
Helen Charlston

Selected Reviews

Glories of English Song, Wimbledon International Music Festival (November 2023)

"Charlston's voice is truly exceptional. It is both lithe and multifaceted rather than opulent, which makes it ideal for the song repertory. The way she can modulate between emotional contrasts within a phrase, drawing on a variety of tonal colours in response to the text, is little short of miraculous... She conjured the sense of nature's beauty within a dreamscape in a pair of Hardy settings by Gerald Finzi."

- **Barry Millington, *The Standard********

A Poet's Love with Sholto Kynoch, Oxford International Song Festival (October 2023)

"Charlston has a superbly clear timbre, exemplary intonation and diction, and an admirable way of bringing out the core emotions of these Heine settings, whether the intense sadness of Fanny Mendelssohn's Schwanenlied or the rage and bitterness of so many Dichterliebe songs, where Kynoch supplied notable strokes of disruptive accentuation."

- **Richard Morrison, *The Times********

"Charlston sang Werner's haunting, lyrical vocal line exquisitely, alert to every nuance of the text, including spoken interjections in English, amusingly turning on its head the line "Yet never a word would be spoken".

Her radiant expressiveness reached its peak in Schumann's Dichterliebe, Op 48, Heine's romantic journey through bliss and disillusion towards apparent resignation and resolution. With supremely sensitive playing from Kynoch, Charlston made us struggle with her over all these emotional hurdles in a superb performance, both exhausting and elating."

- **Stephen Pritchard, *The Observer********

Bach B minor mass, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Usher Hall Edinburgh (October 2023)

"But the real surprise, and extraordinary revelation of the evening, was the mezzo-soprano voice of Helen Charlston, heard in "Qui sedes a dextra" and latterly in the gorgeous Agnus Dei. This is a voice of mysterious depths, and luscious texture, produced seemingly without effort, sounding at times close to a counter-tenor but without the latter's sense of artificiality. It seems like a contradiction to say that a voice that is so unusual should also be quite sublime, but it is true... The soulful Agnus Dei leaves you wanting more, especially with Charlston singing..."

- **Christopher Lambton, *The Arts Desk***

"With a luxury line-up of five top-notch vocal soloists... this was always going to be a Bach B minor mass to remember... The lusciously liquid tones of mezzo Helen Charlston provided an ideal vehicle for the deliberate tread of the thoughtful penultimate 'Agnus Dei'."

- **David Kettle, *The Scotsman********

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CD: Purcell *Dido & Aeneas*, La Nuova Música, Pentatone PTC5187032 (September 2023)

"...with mezzo Helen Charlston (a recent Dido for Les Arts Florissants) a luxurious First Witch"

- Alexandra Coghlan, *Gramophone*

CD: *The Honor of William Byrd* with Chelys Consort of Viols, BIS2663 (August 2023)

"[Charlston] can give life to a line like few others; her diction is marvellous, and marvellously varied; everything flows with incomparable beauty."

- *Gramophone*

"Whether or not these vocal works were meant to be sung by male singers is debateable, but Helen Charlston's rich, deep timbre make such distinctions irrelevant. Supple, controlled and vibrato free, she is sympathetically supported by a combination of treble, tenor and bass viols, which come into their own in Byrd's complex but rhythmically appealing Fantasias." - John-Pierre Joyce, *BBC Music Magazine******

"Played by the Chelys Consort and flawlessly sung by the mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston, the whole thing is beautifully done."

- Erica Jeal, *The Guardian*

Mendelssohn *Elijah*, BBC Proms, Scottish Chamber Orchestra (July 2023)

"The excellent mezzo Helen Charlston"

- Richard Morrison, *The Times******

"The star of the show, however, was the mezzo, Helen Charlston. The concentrated syrup of her voice made for an Angel full of tender compassion, and 'Though they are by him redeemed' was overflowing with sweet yearning; for her Jezebel, though, she found heft in her chest voice and a steely edge to the top of her range, giving us the consummate 'evil queen'."

- Barry Creasy, *MusicOMH*

"...the soloists were beyond compare... the silvery grace of mezzo Helen Charlston"

- Michael Church, *The Scotsman******

"Helen Charlston brought great beauty of tone and sense of line to her moments as the Angel, creating a significant effect in a small moment. Her aria 'Woe unto them' was plangently expressive and very moving, whilst as the Queen, Charlston was highly trenchant and implacable."

