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**Reviewer: Bertil van Boer**

**Attilio Ariosti (1666–1729) was one of those polymaths who has been relatively little explored as a composer. A colleague of Handel in London at the end of his life, this Servite monk had a rather exciting and sometimes politically dangerous career as a**

diplomat, even though his main occupation seems to have been as a composer. At the age of 31 he served in Brandenburg as a Kapellmeister to the Electress, but for the next 20 years he went from place to place as an Imperial agent (shades of a diplomatic James Bond), finally winding up in Paris, where he was involved in the various court intrigues surrounding the Duke d'Anjou. In 1716 he suddenly moved to London, where he first performed on the viola d'amore (his favorite instrument) for Handel, eventually becoming known as a composer at the King's Theatre in Haymarket with his 1723 opera *Coriolano*. He was well regarded enough that his music sold, and he published like a fiend for the remaining years of his life. This being said, he was evidently always in need of money, as a rather nasty satirical epitaph reveals.

The various pieces, including cantatas, for the viola d'amore are his main forte, but the many operas he wrote are equally impressive. As the fine booklet notes mention, he was extremely persnickety about his orchestration (as opposed to Handel and others who were more lax), often indicating which instruments he wanted for his continuo grouping at each aria. Add to this a penchant for writing interesting and progressive introductions, and one has the idea that Ariosti was worth every bit of his reputation as a composer in total. This disc does give a good cross section of works drawn from a good span of his career, from his earlier works in Vienna to the last (and certainly most famous) in London. There are, of course, some considerable stylistic differences that are notable. For example, the aria "Bella mia, lascia ch'io vada" from the 1704 *Scipione* is quite old fashioned, with a simple continuo introduction featuring the theorbo and a meandering vocal line that seems right out of Alessandro Scarlatti. In a similar vein, the sinfonia of the 1705 opera *La profezia* is a cross between Corelli and Scarlatti, lacking the more definitive rhythms of the later French style London overtures, such as the pompous and noble work that begins *Coriolano*. Ariosti uses a variety of compositional techniques to highlight interest. In "Aure care" from *Tito Manolo*, the gentle breezes are depicted as a moderate paced Siciliano. The aria "Premerà scoglio" from the 1724 *Vespasiano* is based on a rather strict ground, which proceeds chaconne-like as the voice soars in contrary motion upwards by thirds in the main theme before winding all about the steady line in twisting roulades. In "Rinasce amor" from *Aquillio Consolo* from the same year, the opening unisons are stark contrasts to the rising suspensions. Ariosti does not shy away from coloratura, but he is often less likely to make it the focus of the aria, but rather allow it to develop out of the often lyrical main themes, such as in the final aria of the disc, "Io spero" from *Coriolano*, in which the recorders warble nicely as if in an opening dream, only to have the faster section break into some twisting and turning roulades vocally as the tempo increases.

These are all works intended for a castrato, but countertenor Filippo Mineccia does a terrific job. His voice is powerful and decisive, and as far as I can hear he doesn't miss a note. His sense of lyricism is acute, and he knows how to heighten the emotion of an aria by entering smoothly and unobtrusively at Ariosti's often unexpected vocal entrances. The ensemble playing by Odyssee is well integrated and well phrased, with good tempos that are flexible to accommodate the textual nuances of the vocal part. They use a larger ensemble than one-on-a-part, which gives this work depth, and also corresponds more closely to Ariosti's London orchestra, the exception being the oratorio *La madre de'Maccabei*, where the composer actually pretty much insists upon a lesser textural scoring in his own instrumentation. All in all, this gives an excellent sampling of the operatic treasures by one of Handel's colleagues. Of course, it is all about the voice and subsequent characterization done by Mineccia, but there is enough of a glimpse here to wish for someone to record a complete Ariosti opera. Recommended.

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