</i>	Somnus
Jolyon Loy <i>bar</i>	Apollo
Jonathan Brown <i>bar</i>	Cadmus
Anna Dennis <i>sop</i>	Semele
Aoife Miskelly <i>sop</i>	Ino
William Wallace <i>ten</i>	Athamas
Graeme Broadbent <i>bass</i>	Chief Priest
Rory Carver <i>ten</i>	Second Priest/First Augur

James Rhoads *ten* **Third Priest/Second Augur**
Cambridge Handel Opera Company; Academy of Ancient Music / Julian Perkins *hpd*
 AAM Records (E) (2) AAM012 (121' • DDD)
 Includes synopsis and libretto



John Eccles's setting of his friend William Congreve's wry morality tale was one of the great might-have-beens in English operatic history. Composed around 1706-07 for the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, *Semele* was intended to capitalise on the recent fashion for all-sung English opera and the popularity of the delightfully named singing actress Anne Bracegirdle. Yet various factors, including Congreve's acrimonious departure from the theatre and the growing taste for Italian opera, meant that it never saw the stage. After the triumph of Handel's *Rinaldo* at the Queen's Theatre in 1711, *Semele* did not stand a chance. Disillusioned, Eccles retired to a Thameside retreat near Kingston to indulge in his new passion for fishing. His final opera remained unperformed, apparently forgotten, until a semi-staging in the Holywell Music Room, Oxford, in 1964.

Baroque opera lovers will inevitably hear Eccles's *Semele* against the background of Handel's now-famous work – an opera thinly disguised as an oratorio. There are no obvious plums to compete with 'Endless pleasure' or 'Where'er you walk'. But comparisons are unfair. Eccles was a consummate theatrical professional, with an acute dramatic sense. The plot surges forwards in a flexible sequence of recitative, *arioso* and short arias, plus a handful of ensembles (no chorus). Eccles's overall tone is more intimate, more inward than Handel's, with preening virtuosity at a minimum. Each of the characters, blinded by love, revenge or ambition, comes alive in music whose idiom might be described as Italianised English, with the occasional nod to French *tragédie lyrique*. Echoes of Purcell, albeit without Purcellian cross-rhythms and spicy harmonic clashes, mingle with more flamboyant – and to our ears Handelian – arias in the modish Italian style.

With the only previous recording of *Semele*, directed by Anthony Rooley (Forum, A/04), now unavailable, this new version has the field to itself. It will be a hard act, in both performance and presentation, for any competitor to follow. 'This opera oozes drama', writes Julian Perkins in his note, and goes on to prove

his point. Pacing, not least in the expressive recitatives, is fluid and natural, the playing of the AAM strings tingles with theatrical life and the young cast is uniformly fine.

As *Semele* – a more fragile, vulnerable figure than her Handelian equivalent – Anna Dennis combines purity with a touch of sensuous richness. Hers is a lovely piece of singing and characterisation. *Semele*'s implacable rival Juno should steal the show whenever she appears. From her imperious opening entry to her rollicking final aria of triumph, her tone dripping with venomous glee, Helen Charlston does not miss a trick. Richard Burkhard's Jupiter, assigned the opera's most Italianate music, sounds slightly inhibited reassuring *Semele* in his first aria but quickly grows in ardour. Aoife Miskelly brings a warm, flavoursome mezzo to the role of *Semele*'s sister Ino. Her singing of the plangent 'Turn, hopeless lover', strings sighing in sympathy with the voice, is a highlight. Among the minor roles, William Wallace deftly negotiates the high tessitura of Athamas's music, while Héloïse Bernard (Iris) and Bethany Horak-Hallett (Cupid) sing their appealing Purcellian solos with grace and guile.

The discs, superb as they are, are far from the whole story. Anyone who has acquired the AAM's recording of Handel's *Brookes Passion* (11/19) will know that their classy documentation is an education in itself. What we get is a lavishly illustrated 200-page book, with lively articles on Eccles's career, the London theatrical scene c1700, Italian influences on English violin-playing (a brilliant essay from Judy Tarling), and the mythological background. Did you know, incidentally, that *Semele* was the great-great aunt of Oedipus? I certainly didn't!

Richard Wigmore (April 2021)

Purcell

The Fairy Queen
Anna Dennis, Mhairi Lawson, Rowan Pierce, Carolyn Sampson *sops* **Jeremy Budd, Charles Daniels, James Way** *ten*s **Roderick Williams, Ashley Riches** *basses* **Gabrieli Consort and Players / Paul McCreesh**

Signum (M) (2) SIGCD615 (138' • DDD)

Includes synopsis and libretto



The dramatic function of Purcell's music within Thomas Betterton's

extravagant adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not as tenuous as often