

Recordings

Vincenzo Bellini *Zaira*: Katia Ricciarelli (Zaira), Simone Alaimo (Orosmane), Ramon Vargas (Corasmino), Alexandra Papadjakou (Nerestano), Silvana Silbano (Fatima), Roberto De Candia (Meledor), Luigi Roni (Lusignano), Giovanni B. Palmieri (Castiglione); Orchestra e Coro del Teatro Massimo Bellini di Catania, Dante Gherzi (Maestro del Coro), Paolo Olmi.
Nuova Era 6982/3 (2 CD's). Recorded live at Catania, 23/25/27 September 1990.

This recording was made live during performances in Catania in September last year. It was the second revival of this opera this century. The first took place in 1976 in the same theatre (cast: Scotto, Casellato Lamberti, Roni, Nave, Rinaudo, Belardinelli conducting). Last century it was performed twice, in 1829 at Parma and 1836 at Florence). The booklet coming with the set contains an essay by the Bellini scholar Friedrich Lippman. It was already used as part of the libretto published for the 1976 staging. Lippman examines the possible reasons why *Zaira* was a failure: Bellini refused to accept a libretto by a lawyer from Parma, he seemed to take the commission for the new work lightly, delays in producing the opera etc etc. However, it was not a fiasco such as *Tannhauser* in Paris. Bellini was called on to the stage at the second performance but he was not to be found, the trio and other pieces pleased the audience, the scheduled run went to completion. It was not revived during Bellini's lifetime and Lippman in his introduction describes which material Bellini used in other operas, most of which was incorporated into *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi*. On hearing *Zaira* it is difficult to understand that it failed to please. It is good Bellini. *Zaira's* aria in Act II with the funeral procession is very effective and moving. Other high points of the score include the three major duets (between *Zaira/Nerestano*; *Zaira/Orosmane*; and *Orosmane/Corasmino*). The opera contains a magnificent role for the soprano and a good part for the bass.

In this performance *Zaira* is sung by Ricciarelli who cannot meet all the demands of the part. She sounds very well when singing softly, which she tries to do as much as possible, but any modest high note, mezzo-forte singing even, causes great discomfort (the wear resulting from too many *Amelia's Aida's* etc...). Alaimo as the sultan Orosmane produces beautiful tones with his well schooled voice but maybe a bit more bass weight could have been desirable. The trouser role of Nerestano is sung convincingly by Papadjakou. The best voice in this cast, Ramon Vargas, has not enough to sing. His aria comes early and this is basically it, except for a duet with Alaimo. He is a good singer exhibiting a tenor voice with a fine edge and metal and brilliance. One wishes to hear him in something more substantial than Corasmino. The orchestra may not be first rate but under Olmi gives a good account of the score.

Nuova Era advertises this as the world premiere recording, not quite true since MRF issued in 1976 a set with the cast of the first Catania revival. Unfortunately, Nuova Era (while to be commended for their choice of repertory and speed with which they release major revivals) consistently provides too few access points. *Zaira* has only six tracks, one lasting for over 20 minutes; the same as in the newly-released *Il bravo*. Tracks containing two musical numbers occurring in different scenes are an annoyance. This is a serious problem and CD manufacturers should pay immediate attention to resolving this matter.

Francois Nouvion