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ANTONIO VIVALDI

JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS

Oralia Dominguez, Irene Compañez
and Bianca Maria Casoni, Mezzo-Sopranos

Emilia Cundari, Soprano
Maria Grazia Allegri, Contralto

Chorus of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana

Angelicum Chamber Orchestra

ALBERTO ZEDDA, Conductor

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ANTONIO VIVALDI

(1678-1741)

JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS
Devicta Holofernis Barbariae

(Sacrum Militare Oratorium)

(Libretto by Giacomo Casseti)

Judith	Oralia Dominguez, <i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>
Abra, her handmaiden	Emilia Cundari, <i>Soprano</i>
Holofernes	Irene Compañez, <i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>
Vagans, his servant	Bianca Maria Casoni, <i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>
Ozias, High Priest of Bethulia	Maria Grazia Allegri, <i>Contralto</i>

Chorus of the Accademia Filarmonica Romana (Luigi Colacicchi, *Director*)

Angelicum Chamber Orchestra

ALBERTO ZEDDA, *Conductor*

Until recently Vivaldi's name was generally known solely because of a few violin concerti and transcriptions of some of his works by Bach. With the publication of the bulk of his instrumental works recently completed, Vivaldi's true stature as an immensely prolific composer of concerti, concerti grossi, sinfonias and sonatas, came to be appreciated for the first time. So busy were musicians and musicologists in assessing his instrumental works, however, that little attention was paid to much of his vocal music. This lack of interest in Vivaldi's vocal works, however indefensible, is understandable. People have always been unwilling to admit that a composer can write equally well in different areas. There are many people today, for example, who feel Beethoven's piano sonatas to be not only unpianistic but also, generally speaking, not especially good music, while in the same breath they praise his symphonies and string quartets.

Actually Vivaldi composed over forty operas and oratorios, to say nothing of several religious works such as solo motets, cantatas and various works for chorus and orchestra. Between 1713 and 1740 Vivaldi produced a steady stream of dramatic works. For one theatre alone, he contributed eighteen operas, including revisions of works previously composed by less original composers, "*mediocre operista*," his biographer Pinchierle calls them. In 1727 his opera *Ipermestra* was such a success in Florence that the theatre's ailing finances were completely restored to health. His opera *La costanza trionfante* was successfully staged in Munich, and Charles Albert of Bavaria was immensely pleased with the performance of *Catone* he attended in Verona. A further proof of the popularity Vivaldi's vocal music once enjoyed is attested by the many manuscript copies of various arias found in libraries throughout Europe.

In 1739 Vivaldi's music was considered by a contemporary composer and music critic as so well composed for the voice "that his arias impress the specialists in that species of composition as being a thorn in the flesh." Several years later Charles Burney wrote that despite his "riotous" music for violins, Vivaldi "had been too long used to write for the voice to treat it like an instrument."

Adverse comments regarding Vivaldi's vocal music were

made while he was still alive. In 1740, Tartini told the French jurist and scholar Charles de Brosses "I have been urged to work for the Venetian theatres, and have never been willing to do it, well knowing that a gullet is not the neck of a violin. Vivaldi, who wanted to practice both genres, always failed to go over in the one, whereas in the other he succeeded very well." Quantz, the flute instructor and composer to Frederick the Great, maintained (in 1752, eleven years after Vivaldi's death), that Vivaldi's concerti were "lively and richly inventive . . . but composing daily and too much and especially turning out vocal music for opera, he fell at the end into frivolousness and eccentricity both in composing and playing." By 1792 (hardly more than fifty years after his operatic successes!) Gerber's dictionary of music, which has an otherwise laudatory article about Vivaldi maintained that "In Venice he was held in higher esteem as a violinist than as an opera composer, and that was just." And so the opinions go, right into the twentieth century. How much adverse opinions are based on personal knowledge of the music, and how much on the opinions of others, is of course hard to say. Judging by the difficulty in obtaining copies of most of the operas, and reliable editions of the solo and choral works which are in print, it would appear that perhaps in Vivaldi's case, many present day evaluations are derived from opinions of the past.

