

# Stephen Powell: *Archetype*



Arias by Bach, Donizetti, Handel, Heggie, Leoncavallo, Massenet, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Orff, Rossini, R. Strauss and Verdi. Nashville Sinfonia, S. White. Texts and translations. Lexicon 2307

**PENNSYLVANIA-BORN BARITONE STEPHEN POWELL** has had a successful career for more than three decades, appearing with most of America's major opera companies and symphony orchestras. His third solo release in recent years, *Archetype*, shows why that is. The carefully assembled "archetypal" musical selections—in Italian, French, German, English and Latin—reflect and define Powell's career journey from a lyric baritone to a more dramatic one, making manifest ingrained musicality, an awareness of stylistic and performance tradition and, above all, a remarkably reliable and durable technique. The mystery is why such a well-prepared and vocally gifted baritone hasn't been a staple of recordings—and HD broadcasts—long since.

The recording as programmed opens operatically, with Tonio's metatheatrical Prologo, "Si puo?," from *Pagliacci*. Powell makes all the number's points in commanding sound, and he varies dynamics expressively. His capping high A-flat and concluding high G are still dead-on and exciting. It's quite a remarkable transition to the little song of Harlekin in another Prologue, that of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which Powell performs with dynamic restraint but still turns remarkably well. After a stirring version of Athanaël's Act I aria from *Thaïs*, once a concert staple worldwide, we hear "Pari siamo," from *Rigoletto*, in which the artist's considerable stage experience in the role shows in his nuanced declamation. A forthright rendition of Di Luna's "Il balen" is the other Verdian selection, making you want to hear him in works such as *I Due Foscari* and *Simon Boccanegra*. The fine aria "O Lisbonne," from Donizetti's 1838 *Dom Sébastien*, recalls one of Powell's great Carnegie triumphs, as Camoëns in this opera with Opera Orchestra of New York in 2006. His participation over the years in several contemporary works finds echo here in a resonant traversal of the soliloquy from a role he hasn't done: Starbuck in Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*. Powell's clear English diction is imposing throughout. Leading the very solid Nashville Sinfonia, the very experienced Steven White gives aptly theatrical support to his frequent colleague in the arias.

Powell has also frequently appeared in oratorios and cantatas, including *Messiah*, *Elijah* and *Carmina Burana*, all notably sampled here. The trumpet echoing the baritone's impressively articulated "The trumpet shall sound" could be more impressive; in some ways this is a traditional reading, but Powell's light decorations and appoggiaturas show his awareness of contemporary Baroque practice. Powell surely has the correct weight of voice for Elijah's music and gives "It is enough" a fervent, moving reading. Powell still has the range for Orff's "Estuans interius" and Rossini's Figaro's iconic self-introduction, and it's impressive that he can still get his voice around their demanding curves. But a slight sense of timbral dryness makes these numbers seem more like fondly saluted mileposts of past triumphs than summit achievements of a still-active professional. On the other hand, Don Giovanni's delicate serenade "Deh, vieni alla finestra," seductively accompanied by Eli Bishop's lute, flows most enjoyably, and a mellow, lived-in "Mache dich, mein Herze," from the *Matthäus-Passion*, evokes an earlier, excellent and somewhat overlooked baritone—Mack Harrell.

—David Shengold (*Opera News*)