

THIS LATE OPERA of Donizetti's produces some Shakespearean echos for English listeners, as its locations reverse those of *Othello* starting in Venice then moving for the main part of the opera to Cyprus. Indeed, Sacchero, Donizetti's librettist was more precise geographically than Shakespeare, placing Cyprus scenes actually in Nicosia. The atmosphere of *Caterina* however, is not at all Shakespearean, but a mixture of Byronic fatalism and political motivation, intermingled with high Romantic heroic resolve in its four main characters, name, Caterina herself, a political tool of the Council of Ten of the Venetian republic; Gerardo her french lover, who renounces the world and her to become a knight of Rhodes; Lusignano the Cypriot king; and Mocenico, who acts as evil puppet-master deforming the destinies they originally desired.

The rapidity and compression of events on stage and the dovetailing of traditional musical structures to suit this purpose, links the format and its action to those early Verdi dramas based on Byron, *I Due Foscari* & *Il Corsaro*, whereas its musical refinement links it more to middle period Verdi e.g. *Il Trovatore*. This increased flexibility in using more sensitive musical and dramatic forms would seem to arise from experiences of wedding Italian melodic gifts to French dramatic niceties. While the outlines of the plot are clear enough and uncomplicated, the characters are little more than types set amid the often bizarre incidents provided by the librettist. What characterisation there is, derives from the musical score.

The recent first complete commercial recording derived from what seems to be a concert version, given in the Salle Pleyel in Paris on the 25th November 1973 allows the listener to savour its riches more completely. The opera was given its first U.K. broadcast on the 18th May 1982 on BBC 3 from an Italian Radio recording. This has been used to provide a comparison with the current discs.

There seem to be minor textual variations between the printed version inserted into the record sleeve and that sung on the discs. Some of this may be due to the discs being a transcription of a live broadcast, where there is plentiful applause after set 'numbers'. The BBC version is faithful to text and has no applause to break the continuity of the scenes.

There is little to choose between the orchestras, the choruses and the conductors (see below for details). Elio Boncompagni has a livelier 'beat' but in Lusignano's aria (recorded by Renato Bruson on his Donizetti recital disc quite beautifully GRV 9-Decca) the aria rather sags. Masini is more regular and quite reliable, and does not allow stretta to the finale of Act 1 to become disorganised like Boncompagni.

In particular, he makes the Gabrielli-like sound of the brass introduction to the opening chorus, a telling piece of imaginative archaism, one of the many indications of the advances Donizetti had made in his writing. In both, the minor roles are adequately cast.

Gwynne Howell out-sings and projects the rather generalised evil much more tellingly than his rival in the broadcast version, Gianni Socci. Howell mingles lyricism and menace, clearly articulating his unpleasant intentions. Ryan Edwards, while not outshining Bruson in his main aria and cabaletta, makes what he can of the clement king, Lusignano. He sounds unfortunately old and less steady in tone, especially in the noble death aria than Licinio Montefusco, who has a lighter younger voice, which is more appropriate within the context. Edwards vocalises with Aragall quite effectively, but overall as Gerardo, Aragall is disappointing. The role needs the delicate lyricism of Ernesto in the love duet in the prologue, so close in vocal line and charm to its *Pasquale* model, and the declamatory tones of an Alfredo denouncing Violetta (Act 2 of *Traviata*) plus as the heroic tones of a Manrico from middle-period Verdi, in the final act. Here Ottavio Garaventa in the broadcast, shows more resource in the varying demands required, especially in his use of *mezzo voce*. At times, he sounds strained in the upper register instead of producing a ringing tone. Ideally the role calls for Carreras* or Burrows. Giacomo Aragall has some good moments, but often his tone sounds unfocused and he sounds even more strained in the more heroic or martial movements than Garaventa. He is much better in the Bonyng/Sutherland *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Like many other operas, *Caterina* lives or dies by the quality of its prima donna heroine. Margarita Rinaldi has charm, but basically not a lot of tonal range. Things are accurate enough, but there is little apart from hardening of tone in the more strenuous passages to indicate change of mood. On the other hand, Montserrat Caballé is fully up to the part that she sings, moving from the delicate and innocent joy of the Prologue.

^e through the indignation of betrayal, as *Caterina* sees it in Act 1, to an acceptance of God's will and her queenly responsibilities in her Prayer and the martial temper of the finale set-piece, where she is every inch the caring monarch. It is a wonderful assumption and the discs are worth purchasing for her alone.

contd.

In conclusion *Caterina Cornaro* while not as satisfying as some of Donizetti's other late works, partly because he keeps his lyrical impulse somewhat in check, is well worth a hearing because the experimenting in compressing forms to a text however unworthy. It distills a life times experience of his craft, pioneering a trail that the young Verdi would follow. AE1986(C)

\ BBC Broadcast, Rome, Orch. & chorus of Italian Radio, conductor