

Recordings

La rosa bianca e la rosa rossa ossia Il trionfo dell'amicizia
 dramma per musica in due atti di Felice Romani, musica di Giovanni Simone Mayr
 Ricordi Fonit Cetra RFCD 2007- 2 CD's

This recording is taken from live performances of the second opera of the 1990 Donizetti Festival at Bergamo. It has thus, in terms of its English historical "argument", elements in common with that *L'assedio di Calais* which inaugurated the same Festival "in the grand manner" in the words of Franca Cella. Indeed, it is the first of that long line of "English" and "Scottish" operas which were to form such an illustrious chapter in the Donizetti canon. It also saw the début, as a librettist, of Felice Romani, as a result of the initiative of Mayr himself who admired his work and was "amazed and highly satisfied" at the result. Indeed, it is not hard to see why. Because this is very much the same "classicising" Romani who will write for Donizetti (and this libretto too contains a characteristic Romani preface). The "strong whiff of academicism" described in Rubens Tedeschi's notes must have found a ready response in a Mayr who looked "towards the world of the 19th Century but did not cross the threshold". And the amazement and satisfaction of the composer finds a ready echo in the final product which this writer finds irresistible -- a score which is a mixture of delicious naïveté and of the genuinely affecting, of the highest integrity of construction.

It is an attractive mix of the Italian belcanto aesthetic allied to a high Germanic skill in "making the instruments sing" (in the words of Stendhal), which the Orchestra Stabile di Bergamo, directed by Thomas Briccetti (both in a high state of musical grace), do to beautiful effect.

The Coro Accademia of Milan, instructed by Bruno Casoni set the tone, not just in excellent delivery, but in the felicity of the diction, for the sanguinary episode of British history known as the Wars of the Roses, is only a remote backdrop to the plot of this opera. Like Rossini's *Tancredi*, it is a piece in the class of 1813. Its dénouement, with a gesture of royal clemency, so closely paralleled in the future *Assedio di Calais*, is but a classicism in the Metastasian manner.

The presentation of the discs is very fine. Tedeschi's notes and the synopsis are translated into English, French, and German and the Italian libretto has been excellently translated into first-class English by Nigel Jamieson.

In evaluating the soloists, the basic standard of acceptability is here set very high. There are two *prime donne*, Anna Caterina Antonacci as Clotilde and Silvia Mazzoni as Elvira, both of differing dark timbre, both beautifully produced. Elvira's *sortita* recalled to this writer his first hearing of Leyla Gencer in terms of the authority of dramatic impact. Susanna Anselmi's Enrico is a travesti role, an example of the traditional "castrato" mezzo-soprano then already somewhat in decline. In this case we have a genuine interpretation, uncannily redolent of *Tancredi*. There are two tenors. The squire, Ubaldo (Enrico Facini) has a substantial comprimario role, and given the exalted quality of his interpretation, this is all to the good.

Vanoldo (Luca Canonici) is a baritenorial role, in this case thrust upon a *tenore di grazia*. To his credit Canonici never "forces" and he consistently manages to maintain an exquisite timbre, but one would council more attention to interpretation for this instrument is a gem which would benefit from some polish...

Afflicted by the advanced stages of record-collecting, new acquisitions can be -- and frequently are -- a disappointment. The writer found this recording, however, to be a genuine revelation. An opera which invites a pleasurable binding, time and time again, "to its pleasurable chains". Compliments are due to the artistic management of the Donizetti Festival for continuing the 1990 edition so splendidly *in bellezza* and for the pleasure given by the artists. In spite of cruelly tight funding in a *teatro di tradizione*, this was a performance worthy of, nay better than, many an International venue.

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