

San Francisco Chronicle

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CD REVIEW

Sunday, April 30, 2006

ATALANTA

Handel lovers who missed the Philharmonia Baroque's heralded performances of the composer's rarely heard opera "Atalanta" at Berkeley's First Congregational Church last fall may now hear what the excitement was all about. And they can do it either as a download or in conventional CD format. Both options are available at www.magnatune.com, which offers a pay-what-you-will download (suggested price \$16 for the complete two-part opera). The company will also ship a two-CD jewel-cased "Atalanta" for \$25.94. Either way, the end product is musical bliss. In every particular, from the suave musicianship of Nicholas McGegan's orchestra to the six vibrant and tender soloists to the joyous contributions from the Philharmonia Chorale, "Atalanta" spills over with delights. None of this will come as a surprise to devotees of the Philharmonia, the invaluable San Francisco early music ensemble whose silver anniversary climaxed earlier this month with a Beethoven Ninth Symphony at Davies Hall. Recorded during the semi-staged performances in Berkeley, "Atalanta" emerges as an unjustly neglected work of great charm, vigor and emotional warmth. The pastoral tale of lovers misapprehending one another and then uniting, may be less than dramatically compelling. But Handel, who composed the 1736 work as an entertainment for the Prince of Wales, breathes life into one choice aria, duet and chorus after another. In the two soprano parts, Dominique Labelle lavishes her sweetly ringing tone and lush trills on the title role, while Susanne Rydén is equally adept and moving as Atalanta's lover. Everyone rises to the occasion here, with tenor Michael Slattery and baritone Philip Cutlip meriting special mention. Even the occasional rumble of stage business, which includes an attack by a wild boar, adds to the air of discovery. Philharmonia Baroque found "Atalanta" and put it back on the musical map. — Steven Winn

HANDEL

ATALANTA

PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE ORCHESTRA

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\$16 RECOMMENDED PRICE