- Robert Hugill, *Planet Hugill*

Purcell *Dido & Aeneas* (Sorceress), The Grange Festival (June 2023)

"Meanwhile, aided by a gang of sinister witches determined to bring destruction to Dido and her city, Helen Charlston's Sorceress infused menace into her mezzo" - George Hall, *Opera Now*

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"As the Sorceress, Helen Charlston – striding the stage in black leather and boots – is terrifically imperious and wicked."

- **Claire Seymour, *Opera Today***

"Helen Charlston's performance as the Sorceress was truly remarkable. Without a silly voice in sight and looking a million dollars in leather dress and heels, she commanded the stage from her first entrance – this was pure Cruella de Vil with an added sense of glee. Kirsty Hopkins and Katy Hill made gleeful, hyperactive witches, eager minions for Charlston's Sorceress to command. Charlston played the Spirit too, the Sorceress in disguise rather than a pseudo-mythic figure."

- **Robert Hugill, *Planet Hugill***

Mahler *Symphony No. 3*, Kensington Symphony Orchestra, Fairfield Halls (May 2023)

"...with Helen Charlston marking the beginning of the progress to the Symphony's end in singing of considerable beauty, poise and warmth"

- **Peter Reed, *Classical Source***

Handel *Messiah*, Irish Baroque Orchestra, Wigmore Hall (April 2023)

"If the infinite depths sounded by Helen Charlston, most distinctive of contraltos, were the most moving thing in an astonishing evening... it seems only fair that the contralto, especially given Charlston's star quality, gets the last number in Part Three ("If God be for us")" – **David Nice, *The Arts Desk********

"Helen Charlston sang the alto solos with a lovely straight tone and nice directness. 'O thou that tellest' combined seriousness of purpose with a nice rhythmic bounce, whilst 'He shall feed his flock' had a telling sense of understatement. 'He was despised' had a sense of movement to it, with shape to the accompaniment and Charlston's remarkably intimate delivery. Throughout her performance, you sensed the commitment to the words, which came over right through her final solo 'If God be for us.'"

- **Robert Hugill, *Planet Hugill***

Purcell *Dido & Aeneas* (Title role), Les Arts Florissants, l'Opera Royal de Versailles (March 2023)

"The standout vocal performance came from Helen Charlston, delivering her first Dido. She was ever engaged with text and music despite forced semi-immobility and projected a clear emotional arc towards the final Lament."

- **Colin Clarke, *Opera Now********

Purcell *Dido & Aeneas* (Title role), Les Arts Florissants, Théâtre Impérial de Compiègne (February 2023)

"Lyricism and restraint: key words for a great Dido in the making. Helen Charlston 's warm timbre with

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copper reflections, the modest dignity of her interpretation, her absence of any simpering give way to the most beautiful musical moments of the evening." - **Loïc Chahine, *Diapason***

Handel *Messiah*, Dunedin Consort, St Mary's Cathedral Glasgow (December 2022)

"The alto has some of the best arias and Helen Charlston was sensational in her heartfelt interpretations, her mezzo warm and burnished in the lower register opening out thrillingly, every word crystal clear and I loved the ornamental flourish in "But who shall abide". Her mood changed in "He was despised", meltingly sorrowful, turning to anger in all the shame and spitting. Charlston is a singer to watch.

- **David Smythe, *Bachtrack********

Handel *Theodora* (Irene), Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra (October 2022)

"The evening's great surprise, though, was the magnificent local debut of British mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston as Irene. Charlston's vocal tone boasts an astonishingly beautiful weight and heft, which she deploys with irresistible urgency throughout both tender and bravura passages. May she return soon, and often."

- **Joshua Kosman, *The San Francisco Chronicle***

***Battle Cry*, Recital at Oxford Lieder Festival, Sheldonian Theatre (October 2022)**

"It's a programme that is both intelligent and insightful, forging creative connections between the past and present. In the Sheldonian, it was delivered with consummate poise... Her platform manner and presence are assured, and engaging, and she sang the entire programme confidently off-score, communicating with a beguiling directness. Her diction was superb in all three languages heard here, and she demonstrated throughout a discernment in linking text to colour and weight. Her mezzo is full and creamy... and the evenness of her phrasing was complemented by variety of colour, often changing rapidly in response to the text."

- **Claire Seymour, *Opera Today***

Handel *Theodora* (Irene), Northern Aldborough Festival (June 2022)

"Helen Charlston's Irene was a moving portrayal... Irene is a role strongly associated with the much missed Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, but Helen Charlston took up the challenge and made it her own. Her tone is a shade harder than that of her predecessor, but she made effective use of this to portray a zealous companion. Both 'As with rosy steps' and 'Lord, to Thee each night and day' held the audience spellbound."

