

Classical

## **Regal revelations**

**Annick Massis/**

**Jory Vinikour**

Wigmore Hall, London

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French soprano Annick Massis is a woman with style. Walking on to the platform in a simple yet striking grey dress, she has an assured, almost aristocratic allure, which is mercifully free from the self-dramatisation of divadom. Her accompanist, the Canadian Jory Vinikour, trots behind her. Dressed in a velvet suit and a florid Louis XIV waistcoat, he looks like a bashful valet in the service of some great lady. They make an impressive team.

Massis first came to prominence at Glyndebourne in 1997, as Adèle in Rossini's *Le Comte Ory*: her flawless musicianship and impeccable comic timing redeemed what was unquestionably one of the festival's weaker efforts. As if acknowledging that turning point in her career, she closed her programme with Adèle's big act one aria, creating the same magic, laying bare the character's self-deluded sensuality with a combination of spectacular vocalism, verbal innuendo and subtle wit.

Technically, she's staggering. Her voice—bell-like in its upper registers, warm and sweet lower down—is incredibly beautiful. The long, extravagant lines of Monteverdi's *Quel Sguardo Sdegnosetto* are sculpted with immaculate breath-control. *Bel Raggio Lusinghier* from Rossini's *Semiramide* reveals coloratura of dazzling precision and a phenomenal ascent to a gobsmacking top E.

She is also, however, an outstanding actress, nursed in the dramatic tradition that produced Molière and Racine. The latter's *Phèdre* was the source of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, and there's a touch of the Comédie Française in Massis's version of Aricie's great lament—the restrained yet tragic stance, the sparse, declamatory delivery, the flickering subtlety in which every note and gesture speaks volumes. Handel's Cleopatra (from *Giulio Cesare*) is often portrayed as a childish sex-kitten; Massis turns her into a regal, sensual figure, and the result is revelatory.

She's fabulous in comedy, too. A wicked smile crosses her face as she exposes the erotic yearnings of Rezia, the heroine of Gluck's *Les Pèlerins de la Mecque* or *La Rencontre Imprévue*, the opera on which Mozart drew for *Il Seraglio*. She presents us with Offenbach's Eurydice as an encore, hissing her resentment of Orpheus with gleeful spite.

Throughout, Vinikour is a perfect foil. Recitals of operatic arias with piano or harpsichord accompaniment (he plays both) are tricky to get right and you tend to miss the orchestra. Vinikour—whether enveloping Rameau's Aricie in tendrils of consoling sound, or turning the prelude that heralds Semiramide's arrival into an appealing nocturne—was exemplary throughout and the absence of a band wasn't felt.

Tim Ashley

\*\*\*\*\* Unmissable \*\*\*\* Recommended \*\*\* Enjoyable \*\* Mediocre \* Terrible