

The Sunday Times

MUSIC

On record: Classical

The week's essential new releases

Hugh Canning, David Cairns, Paul Driver and Stephen Pettitt



A fine version: Paul van Nevel with the Huelgas Ensemble

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ALBUM OF THE WEEK

FRANCESCA CACCINI

La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina

Cast, Huelgas Ensemble, cond Paul Van Nevel

Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 88985338762

This beautiful opera, written in 1625 for the visit to the Medici court by the crown prince of Poland, is the only surviving theatrical score by the great singer Francesca, daughter of the better-known Giulio Caccini, one of the composers associated with the *intermedi* for the 1589 comedy *La Pellegrina*. Many regard these interludes with dance and song as the precursor of opera, and Francesca soon became established as a vocal “virtuosa” after her appearance, aged 13, in Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice*. Her part witty, part serious retelling of the story of Alcina and Ruggiero is admirably concise, standing between the madrigalian/choral style of Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* (1608) and the sung recitative of his later masterpieces, *Ulisse* (1640) and *Poppea* (1643). Van Nevel’s recording follows the fine version from the Boston Early Music Festival, but includes dance music by Salamone Rossi. Michaela Riener’s vindictive Alcina, Achim Schulz’s languid Ruggiero and Sabine Lutzenberger’s ravishing, androgynous-sounding Melissa are stylistic paragons, as are “choruses” of water spirits, monsters and enchanted plants. *HC*