- **Melanie Eskenazi, *MusicOMH********

CD: *Battle Cry: She Speaks* with Toby Carr, Delphian DCD34283 (May 2022)

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"These characters come alive in Charlston's flexible mezzo, surely one of the most exciting voices in the new generation of British singers... You get the strong sense from this superb recording that they're only just getting started"

- **Alexandra Coghlan, *Gramophone***

"Charlston's distinctive, expressive lower register, and the clarity of every word, contribute to an outstanding disc."

- **Fiona Maddocks, *The Guardian***

"Mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston and theorbist Toby Carr focus on the close relationship between voice and theorbo in their recital, scaling down several works to create the intimacy of a duet. Charlston's mezzo is dark and full-bodied as a good claret, and she offers highly expressive readings of the texts, plumbing their depths with cut-glass diction and a glorious range of colours and timbres."

- **Kate Bolton-Porciatti, *BBC Music Magazine* (Song Choice, Performance*****, Recording*****)**

"This album by the gloriously expressive, vocally utterly secure and dramatically aware mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston, in duo with Toby Carr's theorbo, has to be seen already as a clear contender for vocal album of the year. Something very special indeed is going on here. The very best comes right at the end. Purcell's "Evening Hymn" is sung as slow, as low, as dark, as warmly and as touchingly as you could ever wish to hear it. Listen to the diction and the understanding given to every single vocal syllable, the delicious pacing and the wonderful cumulative effect. And the last word of the song? Helen Charlston says: "The closing Hallelujah could be heard in so many different ways, but mainly it's trying to find an answer to all of the questions that we've asked throughout the recording."

- **Sebastian Scotney, *The Arts Desk***

"Charlston's voice is distinctively bright edged and clear, her words so finely projected and 'felt' that the booklet texts are hardly necessary to follow the drama of each item. She also has a rich lower register, and this combination of brightness and an enviably wide range makes a perfect match with the theorbo"

- **Europadisc**

"Charlston's emotive mezzo is heroic throughout, lustrous and arresting."

- **Ken Walton, *The Scotsman***

Handel *La resurrezione* (Mary Cleophas), London Handel Festival, St Martin in the Fields (April 2022)

"Mezzo Helen Charleston brought both strength and serious focus to Cleophas, with unerringly accurate gales of coloratura in 'Naufragando va per l'onda'"

- **Robert Thickness, *Opera Now********

Bach *Christmas Oratorio*, Solomon's Knot, Wigmore Hall (December 2021)

"Alto Helen Charlston (pictured below), another last minute call-up, was quite the substitute, her silvery

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sound and sensitive dynamic range accompanied like a second voice by violinist (and leader) Kinga Ujszászi."

- **Bernard Hughes, *The Arts Desk***

CD: *An Elizabethan Christmas*, Fretwork, SIGCD680 (December 2021)

"...topped out by the creamy and calorific voice of Helen Charlston, a true Alto with a hint of countertenor colouring... Charlston curling her tongue around the words as if her voice were itself a viol... This is the Christmas disc I'll be asking Santa for a hard copy of this December." - **Andrew Mellor, *Gramophone***

"The songs are beautifully delivered by the mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston, who sings with firm yet confiding tone and lends the same sense of potentially endless expansion to her lines as do the viol players."

- **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian********

"Court composer William Byrd provides most of the vocal works here, mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston's warm, expressive voice the perfect match for a quintet of viols. The moments where she's joined by additional singers are sublime"

- **Graham Rickson, *The Arts Desk***

"Byrd's consort songs are masterpieces and it is very nice to hear some of them being sung so well as here by Helen Charlston, a young singer whom I have heard in several recordings recently and whom I rate highly."

- **Johan van Veen, *MusicWeb International***

"But of course, the musical responses inspired by this period of piety are far from downbeat or dour, as a new collaboration between Fretwork and mezzo Helen Charlston illustrates... Interspersed between the solo vocal numbers, in which Charlston's unfussy voice contrasts pleasingly with the viols' sonority and all the performers audibly relish the subtle syncopation of Byrd's style" - **David Smith, *Presto Music***

"I do though tip my hat to the guest mezzo Helen Charlston who is clearly a singer with a future and whose contributions add greatly to the programme"

- **Steven Whitehead, *Cross Rhythms***

Handel *Partenope* (Rosmira), *Les Arts Florissants*, Thiré & Lucerne (August 2021)

"...the versatile British mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston as his golden-toned lover, the spurned but dignified Rosmira."

- **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer********

"Exceptional projection and beautiful temperament in the contralto Helen Charlston whose homogeneous timbre and a striking depth bring a beautiful authority to the perilous "Un'altra volta ancor".

