Gaetano Donizetti *La favorita*: *Leonora* Adalisa Tobiadon; *Fernando* Giuseppe Morino; *Alfonso* Paolo Coni. Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia, cond. Fabio Luisi. Recorded live at the Festival of the Valle d'Itria, Martina Franca. NUOVA ERA 6823/4

La favorita has a tangled performance history. It derives from *La Favorite* which itself is a remake of the earlier *L'Ange de Nisida*, with plot coming from *Adelaide*, and the celebrated air 'Ange si pur' ('Spirto gentil') coming from *Le duc d'Albe*. In due course this *La Favorite* was translated into *La favorita*. However, in the process the dramatic logic of the French *livret* was mutilated by reason of the requirements of the Italian theatrical censorship into a *libretto* that fails to express to the full Maestro Donizetti's original concept of the opera as a *"voyage of self-discovery of a Soul"*. (A new critical edition of *La Favorite* is, incidentally, one of the proposals for the Donizetti Festival of 1991).

The Italian libretto may be somewhat incoherent, but the musical score of this opera most certainly is not. The *sinfonia* alone is a gem that stands well on its own. There is a quality of construction of both orchestral and vocal lines throughout that reflects the exigent standards of the operatic Paris for whom the work was intended.

The Nuova Era recording is based on live performances at the Festival of the Valle d'Itria of Martina Franca in Apulia. The objective of these was to realise the work in an authentically Donizettian style, with a strong emphasis on musical and vocal values. The net effect of which is of a general "lightening" to a lyrical musical discourse so as to emphasise Donizetti as the artistic precursor of Verdi, which he was.

The Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia is conducted by Fabio Luisi. He directs with great discretion and intelligence, creating abundant 'space' for the singers to collaborate with the orchestra at all times. Indeed, one's respect for their collective achievement is redoubled when one considers the exigent demands of the vocal realisation of the opera as described below.

The cast are all young singers, totally outside the International Star System. Precisely because they are outside that system (and because of the rigorous perparation which is a Martina Franca hallmark) all without exception furnish a well-nigh text book example of the vocal and dramatic interpretation of their parts. To cite the classic texts only, they all show the very highest competence in the art of phrasing <u>and</u> colouring long exposed legato lines, of fining the vocal discourse down to a pianissimo whilst maintaining perfectly the thread of a voice; and when they launch into the music with *slancio*, that *slancio* is achieved without the slightest hint of vocal abuse. It goes without saying that their Italian diction is idiomatic and excellent.

This opera serves, as does all Donizetti's output, as a "Medical Bulletin" on the voices of his interpreters, every inch of which is as cruelly analytical this present day as it was at the work's original creation. This present cast is, to put it briefly, excellent. An examination of the principals will amply illustrate my point. The *Fernando* of Giuseppe Morino is a lyrical interpretation of his part, the voice has a slight tremolo in the low register but really takes wing in the many high-flying passages that fall to him. Paolo Coni's *Alfonso* shows a fine voice deployed to noble effect, a Donizetti baritone very much *"su misura"* for this role. Adalisa Tobiadon's interpretation of *Leonora* has a substantial instrument here under very stringent control, with its power unleashed with great discretion and to good effect.

This recording comes complete with libretto and notes with an English translation of both. It is a matter of mild regret that this latter is a trifle fustion - *"thou wast/durst"* etc.

But such observations are but minor cavils of limited import. What <u>is</u> important is that this is a stylistically authentic realisation of the opera, well recorded. There can be no hesitation in recommending an investment - for such it is - in this set.

Philip G. Gormley

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