

OPERA

Anna Netrebko brings 'voluptuous' and 'volatile' qualities to Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*; and *Lawrence Brownlee* shines in *bel canto* arias

MUSIC OPERA CHOICE

A consummate Farinelli

Ann Hallenberg has both the voice and the artistry, says *Berta Joncus*

HIGH DRAMA:
Ann Hallenberg with
Christophe Rousset



FARINELLI: *A Portrait (Live in Bergen)*

Arias by Broschi, Giacomelli, Porpora, Hasse, Leo, Handel and Porpora

Ann Hallenberg (mezzo-soprano); Les Talens Lyriques/Christophe Rousset
Aparté AP117 79:33 mins

In 1994 Christophe Rousset and his band recorded the music for the film *Farinelli*. Not only did the soundtrack sell over a million recordings, but it sparked numerous other Farinelli-themed CDs and DVDs. In 2011, Rousset reclaimed the 18th-century castrato's music, creating a new Farinelli-

centric programme sung by Ann Hallenberg, with which they toured. This recording is their performance at the Bergen International Festival.

It far surpasses the soundtrack. Hallenberg is a force of nature, in stark contrast to the synthetic singing of the film, for which

The crackling tension of live performance fills every phrase

sound engineers fused a mezzo with a male alto voice. Hallenberg's voice is unmistakably her own, and the crackling tension of live performance fills every phrase. Her swaggering fireworks culminate in a final aria of almost ludicrous velocity. Her lyricism is equally powerful, thanks partly to Rousset. Creating hushed silences or soft

tremolos, he subtly makes space for her vocal entries and colours. Aiding her further is Rousset's programme: he has replaced about half the film soundtrack arias, improving the balance between bravura and pathos. The two arias recorded for the first time, by Leo and Giacomelli, are gems. Although a live recording, its sound quality is warm and clean.

Rousset uses his vision – as artist, scholar and impresario – to re-imagine music which had become faddish. Do replace any impressions from the film with this CD.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

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www.classical-music.com



BERG

Wozzeck

Roman Trekel, Anne Schwanewilms, Marc Molomot, Nathan Berg, Gordon Gietz, Robert McPherson, Katherine Ciesinski, Calvin Griffin, Samuel Schultz, Brenton Ryan; Members of Houston Grand Opera Children's Chorus; Chorus of Students and Alumni, Shepherd School of Music, Rice University; Houston Symphony Orchestra/
Hans Graf
Naxos 8.660390-91 97:34 mins (2 discs)

There are more corpses in Berg's epoch-making opera, *Wozzeck* (1914-22), than the two literal ones of its devastating final scenes. Underpinning the harrowing tale of a tormented soldier and the girlfriend he brutally murders is a searing, apocalyptic vision of a society so inhumane as to signal the death – as Berg witnessed, during and after World War One – of any illusion of a just or genteel modern civilisation. *Wozzeck* is mocked by his superior officers and tortured in the name of medical science, as both he and Marie are oppressed by a system which they barely survive day-to-day.

This live, 2013 concert performance by the Houston Symphony, under their then outgoing musical director Hans Graf, benefits from a stellar cast. Yet, while singing with laudable clarity and commitment, principals Roman Trekel and Anne Schwanewilms lack desperation sufficient to paint the score blood red. Graf appears to choose as a model late-Romantic Mahler rather than expressionist Schoenberg; both are vital, but without the latter it is difficult to achieve the grotesque savagery at the heart of the piece.

Ideally, the nightmares that tip *Wozzeck* over the edge would be as viscerally real as they are imagined. Nathan Berg's chilling *Doktor Gietz* certainly gives pause, but Marc Molomot, and especially Gordon Gietz – respectively the Captain and the Drum major – feel dramatically underpowered.

However, while the performance overall is short on disturbing inevitability, it exudes textural fascination: much attention is paid to orchestral detail, and Berg's complex rhythmic polyphony in particular is lucidly rendered. *Steph Power*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★