

FOTHERINGAY REVISITED

BY ANDREW EVERETT

AN APPRECIATION OF THE BBC RADIO 3 BROADCAST OF MARIA STUARDA
SUNDAY 13TH JULY 1986 VIENNA STATE OPERA OCT 85

Fortheringay and Westminster; Mary and Elizabeth; an exiled Catholic queen versus her cousin secure in the Protestant settlement; a warmhearted expansive woman, who has had three husbands and other lovers against a jealously suspicious one, who could not bestow her favours finally on any man; a legitimately born Pretender to the English Throne against the dubious-born Possessor of it. These are the ingredients of Bardari's *Maria Stuarda* filleted from Schiller's play. It puts the two protagonists in the lime-light by suppressing the political details and compressing other characters to a serviceable minimum. This results in two if the main male characters each becoming aligned to the two royal ladies; Talbot as negotiator on Mary's behalf at Elizabeth's court and then her secret confessor; while the political courtier, Cecil is the instigator of Elizabeth's decision to eliminate Mary. Between this clash of interests Leicester acts as a pivot, initiating movement, but not very effective as a character.

Any performance must strive to contrast the characterisation of Elizabeth, in its restless coloratura with the more smoothly lyrical lines given to Mary, especially in the pathos of many rising scale passages. This will promote the maximum effect, when Mary and Elizabeth meet in the climatic scene of confrontation in Act 2. This, in turn, will pave the way for the tragic denouement and final apotheosis of Mary, through repentance and forgiveness.

The broadcast was largely faithful to this balance. The text was more or less complete, except that most repeats were not made, so that link passages, leading to re-instatement of cabaletta material were missing, slightly disturbing the overall structure of some scenes. One omission in Act 3 sc2, was the exchange between Mary and Cecil, when he offers her the services of a Protestant minister, and she proudly refuses this offer - an important snippet, contrasting the revelation later in the same scene by Talbot that he is a Catholic priest. The Sill/Ceccato on HMV is the fullest account of the score with no cuts (and even includes the overture added later) omitted from the other commercial versions.

The conducting of the Vienna State Opera Chorus and Orchestra by Adam Fischer was vigorous, the opening chorus and some of the faster cabalettas and strettas being particularly brisk, while

the more lyrical numbers were well served. The playing was not perfect, e.g. in the Berliozian orchestration of the march to the scaffold, the ensemble was ragged, but this was a blemish redeemed by the feel of a live performance throughout. Neither orchestral playing nor the conducting effaced memories, however, of the London Philharmonic Orchestra under Aldo Ceccato, in the Sills version. Choral contributions from the Vienna State Opera Chorus, especially in the last act were impressive.

The male soloists provided their respective royal ladies with admirable support. Kurt Rydl as Talbot was excellent providing a clear line, good diction and surprising flexibility for what sounded like a true 'basso'. His tone was much more incisive than Quilico with Sills, for instance. Hans Helm as Cecil, an underdeveloped part considering the importance of his influence over Elizabeth was good, although he sounded similar to Rydl. Francesco Araiza as Leicester shaded his part with much artistry, and produced much to admire but not when compared to the beauty, fire and clear articulation of Stuart Burrows, one of the best pieces of singing of any Donizetti tenor role on record in the Sills set, while Araiza was not as good as this, he was subtler than Pavarotti's more conventional, but more full-throated view of the role. Rendall is quite coarse-toned and unstylish in the ENO performance.

The two ladies of the piece were well contrasted vocally and temperamentally. Agnes Baltsa, as a mezzo of exceptional range sang Elizabeth with ease in all registers, using a resonant middle voice to telling effect, yet using the jumpy nature of her coloratura as an expression of character. It was a fine assumption, fuller sounding than Plowright in the Baker set, where Baker's 'mezzo' Mary reverses the voice timbres. Nor is it so plumbily contralto as Tourangeau's rather forced contrast to the big soprano sound of Sutherland. On the other hand, Eileen Farrell with her mature soprano sound projects a suitably ageing portrayal of Elizabeth to contrast with the thinner, brighter sound of Sills. This remains as valid a portrayal as the younger sounding Baltsa.

Edita Gruberova, who seems to be specializing in 'bel canto' roles at the present, provided a thoughtful approach to the part, with clear articulation and phrasing. Her sound is bright and youthful, so it is doubtful whether she has left her 'gioventu' that far behind, as mentioned in her entrance aria. While she sang well (one lapse of pitch at the end of

the long duet in Act 3 sc 2 apart) the character does not progress in inner depth. Only Baker and Sills are able to reach this apotheosis. Sutherland, for Decca is superb vocally, indeed in formidable form, but does not characterise or develop the role. Although Sills is white-sounding in upper reaches of her voice and over-inbellishes the vocal line at times, something of the transforming anguish of Mary comes through, as it does in even greater measure with Baker despite it stretching her resources vocally. To summarise, this was a very enjoyable performance, musically and dramatically, although the line-up of Sills, Burrows and Ceccato continue to distill much magic.

(C) Andrew Everett.

RECORDINGS USED IN COMPARISON

HMV SLS 848 Sills/Burrows/ LPO Ceccato

DECCA D2D3 Sutherland/Pavarotti/ Comunale, Florence Borynge

HMV SLS 5277 Baker/Rendall/Plowright/ENO Mackerras

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