



VOL. 17/18

2 CD Set

# THE MASTERWORKS

George Frideric Handel

# Acis & Galatea



BRILLIANT  
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## SYNOPSIS

## Act I.

As the opera opens, a chorus of nymphs and shepherds sings of the delights of pastoral life on plains of Sicily („Oh, the Pleasures of the Plains“). Galatea, one of the 50 daughters of the mythical sea god Nereus, enters, singing that these joys of nature pale beside her great love for the shepherd Acis, son of the mythical wood god Pan and the nymph Symaethis („Ye Verdant Plains“). She bids the singers be still, for their songs awaken her pain at separation from her beloved („Hush, Ye Pretty Warbling Choir“). In a nearby grove, Acis enters and asks the mountain dweller Damon where he might find his love Galatea („Where Shall I Seek the Charming Fair?“). Damon tries to persuade Acis to stay and enjoy the pleasures of nature, rather than running to what he predicts will be Acis' ruin. Galatea enters; Acis throws himself at her feet („Lo! Here My Love“). In the lyrical aria „Love in Her Eyes Sits Playing“, Acis rejoices in the signs of love he reads in Galatea. Galatea responds by telling Acis of the sorrow separation from him has caused her („O Didst Thou Know... As When the Dove Laments Her Love“). The two join in an ecstatic duet („Happy We“) and the Chorus echoes their joy.

## Act II.

The lovers, warns the Chorus („Wretched Lovers“), are in danger: „Behold the monster Polypheme,“ they shout, as the loathsome Cyclops bounds into the peaceful glade. „I rage, I burn“, he roars, declaring his love for the horrified Galatea („O Ruddier than the Cherry“.) She backs away, repulsed; Polyphemus asks „Whither, fairest, art thou running?“ But it is clear that the beautiful sea nymph could never prefer him to Acis. „Cease to Beauty to be Suing“, the cyclops advises himself. Damon predicts that this thundering approach will never win a gentle woman („Would You Gain the Tender Creature“). Acis has no sympathy for his rival: „His Hideous Love“ will never touch Galatea. Though his strength is nothing next that of Polyphemus, Acis exclaims that „Love Sounds the Alarm“, and prepares to combat the giant. Damon urges his customary caution („Consider, Fond Shepherd“). Galatea also attempts to intercede („Cease, O Cease“). In a climactic trio, Acis and Galatea sing of their love while in the distance the smouldering Polyphemus threatens revenge. The giant seizes a boulder and hurls it at Acis, crushing him. Acis' last words are for his beloved („Help, Galatea“). The stricken Chorus sings the dirge „Mourn, All Ye Muses“. Galatea's graceful lament, „Must I My Acis Still Bemoan“, is answered by the Chorus: she must not grieve, they urge, over what cannot be changed. Instead, she should call upon heaven to bestow immortality on Acis. „Tis Done“, Galatea answers. The blood flowing from the slain Acis has been transformed into a sparkling stream („Heart, the Seat of Soft Delight“), as Acis himself, with wreathed brow, joins the company of Olympus. The final chorus counsels, „Galatea, Dry Thy Tears“: the River Acis is still part of their world!

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George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) served as Music Director for the Duke of Chandos from 1717 to 1721, and it was at Canons - the Duke's residence in Middlesex, England – that *Acis & Galatea* was first produced, with libretto by John Gay, possibly with John Hughes and another poet. The date of the first performance is approximated at 1718. The work is classified as an English Masque, a dramatic piece, most often on a theme from classical mythology, either staged or in concert form. This was not Handel's first treatment of the myth. He composed the smaller-scale Italian cantata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* during his Italian stay some ten years earlier. But it was the later English version that attracted his public and resulted in many performances. In 1732, Handel reworked material from both the earlier Italian and English versions into a third, bi-lingual hybrid „serenata“, principally for the benefit of his pampered Italian opera stars, who were content to earn enormous performance fees from their London public, but unwilling to attempt the English language on stage. To his earlier smaller cast were added vocal principals and an organ concerto entr'acte! The present recording features Handel's original 1718 English-language masque with its youthful ebullience. It is clearly the most successful treatment of the myth, and indeed, is one of the composer's most delightful works. *Acis* is an amazing voyage through the traditional Baroque modes of composition – which it both catalogues and transcends. Recitative is featured in a wide range – both secco and accompagnato. Perhaps the most extraordinary is Polyphemus' dramatic accompagnato recitativo „I Rage, I Burn“ from Act II: its tempestuous course is charted by wild changes in tempo: „furioso“, „adagio“, „furioso“ again, and „adagio e piano“, noted in Handel's own hand (a rarity). Another extraordinary recitative is the secco dialogue between the bass Polifemus and Galatea „Whither, fairest“. The popular baroque „step“