Juditha Triumphans, by Vivaldi, is subtitled "sacrum militare oratorium" (sacred military oratorio). Strictly speaking, an oratorio is supposed to be performed without scenery or action. We know, however, that many of Handel's oratorios were performed in much the same fashion as his operas, that is, with action and scenery on the stage. It is fairly safe to assume that the custom of staging oratorios was moderately widespread during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. One of the only differences between oratorios and opera at this time was the subject matter: Opera was based on a secular subject and could only be performed in the theatre; the oratorio, based on a text generally derived from the old or new testaments, could be performed without scenery or action in the church, or with the scenery and action in the theatre.

The first European opera house was opened in Venice

(Edited by Alberto Zedda)

in 1637, and for the next seventy-five years that city remained the center of operatic activity. Because the public was admitted to the performances, it was necessary to adjust the libretti for the benefit of the audience. To this end, the complicated and often ludicrous plots including magnificent scenery and stage machines were abandoned in favor of stories dealing with intrigues. The use of the chorus, too, was almost completely abandoned. In its place the aria and recitative took over, together with the orchestral introductions, interludes and closing sections.

During the early 18th century a certain stylization of musical language and form developed, which emphasized the melodic line of the solo voice, supported by a pleasant harmonic background. The eventual result of this was a style of opera in which refinement and structural symmetry were of more importance than the dramatic strength and truth. Frequently, as though to compensate for this weakness, the music (however poorly related to the dramatic situation) was of great beauty. This new style is known as Neapolitan opera, because it was first thought to have originated in Naples, though subsequently it was found to have developed simultaneously in the North of Italy as well as in the South.

Frequently composers of Neapolitan opera (the greatest of whom was probably Alessandro Scarlatti) employed rhythms of the indigenous folk songs and dances in their arias, thereby imparting to their works a strong popular appeal. Two types of recitatives were also developed: The recitative with harpsichord accompaniment (*recitativo secco*), and the recitative with orchestral accompaniment (*recitativo accompagnato*). The recitative with or without accompaniment was used for the purpose of bringing the action of the story forward as quickly as possible, while the arias, duets, etc., were used to highlight certain emotional climaxes.

Though subtitled an oratorio, Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans* (composed in 1716), is actually an opera in the modern Neapolitan sense. Gone are the elaborate choruses, the lavish scenery, the large orchestra and large cast of characters. The arias frequently sound as though they were originally folk songs; the recitatives (with and without accompaniment) are in the best Neapolitan tradition.

The Book of Judith may be summarized as follows: In the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrians sought to increase their domains and conquered all peoples except the Jews. Holofernes was sent at the head of an army to lay siege to Bethulia and to enslave its citizens. The hard-pressed Jews are about to give in when Judith, a rich widow, offers a solution. She thereupon goes to the enemy camp together with her maid, and pretends to help Holofernes capture Bethulia. Holofernes, infatuated by Judith, invites her to have dinner with him. He becomes drunk and falls asleep, whereupon she decapitates him. Judith and her maid then carry the head back to Bethulia. Armed with new courage, the Jews now hang Holofernes' head outside the city walls, rally their armies and scatter or destroy the entire enemy force.

In Vivaldi's oratorio, the action is limited to what happens between the time Judith comes to Holofernes and the time she returns to Bethulia. Judith is characterized as a chaste widow, the medieval type of holy woman who remained chaste despite marriage. Since much of the interest is in the "love angle" of this libretto, so her main characteristic is her glowing beauty. When Holofernes tells her of his love she is still the medieval holy woman and answers him with the customary statements regarding the shallowness of this world and the verity of the next. When she kills Holofernes, although she does it in the name of her Lord, she also does it out of patriotism. The libretto, in fact, is an allegorical representation of Venice's political struggles: that no one might mistake the intent, Ozias, in a portion of his final recitative (omitted in this recording) makes it quite clear that Judith represents Venice, he himself the Church and the Bethulians the Christian congregation. Holofernes and his army represent the Turks.

Space doesn't allow for a detailed discussion of each of the arias in this oratorio, nor is this the place for such a discussion. We will, therefore, limit ourselves to drawing attention to a few of the many interesting features of this work.

Holofernes' character is described in the aria following his recitative, in which he sings that "if purpose uphold him, / then fighting embolds him, / his life's hope is near." It is interesting to note that in this warlike song, Vivaldi not only uses no martial instruments (trumpets, drums, etc.) but the rhythm is in 3/4 time, which is about as far from military music as one can ordinarily go.

