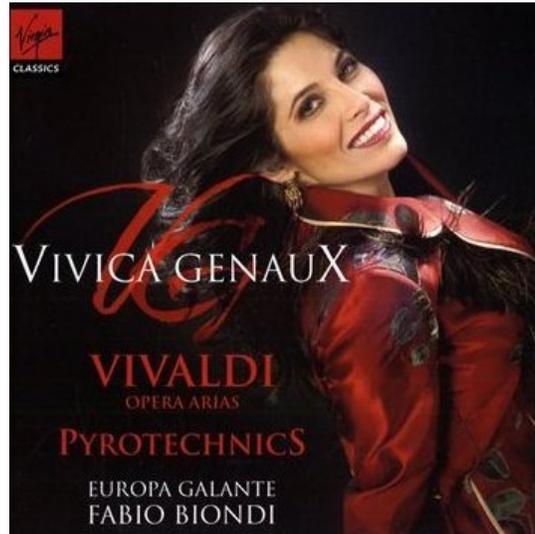


Pyrotechnics - Vivaldi Opera Arias

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Vivica Genaux (mezzo-soprano); Europa Galante/Fabio Biondi
(Virgin Classics 6945730)

Firmly established as a specialist in Baroque music, **Vivica Genaux** has repeatedly stunned her listeners with jaw-dropping renditions of the most hair-raisingly difficult coloratura music. Though she has spent a good deal of time on stage impersonating Rossini's comic heroines (most notably Angelina, in *La Cenerentola*), Genaux clearly has an affinity for music associated with the great castrati.

It was her attempt to expose the public to the breadth of virtuosity wielded by the great Farinelli that yielded her first solo disc, appropriately titled 'Arias for Farinelli'. On that disc, she collaborated with Rene Jacobs to offer some of the most impressively virtuosic singing I have ever heard. Indeed, despite the strong showing of many worthy countertenors, it was Genaux who – perhaps for the first time – truly demonstrated something similar to the technical arsenal for which the castrati were so famously admired. She has since expanded her recorded repertoire quite successfully (Handel, Scarlatti, Hasse, Donizetti, Rossini), but with this newest release, she once again brings an intense focus to the ornate flourishes of the Italian Baroque. 'Pyrotechnics' – entirely comprised of arias and scenes by Vivaldi – is another triumphant showcase for one of the most accomplished vocal technicians of our times.

Beginning with 'Come in vano il mare irato', an *allegro molto* aria from Vivaldi's *Catone in Utica*, Genaux jumps in with all guns firing, pinning the listener to his seat in utter disbelief. This exhilarating vengeance aria in C-major asks the singer for five and a half minutes of roulades, leaps, turns, arpeggios, and trills. Frankly, I was so disbelieving that I stopped and re-started from the beginning three or four times before I made it through the entire aria. Interestingly, it was originally composed for a mezzo-soprano, so the castrati were not the sole purveyors of astonishing technique back in Vivaldi's day. From the heights of energetic coloratura, Genaux transitions into the mesmerizing, phenomenally long-phrased 'E prigioniero e re' from *Semiramide*. Without speed to generate the 'pyrotechnics', Genaux offers

chameleonic dynamic variations and immaculate control of phrasing, along with superb diction, allowing us to understand every word of the text. These first two tracks couldn't be more contrasting in their vocal requirements, and illustrate perfectly the following quote from Frédéric Delamea's interesting liner notes: '[In Vivaldi's time], virtuosity was never empty; on the contrary, it played an important part in bringing the drama to life, always taking as its point of departure the text suggested by the librettist and enhanced by the composer. Far from being a meaningless procedure, the fireworks symbolized the aesthetic of a vocal genre based on the stylization and the rejection of trivial realism.' Stated another way, sometimes 'pyrotechnics' are literal: scales, roulades, triplets, and trills. But intensity of expression can also come from dynamic shading, breath control, and vocal coloring.

Thus, the listener is treated to a feast for the ears, as one aria follows another, each giving us a new angle from which to view Vivaldi's genius. His 'instrumental' writing for the voice comes to the fore in 'Alma oppressa', a 'rage' aria from *La fida ninfa* in which Genaux dazzles with supreme breath control while she traverses a range well over two octaves, sounding like an additional member of the orchestra much of the time. In 'Agitata da due venti' from *Griselda*, the composer metaphorically buffets the voice with tremendously taxing runs and vocal acrobatics. This is surely the most well known aria among the thirteen selections, and Genaux's version is by a good margin, the fastest, most accurate, and thrilling version on recordings. The velocity becomes all the more impressive when Genaux and Biondi choose not to contrast the 'B' section by slowing down; indeed, they barely pause for breath, underlining the despair and frustration the character Costanza is suffering. Among the remaining selections, there is no denying that a couple of the arias are perhaps more conventional (i.e., less interesting at first listen), but each has assets well worth exploring, and none is performed without keen intelligence and total commitment.

Genaux's most remarkable asset is her ability to vividly convey the emotional underpinnings of the notes on the page, whether they are frightfully fast or languorously slow. Her voice is not conventionally beautiful, and there are a couple of arias that require a higher tessitura that emphasizes the graininess in her tone. Still, her skill in molding her voice to meet every conceivable vocal challenge is stunning. Furthermore, the research she has invested in each aria is manifest in the breadth of characters she is able to inhabit without resorting to externally applied artifice. As she sings, the listener is drawn into the music via the thoughts and feelings of the character: we cheer Emilia's defiant rage as surely as we are touched by Zoroastro's inner strength and resolve. Even in the arias with no traceable operatic context (there are three on the disc), Genaux's interpretive powers bring anonymous characters to life.

Of course, Genaux is not the only artist at work in these virtuoso compositions, and it would be hard to imagine more effective collaborators than the esteemed **Fabio Biondi** and his virtuoso ensemble **Europa Galante**. The accompaniments throughout the programme focus heavily on the strings, with winds (flutes, horns) only occasionally adding extra color and interest. The latter are particularly important in 'Nella foresta' from *Catone in Utica*, in which the horns illustrate Emilia's anguish quite stunningly. In fact, one of the minor drawbacks for this Vivaldi showcase is the recording quality itself, which brings Genaux a bit too far forward, leaving her superb collaborators slightly muted. I rarely heard the raw energy of original instruments that might have given these arias the maximum degree of excitement and vitality. A better sonic balance would have afforded a bit more insight into Vivaldi's instrumental details, yet this is a small concern in light of the overall achievement. This disc is a required purchase for all fans of Vivaldi, Genaux, and/or great singing combined with scholarship: what a fantastic way to start the New Year!

By David Laviska

<http://www.musicalcriticism.com/recordings/cd-genaux-vivaldi-0110.shtml>