

Recordings

Gioachino Rossini *Armida* melodramma in tre atti di Giovanni Federico Schmidt
- critical reading of the original text by Claudio Scimone. Koch Europa
Musica 350 211 (2 CD's)

The Rossini bicentenary is an occasion for both sadness and gladness. There is sadness to see it so ignored in northern Europe which is still deprived, not just of a proper perception of the multifaceted aspects of Rossini's genius, as more, much more than a gifted composer of comic operas, but of the pleasure of experiencing the melodic gifts and artistic conscience which finds such exalted expression in his serious operas. But then, in truth, there is gladness and some measure of relief that the art of Gioachino Rossini has been spared the demeaning eruptions of those latter-day money lenders, the *Marketing Men* whose avaricious excesses were such a deplorable feature of the 1991 "Mozart Year".

The *Armida* is placed No.3 in the cannon of serious operas written for the S. Carlo di Napoli. Though it be placed third, it is a dichotomous work for its "argument", derived from Tasso's '*Gerusalemme liberata*', as a fantastical opera looks back to the oeuvre of such as a Handel in his magical operas, while in the style of its composition we see the evolutionary musical mind breaking free from the *convenienze* of the 18th century compositional style. And yet in this we have a paradox in that in its breaking free he has created a score that binds the listener to a subtle disorientating seductiveness that required from this writer the repeated hearings which enabled him to reacquire his musical bearings. This recording is described as a "critical reading" and has all the marks of the care that such a term requires.

In addition to the distinction of the contribution of *I Solisti Veneti*, this opera is blessed by no less than six tenor parts plus one baritone and one soprano. Ferruccio Furlanetto (*Idraote* and *Astarolte*) has no grasp of the correct *basso cantante* style with a production that sounds both heavy and lacks variety. *Armida* is Cecilia Gasdia; she can live with the vocality of the part (no mean achievement this, for it is frightening in both range and in the extravagant extent of its ornamentation) and she "acts" effectively with the voice, interpreting the words by the colouring of her emission as she progresses. *Armida* may be a role with yet more nuances, to be developed over a singer's career (such as those attributed by some to a Callas), but for the time being this *Armida* will do very well.

The tenor *antipasto*, the *Eustazio* of Charles Workman, is clear and well-produced, a creditable, thoroughly workmanlike (appropriately) performance. The other five tenors see doubling-up on both the part of William Matteuzzi (*Goffredo* and *Carlo*), and Bruce Ford (*Gernando* and *Ubaldo*), while Chris Merritt is *Rinaldo*. Celletti informs us that all these tenor roles are "baritenorial" in *Settecento* style as practised by Nozzari in Rossini's day. By that criterion Matteuzzi is out of place here, being basically a lighter David-type of singer. But all credit to him, he comports himself with intelligence, giving us a stylish, well-articulated and interpreted account of his music. Merritt, after an undistinguished deviation into Verdi, is back here on home ground. The "bottom-end" power is still there, and, better still, is evidently under better control than has sometimes been the case, with considerable net benefit to the final product. But, once he leaves the chest voice behind and enters into that glorious head register, what is there to do but lie back and be justly staggered? It is a sonic miracle, a marvel to the ears.

Bruce Ford is an emerging artist in this modern school of Rossini "*baritenori*". He is recalled with affection for a distinguished showing in Pesaro in 1991 and this recording is a welcome opportunity to evaluate him at some length. A fine showing in sum - a well-balanced voice with a well-produced lower register leading to an exhilarating top - which, though it does not have quite the same stratospheric notes of Merritt - is not

one iota less thrilling.

The whole realisation has all the hallmarks of the most meticulous preparation, and this is also evidenced in the Ambrosian Opera Chorus directed by John McCarthy, and most creditable in their clear enunciation of words.

The recording comes with an essay by Bruno Cagli. The libretto is (alas) in Italian only, which is a pity, for this delicious edition of *Armida* merits the widest possible circulation, as the gem it is. We hope that Rossini's bicentenary may be justly marked by other realisations of this standard. And while not subtracting one milligram of credit from Scimone, I, for one, await with baited breath the *prova* in this milieu of Evelino Pidò.

Philip G. Gormley