The servant's aria, *Matrona inimica*, is interesting in that the violins and basses play in octaves throughout, as an accompaniment to the voice part.

The cheerful setting of *O quam vaga, venusta* . . . belies the drama of the situation. One would never suspect, from the music alone, that Judith is about to go to Holofernes to plead for peace.

Judith's aria, *Quanto magis generosa*, is at once tender and beguiling. In order to heighten the effect of Judith's plea, Vivaldi has scored this aria for just viola d'amore solo and two violins. The underlying pathetic quality is unmistakable. It is as though, in sympathy with Judith's cause, Vivaldi has supplied the voice part with an accompaniment least likely to detract from the melodic line. The thin, slightly nasal timbre of the viola d'amore introduction creates a wistful mood which is perfect for the meaning of the words. When the full string orchestra (including violas and basses) enters at the end of the aria, it is as though Judith herself had said, "I have had my say, now it is up to you."

In Holofernes' aria, *Sede, o cara*, Vivaldi gives an excellent musical characterization of the man quite beside himself for love of the woman. Judith, forced to partake of a feast with Holofernes, sings an impassioned aria, *Agitata infido flatu*, in which she bewails her present situation. Sustained notes on the violins contrasted to a running bass and an agitated viola part, create a mood which is as dramatic and intense as many of the better known arias of Handel. Though Judith later in the same aria sings of happiness when contrasted to her present situation, her true feelings are really portrayed in the orchestral accompaniment, which continues in the same vein throughout the aria.

The original instrumentation of *Veni, veni me sequere* was for Salmò and muted strings. Musicologists are divided as to just what the Salmò was, each school of thought advancing perfectly sound claims to substantiate their theories. In this recording, the oboe has been used largely, no doubt, because it heightens the plaintive character of the aria as Judith requests that her servant, Abra, stay with her throughout her dealings with Holofernes. The pathetic nature of the aria is emphasized by the omission of the basses until Judith's first entrance.

The chorus which closes the first part of the oratorio is characteristic of the choral writing in many of the Neapolitan operas, and though it contributes little to the action, it does succeed in bringing this section to a pensive if not dramatic close.

Just as the viola d'amore was used for a special effect in *Quanto magis generosa*, Vivaldi felt that a special effect was required in Judith's aria, *Transit aetas*. In this aria, Judith sings not of love as Holofernes understands it, but of a deathless soul in love with God. The instrumental obbligato is supplied by a mandolin, and the illusion it creates is that of the paintings and carvings of the Renaissance depicting angels playing lutes and harps. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the aria, "*Deb vieni alla finestra*" also employs a mandolin as an obbligato instrument, and it is, perhaps, a sign of the changing times when we compare the mandolin symbolizing one kind of love in *Juditha* and quite another kind in the Mozart opera.

Holofernes can hardly restrain his love for Judith who threatens to leave unless he calms himself. Holofernes' aria, *Noli o cara*, has an accompaniment for obbligato oboe and organ, and is a tender love song in the best 18th century tradition. He agrees to call off the war and says "long live Judith's glory. The face of war will disappear: may love live in peace through you." Judith's aria, *Vivat in pace*, is a tender hymn to peace in the form of a siciliano (a dance indigenous to Southern Italy and Sicily). The emotional quality of the aria is intensified by the manner in which Vivaldi has scored it: muted violins and violas, no basses. It is also interesting to note the curious effect of the frequent trills in the violins, like the breath of a slight breeze caused by invisible wings. Another interesting feature of this aria is that it is the only one in the entire oratorio not employing the da-capo form, which had become standardized by this time.

Abra's aria, *Non ita reducem*, is a fine musical description of Judith's servant's apprehension for her mistress' safety as she prepares to kill Holofernes. Vivaldi effectively increases the tension by omitting the basses part way through the aria, so that their dramatic value is fully appreciated when they reenter.

Judith's invocation to the Lord, *Summe astrorum*

Creator. is set as a recitative with orchestral accompaniment. Her feelings regarding the sleeping Holofernes manifest themselves in the succeeding aria as she goes about preparing to decapitate him. Abra's song of praise for Judith, *Si fulgida per te*, has as its roots Neapolitan folk song, the general style of which is still familiar today.

