

# OPERA NEWS

Opera and Oratorio  
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## GRAUN: *Torna Vincitor*

 Forsythe; Contadin, viola da gamba and conductor. Opera Prima. Texts and translations. CPO 555 284-2



**T**HIS FINE BAROQUE ISSUE features very enjoyable music by a neglected composer that's well annotated and bracingly performed. Johann Gottlieb Graun (1703–71), born near Dresden, remains somewhat in the shadow of his better-known younger brother Carl Heinrich, a singer/composer who, along with Hasse, dominated German opera then. The two brothers collaborated, and some compositions ascribed only to “Graun” still perplex musicologists. The elder Graun brother was a violin virtuoso, a student of the legendary Tartini who in his early twenties instructed Wilhelm Friedemann Bach on the instrument and became concertmaster of Berlin’s court opera at thirty-seven. But his compositions, including the three on display here, feature impressively difficult writing for the lower-pitched viola da gamba, considered more aristocratic at the time.

The new disc, recorded in Italy in January 2019, takes its title from a line in “O Dio, Fileno,” one of two Metasasio-set pastoral cantatas here. Both are exhortations to love, though the second, “Già la sera,” also urges the beloved shepherdess to change venues to the fisherman lover’s beachside home. Both employ da capo arias with strikingly long contrasting sections (Graun was known and sometimes criticized in his day for his expansive sense of form), as well as elaborate obbligato parts for the gambist. Only after almost concerto-like introductions involving the soloist—here, the very proficient Cristiano Contadin, whose new HIP ensemble Opera Prima matches his informed style and clarity—does the soprano enter. There's a “dueling banjos” aspect to the subsequent interplay of voice and instrument. The vocals fall trippingly from the agile throat of gifted soprano Amanda Forsythe, among the glories of Boston’s early music scene, and

a known presence at Pesaro, Covent Garden, Opera Philadelphia and Munich's Bayrisches Staatsoper (if not much in her native New York City). Forsythe's intonation, commanding breath control and skill at decoration and trills augment her very attractive flowing timbre. I slightly prefer her approach to the first, more operatically grandiose cantata, as the second's droll references bring forth a slightly arch and soubrette quality. But even there the execution of her challenging music, up to high B natural, proves exemplary. A splendid Vivaldesque A minor concerto for viola da gamba separates the two cantatas, its solo part again aced by Contadin. —  
*David Shengold*