- **Philippe Ramin, *Bachtrack********

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"Helen Charlston has a superb, solidly seated contralto voice. The role of Rosmira / Eurimène seems to be tailor-made for her, as her expressions are appropriate to the character."

- **Victoria Okada, *Vivace Cantabile********

Isolation Songbook, Delphian DCD34253 (March 2021)

"For her debut album, Helen Charlston invited composers to 'bear witness' to the period of isolation. With a programme that is wide-reaching and runs the gamut of human emotion, this is a powerful moment for us all."

- **Freya Parr, *BBC Music Magazine********

"...a recital that's hard to resist, at once fresh and profoundly familiar... Also striking is Stephen Bick's Milton setting 'On his Blindness', its elegiac, Tallis-infused lyricism a showcase for the stern beauty of Charlston's mezzo and her legato phrasing."

- **Alexandra Coghlan, *Gramophone***

"Witty and touching in equal measure, this personal but deeply relatable lockdown project from a young husband-and-wife-to-be stemmed from Owain Park's appropriately bitter-sweet setting of a poem which Charlston wrote for her fiancé to mark what would have been their wedding-day last year. Other highlights include Joshua Borin's darkly funny Nature is Returning (sung with savage brilliance by Charlston)"

- **Katherine Cooper, *Presto Classical***

Bach *St John Passion*, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Battersea Arts Centre (March 2021)

"Helen Charlston took the most tragic aria of the piece Es ist Vollbracht (It is Finished) at a daringly slow pace, but thanks to her thrilling intense tone and expressive moulding of the line it paid off."

- **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph********

CD: *Eccles Semele* (Juno), Academy of Ancient Music, AAM012 (January 2021)

"Richard Burkhard and Helen Charlston mine some divine comic scenes as the king of the gods and his jealous wife Juno."

- **Richard Fairman, *Financial Times********

"Semele's implacable rival Juno should steal the show whenever she appears. From her imperious opening entry to her rollicking final aria of triumph, her tone dripping with venomous glee, Helen Charlston does not miss a trick."

- ***Gramophone***

"Some of the best moments fall to jealous, scheming Juno, whose scenes spring to life more readily than some of the others; the role is dispatched here with brilliant imperiousness by Helen Charlston."

- **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian********

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"...but it's Helen Charlston's Juno who gets both her man and the laurels by the end – deliciously ferocious in her musical vengeance."

- **Alexandra Coghlan, *Limelight********

"Dark-timbred mezzo Helen Charlston's Juno flares magnificently, unafraid to sound ugly when furious."

- **BBC Music Magazine (*Recording of the month*)**

"Helen Charlston is impressive as Juno: her commanding 'Somnus, arise' and jaunty duet with Somnus, 'Away let us haste' are real highlights."

- **Colin Clarke, *Rhinegold***

"There are few calls for vocal display... 'Above measure is the pleasure', being a rare exception that allows the excellent Helen Charlston a brief opportunity to show her mettle in this regard... richly formidable Juno"

- **Opera Magazine**

Bach *Christmas Oratorio*, Gabrieli Consort & Players, St John's Smith Square (December 2020)

"The mezzo Helen Charlston's Virgin was sober in her joy – the dark beauty of her tone balanced by purity of line."

- **Alexandra Coghlan, *iNews********

CD Recording: *Dussek Messe solemnelle*, Choir and Orchestra of the Academy of Ancient Music (October 2020)

"...fine performance from the well-balanced quartet of soloists ... A hugely worthwhile discovery of an unknown work"

- **Hugh Canning, *The Sunday Times***

***Eccles Semele* (Juno), Cambridge Handel Opera Company (November 2019)**

"All the vocal soloists were excellent... The mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston did full justice to the role of the furious Juno, full of spiteful passion, her coloratura passages proving her to be the real prima donna here."

- **Sandra Bowdler, *Opera Magazine***

***An Elizabethan Christmas*, Fretwork, Wigmore Hall (December 2019)**

"Out of the orient crystal skies' saw Helen Charlston, replacing a previously advertised Elin Manahan Thomas, reveal a clear voice that glistened, with its obvious strength never generating too thick a sound. The lines of the piece seemed so smooth that it felt rather more modern than it actually is, although the final utterance of 'falantidingdido' grounded it very much in its time. In 'From Virgin's womb' of 1589, with words by Francis Kindlemarsh, the line through the word 'Rejoice' very much came to the fore, while

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'Lullaby' of 1588 really showed off Charlston's credentials as a mezzo-soprano. ... For sheer beauty the highlight may well have been Charlston's performance of the anonymous 'Sweet was the song'..."