The aria of Holofernes' servant, *Iam non procul ab axe*, on finding him dead in his tent, might easily be mistaken for Handel. The vocal writing shows how well Vivaldi understood the unique qualities of human voice. Compare the dramatic intensity of the opening words to the instrumental writing (although still actually written for the voice) which follows it. All the passion and hate one person could feel are put in this short aria.

* * * *

The one thing which impresses us most in *Juditha*, is that for a composer who was such a pioneer in the development of instrumental music, and for a man whose imagination was so frequently inspired by nature and poetry (as we know from the varied titles of his *concerti* and *sinfonie*), Vivaldi's oratorio seems, if not old-fashioned, more contemporaneous with his time than many of his instrumental works. Hardly any of the arias combine the lyric and profound quality one is accustomed to hearing in the arias of Handel. While his instrumentation is certainly varied, and his harmony never grows boring, Vivaldi's setting for the voice and instruments, does lack a certain individual quality, which, for example we can find in the works of Alessandro Scarlatti. There is rarely, too, the constant shifting from harmony to counterpoint one encounters in Handel's vocal music, or even in Vivaldi's own instrumental works. While none of these shortcomings should be considered serious enough to discourage more frequent performance of this oratorio, it may explain in part why we hear it so seldom. It is paradoxical in a way, that the very quality which makes the work so attractive — its singable melodies and its overall lack of complexity — also stands in the way of its being performed more frequently. Perhaps there will come a time when we will be able to accept *Juditha Triumphans* and Vivaldi's operas on their own terms, thereby making it possible to enjoy these unjustly neglected works for what they have to offer, not for what they don't attempt to give us.

A few words about this recording. *Juditha* was originally performed at the Pietà in Venice by a cast employing only women. The names of the performers are marked on the libretto and in one or two places in the original score. While it would have been possible to use women in the roles of Judith and Abra, and men in the parts of Holofernes, his servant and Ozias, it was thought best to adhere to the voices specified by the composer.

Vivaldi occasionally made two settings of the same text, in this recording the alternative version has sometimes been used. One aria (for Holofernes' servant) has been omitted in this performance, the order of two arias in Part I has been reversed, and several recitatives have been shortened. Since all the arias but one are of the da-capo variety, it was decided to omit the repeat in most cases. When this was done, the closing portion of the first part of the aria (played by the orchestra) was repeated, thus implying the da-capo without actually playing it. Apart from these minor alterations, this recording of Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans* follows the composer's autograph score as closely as possible.

DOUGLAS TOWNSEND

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**THE MUSICAL
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**ANTONIO VIVALDI
JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS**

**MHS 835
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**MONAURAL
33 $\frac{1}{3}$ R.P.M.**

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Part I (beginning)

Oralia DOMINGUEZ & Irene COMPAREZ, Mezzo-Sopranos;
Bianca Maria CASONI, Mezzo-Soprano;
Emilia CUNDARI, Soprano

Chorus of the Accademia Filarmonica
Romana Angelicum Chamber Orchestra

ALBERTO ZEDDA, Conductor
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ANTONIO VIVALDI
JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS

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XTV 133090

Part I (conclusion)

Oralia DOMÍNGUEZ & Irene COMPAREZ, Mezzo-Sopranos;
Bianca Maria CASONI, Mezzo-Soprano;
Emilia CUNDARI, Soprano

Chorus of the Accademia Filarmonica
Romana Angelicum Chamber Orchestra

ALBERTO ZEDDA, Conductor
Recorded by Angelicum

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ANTONIO VIVALDI
JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS

MHS 836
SIDE 3

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Part II (beginning)

Oralia DOMINGUEZ & Irene COMPAREZ, Mezzo-Sopranos;
B. M. CASONI, Mezzo-Soprano;
E. CUNDARI, Soprano; Maria Grazia ALLEGRI, Contralto

Chorus of the Accademia Filarmonica
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ANTONIO VIVALDI
JUDITHA TRIUMPHANS

MHS 835
SIDE 4

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Part II (conclusion)

Oralia DOMINGUEZ & Irene COMPAREZ, Mezzo-Sopranos;
B. M. CASONI, Mezzo-Soprano;
E. CUNDAR, Soprano; Maria Grazia ALLEGRI, Contralto

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