

respect for the drama's sheer grandiosity – and the niceties of its social drama – does come through. It's enough for Giovanni to unsheath his sword just a fraction and Masetto knows to back off. Rank and swagger count for nearly everything, so Giovanni has no need to exercise restraint.

Although the playing of the Arena di Verona Orchestra can be erratic, conductor Stefano Montanari falls in sync with the mood of the show and gives us BIG effects – romantic fervour in lingering codas and equally dreamy flights of improvisation from the fortepiano. It's the right framework for the hefty, arena-size voices. Álvarez gets out there and sweats as Don Giovanni, a carnivore let loose in the petting zoo, although let down by a rather woofy serenade that wouldn't get anyone down from their balcony in a hurry.

The standouts are the superb Lungu as Donna Anna, fierce and brilliant in her arias, and Saimir Pirgu's ardent, stylish Ottavio. Maria José Siri's unfocused and sometimes unpitched Donna Elvira is less pleasurable, and Natalia Roman's vibrato-heavy Zerlina blows hot and cold. But Alex Esposito's experienced, wry Leporello is enjoyable, and Christian Senn's Masetto is nicely blokish – despite his lurid wedding garb. **Neil Fisher**

Mozart

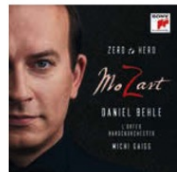
'Zero to Hero'

La Betulia liberata – D'ogni colpa la colpa maggiore **La clemenza di Tito** – Se all'impero, amici Dei **Così fan tutte** – Overture; Ah, lo veggio; Un'aura amorosa **Don Giovanni** – Overture; Dalla sua pace, K540a; Il mio tesoro intanto **Die Entführung aus dem Serail** – Hier soll ich dich denn sehen; Ich baue ganz auf deine Stärke; Konstanze! Konstanze! Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen **Idomeneo** – Fuor del mar **Die Zauberflöte** – Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön

Daniel Behle *ten*

L'Orfeo Baroque Orchestra / Michi Gaigg

Sony Classical © 19075 96458-2 (69' • DDD)



'Zero to Hero' proclaims Sony of a recital that begins with the 'loser' Don

Ottavio (is he?) and ends with the guilt-ridden anti-hero Idomeneo. Never mind the slick rubric. Buoyed by spirited and colourful support from Michi Gaigg's period band, Daniel Behle confirms his high reputation as a Mozart lyric tenor. His unforced, evenly produced tone is always easy on the ear, his coloratura fluent, his phrasing stylish and sensitive. He can spin

a tender *mezza voce*, as in a dulcet 'Un' aura amorosa', enhanced by soft, 'woody' clarinets and bassoons; and with a seam of metal in his tone, he rises impressively to the bravura challenges of a gargantuan aria from the biblical oratorio *La Betulia liberata* and Idomeneo's anguished 'Fuor del mar', sung in its original, uncut version.

There is character, too, in Behle's singing: a mingled ardour and musing intimacy in Tamino's portrait aria, quivering excitement tempered with elegance in Belmonte's 'O, wie feurig', a roguish smile in the tone in Ferrando's blithe lovesong 'Ah, lo veggio', its volleys of top B flats deftly negotiated. Urgency can get the better of him in Belmonte's 'Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen' and Ottavio's 'Il mio tesoro', which emerge as jauntily determined marches, short on poetry and grace. Here and elsewhere Behle can be appoggiatura-shy, leaving phrase endings blunt where they should be expressively rounded. That said, it's hard to think of a contemporary tenor who could better encompass the varied demands of these arias. Sadly, Sony's presentation is barely adequate, with a skimpy, gushing note on the arias and no texts or translations. **Richard Wigmore**

Picker

Fantastic Mr Fox

John Brancy *bar* Mr Fox

Krista River *mez* Mrs Fox

Andrew Craig Brown *bass-bar* Farmer Boggis

Edwin Vega *ten* Farmer Bunce

Gabriel Presser *bar* Farmer Bean

Elizabeth Futral *sop* Miss Hedgehog

Tynan Davis *mez* Rita the Rat

Theo Lebow *ten* Mr Porcupine

Andrey Nemzer *countertenor* Agnes the Digger

Gail Novak Mosites *sop* Mavis the Tractor

John Dooley *bar* Badger the Miner

Jonathan Blalock *ten* Burrowing Mole

Boston Children's Chorus; Odyssey Opera;

Boston Modern Orchestra Project / Gil Rose

BMOP/sound © 2 1065 (83' • DDD)

Includes libretto



Opera has done much during the past few decades to shed

its elite, high-art credentials. In many ways, children's opera ticks all the right boxes in terms of accessibility, communication and participation, yet it's a genre that remains somewhat neglected. The American composer Tobias Picker's adaptation of Roald Dahl's novel *Fantastic Mr Fox* could change all that.

Premiered in 1998 and produced on several occasions since then, this recording is set to bring this engaging work to a wider audience. In fact, Picker insists in the booklet notes that *Fantastic Mr Fox* is not directed at children per se but is in fact a 'family' opera: like those animation films by Pixar, it operates on different levels for both children and adults. For the most part *Fantastic Mr Fox* succeeds.

The story itself, to a libretto by Donald Sturrock, is straightforward enough. Three farmers called Bunce, Boggis and Bean seek revenge on Mr Fox and his family for their constant pillaging of chickens, geese and cider. Gluttony drives Bunce and Boggis to hunt down Mr Fox while greed motivates Bean. Thwarted and frustrated by the clever fox's tactics, Bean hires Agnes the Digger to root him out. While Agnes and Bean's rapacious quest to hunt down Mr Fox only serves to pillage the countryside itself, Mr Fox et al take cover in a nearby forest before joining forces with other creaturely friends to enact their own sweet revenge on the three villainous miscreants.

It's a story that operates on several levels. The animals display 'human' traits – love, care, compassion and consideration for one another – while the humans come across as being either plain stupid or cold and calculating. Picker's colourful, direct neo-tonal style works well in this respect. Themes are adapted to support the narrative rather than serving to illustrate character types. Perhaps inevitably, Picker's melodic lines at times evoke *Peter and the Wolf*, although Stravinsky is the most obvious stylistic reference point – more middle-period neoclassical than the one heard in *Renard*. Boston Children's Chorus do well to tackle some intricate high-vaulting lines, while Boston Modern Orchestra Project add vivid splashes of colour and rhythmic drive to the score. There are some truly tender moments, too, such as Mrs Fox's caring aria in Act 1 scene 2, performed with depth and conviction by mezzo Krista River, or the love duet in Act 3 between Porcupine and Miss Hedgehog. In those moments it's easy to forget that this is a fable and not true to life, and much of the credit has to go to the music itself. **Pwyll ap Siôn**

Rossini

Sigismondo

Marianna Pizzolato *mez* Sigismondo

Hera Hyesang Park *sop* Aldimira

Kenneth Tarver *ten* Ladislao

Il Hong *bass* Ulderico

Guido Loconsolo *bar* Zenovito

Rachel Kelly *mez* Anagilda

Gavan Ring *ten* Radoski