- **Sam Smith, *MusicOMH********

Handel *Venceslao* (Lucinda), Opera Settecento, London Handel Festival (April 2019)

"As a poised Lucinda, Helen Charlston's distinctive mezzo stood out" - **Rebecca Franks, *The Times***

"Helen Charlston as Lucinda revealed a mezzo-soprano whose fullness was complemented by a pleasing edge."

- **Sam Smith, *MusicOMH***

"Helen Charlston expressed steadiness and determination that helped, at least at the musical level, to make sense of her motivations."

- **Curtis Rogers, *Classical Source***

Bach *St John Passion*, Polyphony, OAE, St John's Smith Square (April 2019)

"Helen Charlston has a remarkable technique and dignified presence, and her singing of 'Von den Stricken meiner Sünden' gave a fine example of both"

- **Melanie Eskenazi, *MusicOMH***

Bach *Cantatas Nos 106 & 182*, Amici Voices, CDA68275 (February 2019)

"The highlight is Helen Charlston's mesmerising delivery of 'Leget Euch'... lovingly accompanied by the flautist Ashley Solomon."

- **Jonathan Freeman Attwood, *Gramophone***

'Venus Unwrapped'; Strozzi & Monteverdi, OAE, Kings Place (January 2019)

"Helen Charlston's rich, solid, sensuous contralto, and David Shipley's fantastically sonorous basso profundo stood out. Particularly enjoyable was *Le tre Gratie a Venere*, which featured Allen, Charlston and Zoe Brookshaw in a trio that followed the classic early-baroque model of nimble, pinging phrases that, after abrupt cessation, moved into prolonged, winding suspension-filled cadences."

- **Barry Creasy, *MusicOMH***

Bach *St Matthew Passion*, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra (October 2018)

"For her part, Charlston was able to bring a surprising amount of vocal richness to the remarkable series of arias in the second half. She was also suitably haunting in "Erbarme dich" and displayed soul-wrenching phrasing in a particularly intense "Können Tränen"."

- **Simon Holden, *Bachtrack*******

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Bach *Mass in B minor*, Tilford Bach Society & The London Handel Orchestra St John's Smith Square (June 2018)

"Helen Charlston, though, was the star of the show... like the best of desserts, her voice is creamy with a hint of sharp fruitiness, and it was with her solo 'Agnus Dei' towards the end of the musical feast, that she wowed the audience."

- **Barry Creasy, *musicOMH***

Bach *Weihnachts-Oratorium*, St John's Smith Square Christmas Festival (December 2017)

"Helen Charlston was an exceptional interpreter; the gentle smile with which she intoned 'Schlafe, mein Liebster, (Sleep, my beloved)' was especially moving."

- **Mark Valencia, *Classical Source***

Telemann 250th Anniversary, Florilegium, Wigmore Hall (June 2017)

"The clear highlight of the concert was the Epiphany Cantata *Ihr Völker hört*, which found Helen Charlston on top form, her diction clarion clear, her ability to cope with Telemann's florid writing never in doubt."

- **Colin Clarke, *Seen and Heard International***

"Mezzo-soprano Helen Charlston, despite being a last-minute substitute, used her glinting tone to demonstrate the remarkable expressiveness of Telemann's recitatives."

- **John Allison, *The Telegraph***

Handel *Jephtha* (Storgè), Academy of Ancient Music, London Festival of Baroque Music (May 2017)

"Charlston's Storgè moved finely from the beautifully shaped expressiveness of her opening aria, through great strength of feeling in 'Scenes of horror' to her vibrant reaction to the events of Act Two. Throughout Charlston showed an ability to combined vividness of expression with musicality, using her dark-hued voice to great effect."

- **Robert Hugill, *Planet Hugill***

Bach *B minor Mass*, St John's Smith Square Christmas Festival (December 2016)

"Though she had the lightest challenge, the Mezzo-Soprano Helen Charlston stood out on account of her warmly distinctive tone."

- **John Allison, *The Telegraph***

Bach *St Matthew Passion*, Amici Voices (March 2015)

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"Mezzo soprano Helen Charlston deserves special mention. Her solos... displayed those qualities of her voice which have helped firmly establish Charlston on the professional scene."

– Ingrid Pearson, *Early Music Review*

Esenvalds *Northern Lights & other choral works*, Trinity College Choir Cambridge, CDA68083 (February 2015)

"Trinity have a rather special mezzo, Helen Charlston, and her lovely singing tips the balance for me."

– John Quinn, *Music Web International*