



REVIEW: RECORDING

Ulysses: Musicalisches Schauspiel

Reinhard Keiser (1674–1739)

Göttinger Barockorchester / Antonius Adamske (direction)
Coviello Classics COV 92203, 2022; two discs, 150 minutes

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With the production of a CD of Reinhard Keiser's *Ulysses*, Coviello Classics expands its catalogue to include the music of an important figure in dramatic and non-dramatic vocal composition from around the turn of the eighteenth century. The work itself is of special interest for several reasons, making the recording reviewed here more than welcome. The timing could not be better: the recording has appeared three hundred years after the opera's first performance in 1722, and two years before the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Keiser's birthday.

Ulysses is one of five operas Keiser wrote or arranged for Copenhagen during the years 1721–1722, and it is the only one of them that has survived in score (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv). Georg Feder provided a critical edition based on this score in 1995 (*Das Erbe deutscher Musik*, volume 107 (Mainz: Schott)). Although it is not mentioned in the booklet, this edition was probably used for the *Ulysses* production captured on this recording.

These five operas were performed at the Danish court theatre by a Hamburg opera company under the impresario Johann Kayser. According to his contract, Kayser had to find the German composer and the singers, whereas the instrumentalists and dancers were supplied by the court. The author of the text, Friedrich Maximilian von Lersner (1697–1753), a well-travelled librettist, ambassador and politician, was at that time employed as *Kanzleirat* (princely councillor) at the court and probably wrote the libretto in his spare time.

Johann Kayser's activities as an impresario offered a significant opportunity for Reinhard Keiser. At this point, the Hamburg opera was suffering from considerable financial problems, and Keiser, its long-term Kapellmeister, was searching intensively for a new position as a court composer. He first tried his luck in Germany – Stuttgart, Baden-Durlach and other courts. After that, he turned to Copenhagen, spending about one and a half years there (with interruptions). But he succeeded neither at the Danish nor at the German courts, and so he returned to Hamburg in 1722, where he had to work with Telemann.

It is obvious that in *Ulysses* Keiser wanted to show off his full abilities in an attempt to impress the Danish King Friedrich IV, especially since the opera was composed for the king's birthday (11 October). The music of *Ulysses* is of outstanding quality, and Keiser had at his disposal not only a standard orchestra of strings, woodwinds and continuo, but also the court trumpet and timpani band (nine musicians in total). While it is certain that Keiser composed the opera in Hamburg, it is not clear whether the performance in Copenhagen took place under his direction. Owing to the health problems suffered by Margaretha Susanna Kayser – one of Hamburg's most remarkable singers and wife of the impresario – the performance took place only in November, with another singer in the important role of Penelope. The new actor-singer brought with her some Italian

bravura arias taken from Hamburg pasticcios. These arias are not in the libretto, but were inserted into the score.

In addition to being Keiser's only surviving Copenhagen opera score, and a festive opera for the Danish king's birthday, *Ulysses* is important as one of the few examples of Keiser's later style of composing for the stage. Familiar features from his earlier operas are also in evidence here. In the recitatives Keiser keeps his particularly expressive, melodically and harmonically elaborated style that follows every turn of the text and lets the listener share the emotional state of the character performing on stage. Most of the arias are still short, with fast harmonic motion in the B sections. Yet what has changed significantly since Keiser's earlier years is the melodic flow in combination with the metrical organization. Keiser adapted very well to the elegant style of the 1720s, with bass patterns built upon repeated notes and even-tempered rather than eccentric melodic lines. Continuo arias and arias with other accompanying instruments used only in the A section, both frequently found in Keiser's early operas, disappear almost completely in *Ulysses*. Thus, instead of continual contrasts in the music, we now get a much smoother overall structure, dominated by a new brilliance of sound. One can hear that, for instance, right at the beginning, in the Intrada and through the whole Prologue. Further striking examples, among many others, are Ulysses's arias 'Mit Freuden Thränen in den Augen' and 'Kann ich dich nur wieder sehen' at the beginning of Act 2. In some cases, Keiser leaves this elegant tone behind and writes extremely dramatic pieces, such as Urilas's 'Will der Himmel mich nicht hören' (Act 1 No. 23). Here, as in some other arias and accompagnatos, Keiser uses different time signatures in different sections. Generally, we find a great variety of forms – da capo and binary arias, duettos, several accompagnatos and choruses – and we also find very rich instrumentation, both of which are typical of Keiser. It is Keiser's mastery of elegance and, at the same time, his ability to express textual details and dramatic affect that strike the listener.

The recording is well produced. Its sound is warm and rich, with a good separation of instruments and voices. It is based on live recordings of the final rehearsal and the performance given at the Theater auf dem Hornweg in Nienburg in October 2021, with some retakes recorded at the same location. The album also includes the Italian replacement arias by Giuseppe Maria Orlandini and probably Giovanni Bononcini for the 1722 Copenhagen performance(s), as well as alternative settings by Keiser himself. All in all, the two discs contain a complete recording of the work. Antonius Adamske's interpretation suits the music almost perfectly. Tempos of arias, duettos, choruses and instrumental pieces are well chosen, Adamske and the Göttinger Barockorchester allowing the music to flow without forcing it in either direction. They express all the grandeur of Keiser's composition, highlighting the pieces in the French style and the many other French elements apparent in the opera as well. This approach makes it easy for the singers to deliver the quite demanding vocal parts with ease. The cast is wonderful; highlights (for my taste) are Bogna Bernagiewicz (Penelope), Francisca Prudencio (Cephalia) and Janno Scheller (Ulysses). I also want to emphasize that the comic servant Arpax, sung by Goetz Phillip Körner, is treated without any attempt by the singer to amplify the comic effect by means of extreme voicing or pronunciation, trusting the humorous attributes already found within both text and music.

The recitatives are the only fly in the ointment. The good news is that they are not delivered too rapidly, providing the melodic lines and harmonic changes with enough time to reach the listener's ear. But, to my taste, the manner of recitative performance is much too confined by the notated metre, with an emphasis on small text portions and pauses, both strictly following the 2/2 beat – not at all a realistic way of speaking, as recitative should be. Listening to these – sometimes rather long – recitatives soon becomes tiring and gives the listener the impression that everything is just too slow. But this is not entirely the case: the interpretation of the recitatives simply lacks life.

In addition to information about the cast and the recording, the booklet contains an introductory essay by music director Adamske and the libretto, with an accompanying English translation. The libretto even contains those aria texts and parts of the texts for which Keiser's music is lost or

which he did not set to music. Thus we have a kind of complete libretto edition (except that the aria 'Die Ostsee, der beschäumte Belt', which should be Act 1 No. 8, is left out – by mistake – for it is part of the recording). Adamske's essay gives the impression of having been written under time pressure, or otherwise being kept short because of space restrictions. The result is that some interesting aspects of the opera are not addressed. It says nothing, for instance, about the composers of the Italian arias, and the question of why a male soprano (Gerald Thompson) was chosen for the role of Circe – there is no evidence in the sources for this decision – remains unanswered. The essay does, however, contain two long quotations: a note on *Ulysses* published by Johann Mattheson in his journal *Critica Musica* (November 1722) and Telemann's 1739 'Sonnet on the Death of Keiser' ('Sonnet aufs Absterben des berühmten Capellmeister[s] Kayzers', in Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Der Critische Musicus* 57/1 (October 1740), 248). In the English translation of the essay, those two texts remain in German. An account of the plot is missing completely. Here it would have been beneficial to spend more effort and pages providing a more complete picture of what amounts to an excellent performance of an important early eighteenth-century German opera.

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