

**Concert**  
**Ariodante**

Barbican

★★★★☆

HILARY FINCH

There's many a slip twixt the Champs-Elysées and Silk Street. When the Barbican invited Christophe Rousset and his band, Les Talens Lyriques, to bring over their production of Handel's *Ariodante* from the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, the concert performance was sold very much on the star casting in the title role of the Austrian mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschrager.

So lots of refunds to pay out when this *Ariodante* contracted a particularly bad case of laryngitis. Nobody who stuck the course, though, could have been disappointed in her replacement, the Berlin-based Australian mezzo Caitlin Hulcup. She found herself playing opposite Danielle de Niese (announced as specially on loan from the Met), who was the evening's Ginevra: the daughter of the King of Scotland, she has to go to Hell and back before her betrothal to *Ariodante* turns to marriage.

The intrigues that plague their love were played out in body language as eloquent as any in a

fully-staged performance. These singers performed without scores, moving around the centrally placed period-instrument band, who provided them musically with all the design and stage-management they needed.

Nearly all: at times Rousset's tempos were so perversely fast that they reduced rather than increased the dramatic impact. *Ariodante*'s Cupid's wings, for example, were clipped simply because Hulcup's breath was necessarily too shallow to sustain their speed. This was unfair, because hers was, in every other respect, a magnificent *Ariodante*. Her mighty aria of despair, *Scherza infida* was superbly shaped and inflected.

The contained dignity and depth of expression of Hulcup's singing cast into relief the comparative shallowness of de Niese's performance. Jaël Azzaretti replaced Sandrine Piau as a delightful and intensely stylish Dalina, whose scheming with the viperish, dark and spiky-toned Polinesso of Vivica Genaux almost caused tragedy and made her scarcely worthy of reconciliation with her own Lurcanio, sung with elegant anguish and forceful stage presence by the Finnish tenor Topi Lehtipuu.

CMK