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<p>In the first generation of Italian Baroque masters, Stefano Landi (1587–1639) is a grossly under-appreciated standout.</p>
<p>Born in Rome, he might have made it a capital of early opera rivaling Florence and then Venice, but for the general aversion of popes to the seductions of secular theater. Landi’s first venture in this new realm, the tragicomic pastorella <i>La Morte d’Orfeo </i> dates from about 1619 but was apparently not staged, certainly not in Rome. But he found in the Papal City an abundance of patrons, especially in the Barberini family. It was under their sponsorship that he brought forth his “religious opera”, <i>Sant’Alessio</i>. Considered his masterpiece, it was first performed in 1632 and was taken up in other cities. But how much more of “Roman opera” there might have been!</p>

<p>Fortunately, Landi’s clear genius in vocal writing prompted an extensive output of short works, published in a series of volumes (not all of which survive, unfortunately). We can enjoy his accomplishment in this program devoted to his “airs to be sung” in various formats.</p>

<p>Of the 16 selections in this release, 12 are by Landi himself. For variety, there are two instrumental pieces and two vocal works by other, contemporaneous composers—a harpsichord piece by Frescobaldi and a lute one by Kapsberger and vocal items by Luzzasco Luzzaschi and Frescobaldi. These vocal insertions rightly serve to point up the contrasts between Landi’s writing style and others in his day. Some others preferred a freer and more experimental approach; but Landi, with his particular preference for strophic texts, produced a structured and melodic kind of music. His ‘T’amai gran tempo’, for instance, manages to mount a roughly strophic outburst by an angry husband over a scrambled <i>ciaccona </i>bass with results both clever and amusing.</p>

<p>The performers here are outstanding. Soprano Dagmar Saskova has a powerful, ringing, and beautiful voice; I hope to hear a lot more from her. Less sensational, but sweetly expressive, is tenor Francisco Javier Manalich, who also plays bass viol. Three other musicians make their contributions on some five or six instruments.</p>

<p>The loving commitment of these performers to Landi’s music make this program a great treasure. I really loved it, and I think anyone else is likely to also.</p>

<p>Good notes, full texts and translations. Totally splendid! © 2015 <i>American Record Guide</i></p>