

Recordings

Gaetano Donizetti *Rita/Il Pigmaliione/L'Olimpiade/La bella prigionera*: Susanna Rigacci, Ugo Benelli, Romano Franceschetto, Paolo Pellegrini, Daniela Broganelli, Giuseppe Manini. Orchestra da Camera dell'Associazione *In Canto*. Cond: Fabio Maestri
Bongiovanni GB 2109/10-2

I always enjoy *Rita*, the plot has me in stitches, cynical, malicious, with that kind of dotty self-absorption which is wholly that of the best French farce. Does it transfer (as well as translate - as here) into Italian? As a matter of fact, it does, given these vocal and instrumental forces, and given the splendid direction. Indeed, we have to be realistic, an idiomatic performance of this degree of polish is currently unobtainable, I fear, in French. This is the best reading I have yet encountered of Donizetti's delicious and adroit little comedy.

The vocal talents of Susanna Rigacci, Ugo Benelli and Romano Franceschetto (plus the slightly over-theatrical contribution of Giuseppe Manini in the spoken role of Bortolo) are infinitely better than might be expected in the composer's more frivolous works where often enough brio compensates for pinched tone and feeble intonation. Not here. Susanna Rigacci has a fine voice and uses it generously, my only complaint is that she sounds (as a result) too aimable for this Donizettian precursor of Fricka (but to misquote an overheard conversation in Leeds, she is funnier and goes on not quite so long); Ugo Benelli too is luxury casting, I should have preferred a more henpecked tone, a less confident ring, but it would be churlish to ask for it in the place of this expert performance; Romano Franceschetto partners him to perfection, the patter duetting is irresistible. This nicely sung *Rita* is brilliantly paced by Fabio Maestri whose orchestra underpins every ribald twist. Highly recommended.

It should be said at once that the second disc of this set, though of the greatest interest to collectors, is not really representative of the Bergamasco composer, neither first-rate nor even characteristic Donizetti. *Il Pigmaliione* and the extent portion of *L'Olimpiade* are juvenilia, and *La bella prigionera* consists of two fragmentary duets of uncertain date and function.

Il Pigmaliione (1816) is a species of protracted cantata for tenor solo, his statue Galatea only comes to life at the end (and then sings nothing of great import). This live performance (like *Rita*, though recorded elsewhere in 1990) needs a tenor of inhuman vocal range but does not get it. The voice (Paolo Pellegrini) is worthy, sometimes graceful but more often otherwise. Frankly, Donizetti was too young to handle such an ambitious project, and if the plot registers at all, it merely reflects the young composer's laudable attempts to turn his own operatic career to flesh and blood... There is some raw invention, but this is combined with parody as the music - understandably - is full of echoes of older contemporaries, Mayr to the fore, but no Rossini please note. Fascinating, and to be mined for intimations of the genius to come. The recording enjoys too many bangs, thumps and footsteps in the background.

L'Olimpiade (in a revision by the conductor) too is a semi-student work, and is not unbeguing. For me the principal attraction is the deepening of emotional command on the part of the young Donizetti. Of the 1817 project there remains only this duet but it enshrines a foretaste even of the angst that would feature, say, in Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo* to come the best part of a decade later. Susanna Rigacci sings Aristeia, Daniela Broganelli is a fruity Megacle. Recorded in 1991.

La bella prigionera is a mystery. The composer implies that the score had been completed. Did he ever complete it? And when? It would be tempting to suppose that these two duets for voice and piano had been composed to interpolate into Cordella's 1826 Neapolitan opera of the same title, but neither of them is at all amusing (as they should have been) and they don't sound in the least like music for interpolation. They don't sound much like Donizetti either, more like Persiani! (The Donizettian score, autograph, is at Bergamo). The music is affecting at times, curiously lacking in punch or focus, but not immature. Odd and confusing. Amina (Susanna Rigacci), comes over as a fine vocalist of the Opera Rara type, she sings with, first, Romano Franceschetto as Everardo (who here sounds rougher than in *Rita*, indeed like a sandpaper baritone - also of the Opera Rara type), later with the happier Carlo of Paolo Pellegrini. Studio recorded in 1992. To be heard.