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motive, most familiar in Bach, is featured in the instrumental writing of Handel's opening chorus „O the Pleasures of the Plains“ in the melisma on the word „dance“. The plangent Act II „Mourn All Ye Muses“ is a secular, four-part chorale prelude with harmonies and modulations that range from the traditional to the bold: the accompaniment quits altogether, leaving the grieving vocalists alone with their lament. Galatea's graceful Act II siciliano air „Must I My Acis Still Bemoan“, features a plaintive solo oboe obligato in dialogue with the soprano, with short, dense, four-part choral interludes. Handel's haunting air is reminiscent of the slow movements of Vivaldi and Bach violin concerti. The word-painting Baroque composers borrowed from Renaissance music is also evident in Handel's *Acis & Galatea*: the rippling figure on the word „murmuring“ of the chorus' final „Galatea, Dry Thy Tears“, and the tortured treatment of „wretched“ in the Act II opening „Wretched Lovers“ chorus, achieved through diminished fourths and fifths, are examples. This amazing movement presents the Baroque fugue with astonishing variety: first as a double-fugue which balances the chorale-like first theme and the instrumental – style second, bringing them together in the final half of the magnificent chorus. The Baroque dance suite is richly reflected in Handel's use of dance rhythms in *Acis & Galatea*'s vocal music. These include the Gigue (the „Happy We“ duet/chorus); Damon's Act II Minuet („Would you Gain the Tender Creature“); the Bourrée (Polyphemus' beloved „O Ruddier Than the Cherry“), Polonaise (Handel's rare vocal trio „The Flocks Shall leave the Mountains“) and, in Galatea's Act I „As When the Dove“, a combination of two: Minuet in the first section, and a Passepied in the „B“ section. The two popular Baroque overture types are present in *Acis*: the majestic, double-dotted French style in *Acis*' „Where Shall I Seek“ and the rapid Italian style of the opening Sinfonia. Further characteristics of *Acis*' instrumental writing include frequent ostinato accompaniment and the absence of the viola in the entire score, which serves to deepen the contrast between the high- and low-pitched instruments of Handel's orchestra. *Acis*' da capo aria (an opening „A“ section, followed by a contrasting middle „B“ and a return of the „A“ with decoration by the singer and continuo harpsichordist), afford the four virtuoso soloists of the work abundant opportunity for glittering trills, mordents, appoggiaturas and cadenzas. This spontaneity and Handel's exuberant score serve to keep *Acis & Galatea* forever young.



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### CD 1

#### ACT I

- |                                     |       |                                    |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Sinfonia                         | 3'38  | 9. Aria Damon: Consider            | 6'03  |
| 2. Choir: Oh, the pleasure          | 5'29  | 10. Recitativo: Cease, o cease     | 0'20  |
| 3. Recitativo: Ye verdant plains    | 0'48  | 11. Trio: The flocks shall leave   | 2'27  |
| 4. Aria Galatea: Hush, ye pretty    | 6'22  | 12. Recitativo: Help, Galatea      | 1'03  |
| 5. Aria Acis: Where shall I seek    | 3'34  | 13. Choir: Mourn, all ye muses     | 3'50  |
| 6. Recitativo: Stay, shepherd, stay | 0'23  | 14. Galatea, choir: Must I my Acis | 4'03  |
| 7. Aria Damon: Shepherd, what       | 4'37  | 15. Recitativo: Tis done           | 0'21  |
| 8. Recitativo: Lo, here my love     | 0'30  | 16. Aria Galatea: Heart, the seat  | 3'49  |
| 9. Aria Acis: Love in her eyes      | 6'18  | 17. Choir: Galatea, dry thy tears  | 2'52  |
| 10. Recitativo: O didst thou know   | 0'15  | Total time:                        | 50'09 |
| 11. Aria Galatea: As when the dove  | 5'42  |                                    |       |
| 12. Duet/choir: Happy we            | 2'31  |                                    |       |
| Total time:                         | 40'07 |                                    |       |

### CD 2

#### ACT II

- |                                     |      |                                 |
|-------------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Choir: Wretched lovers           | 4'08 | <b>Galatea: Julianne Baird</b>  |
| 2. Recitativo accompagnato: I rage  | 1'24 | <b>Acis: Frederick Urrey</b>    |
| 3. Aria Polyphemus: O ruddier       | 3'07 | <b>Damon: David Price</b>       |
| 4. Recitativo: Whither, fairest     | 1'14 | <b>Polyphemus: Kevin Deas</b>   |
| 5. Aria Polyphemus: Cease to beauty | 5'17 | <b>AMA DEUS ENSEMBLE,</b>       |
| 6. Aria Damon: Would you gain       | 5'04 | <b>Valentin Radu</b>            |
| 7. Recitativo: His hideous love     | 0'23 | <i>Producer: John Ostendorf</i> |
| 8. Aria Acis: Love sounds th'alarm  | 4'44 | <i>Recording: 1996</i>          |
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