

Recordings

Coccia; *Caterina di Guisa*; Bongiovanni GB 2117-18, 2CDs

Most opera fans consider the age of bel canto to be the time of Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini, and while most members of the Donizetti Society undoubtedly would include Mercadante, Pacini, and the Ricci brothers, the other composers of the period are generally unknown quantities. But, as this new recording shows us, these others are to be reckoned with—certainly Carlo Coccia.

Coccia was a contemporary of Rossini's, whose first opera antedates Rossini's first by a few years, but who was active as an opera composer more than ten years later than the better known native of Pesaro. But if *Caterina di Guisa* is any indication of the potential of the work of some of these other people, there is a gold mine waiting to be explored.

As for this recording, let me say right off that the singing, especially on the part of the tenor, is not what one would expect from the familiar stars who take part in most of the commercial recordings of better known operas. But it is more than adequate, and in no way detracts from being able to enjoy the music. And I am convinced that most purchasers will get the recording because they want to hear an unfamiliar, but historically important work of the period. Mario Leonardi is out of his element in bel canto opera, but his voice is sufficiently manly so as not to ruin the performance. Still, I was unable to really enjoy his singing, and wish that a better tenor—and there are many—would have been chosen. The others range from more than acceptable (the baritone, Stefano Antonucci, already familiar from a recording of *Il Furioso* on the same label) to very good (the young soprano, Carmela Apollonia), to quite excellent (the mezzo, Nicoletta Ciliento). My overall impression of the singing is that it is better, much better than that on many other first attempts at reviving a forgotten opera. As implied before, there is a large (and largely ignored) market of individuals who, like myself, are interested in expanding their horizons when it comes to new operas and new composers. It is this group that will want the recording, and will want it for the music, not the singers.

And what music!!!!. The contributor to the New Grove Dictionary of Opera describes Coccia as a conservative, but probably had not yet heard the work when he made that statement. In this opera, at least, Coccia is anything but conservative. He experiments considerably with the forms, even though we have the usual succession of cavatinas and cabalettas, aria, duets and ensembles, they are, somehow different—and the obligatory ensemble where all the principals are on stage at the same time is missing. The music is far ahead of its time, and while there are opportunities for vocal display, the emphasis is almost entirely on the emotional side, especially in the highly dramatic confrontations between the principal characters, and in the heart rending finale. The latter is among the very best of its kind in all of opera.

The plot has much in common with that of *Maria di Rohan*, except that instead of being friends, the tenor and baritone are already mortal enemies. And the baritone (the Duc de Guise), unlike Chevreuse in the Donizetti work or Renato in Verdi's *Un ballo in*

maschera never arouses our sympathy. If anything, he would make Iago seem like a nice person. Rather than accepting the Count of San Megrino's challenge to a duel, he pulls rank on him, and lures him into a trap where he and his soldiers can murder him. In order to do so, he forces his wife to write a letter inviting him into their palace. This leads to many excellent dramatic situations, all of which are fully exploited by the composer.

As said before, the best individual piece of music in the opera is the aria finale, one of the finest of its kind in all of opera-and quite ably sung by the soprano. Other highlights include

- the "duetto della sfida", although one wishes the tenor part had been sung by the likes of Chris Merritt.
- the second duet between the count and the duchess, a part of which is strangely reminiscent of the Act IV duet from *Les Huguenots*.
- the tenor's aria "Torna a lei, tremante e forse"
- the duet between the duke and the mezzo soprano.
- the scene where Arturo (the Duchess' cousin, a mezzo) reads some verses by Ronsard to her.

The sum total of such wonderful music adds up to a real masterpiece-one that can be mentioned in the same sentence with the best operas of Coccia's more famous contemporaries.

In summation, I feel that this is easily the best performance to come out of the Teatro Chiabrera in recent years (Pacini's *Medea*, which has not yet been released, possibly excepted) as well as the best of the forgotten operas to get their first major post war revival in the 1990s.

One should not forget the program notes* by our own Alexander Weatherson. Like everything he writes, they are entertaining, well written, and, above all, informative. They, as well as the recording make us want to both hear other operas by Coccia, and also hope that the best of today's singers--such as Cheryl Studer or June Anderson, Ciliento again or Gloria Scalchi, Chris Merritt, and Thomas Hampson or Paolo Coni will take up the opera. But, at the same time, we must remember that there are other forgotten composers, and forgotten operas of the period (the list is endless, but Pacini's *Fidanzata Corsa* and *Buondelmonte*, Persiani's *Ines de Castro* and Ricci's *Prigione d'Edimburgo* as well as *Corrado d'Altamura* are among the first to come to mind) may also contain great treasures to unearth.

This set can certainly be highly recommended to any adventurous opera lover. *Caterina di Guisa* may well be the long forgotten masterpiece that we have all been hoping could be added to the regular repertory.

Tom Kaufman

* (PS by Alexander Weatherson): Misprints and gobbledygook, alas, as always, are legion in these notes, the Italian text is infinitely the superior (except that *cavatina* and *cabaletta* are inverted in the first sentence); as for the "English" text, it is a kind of Disneyland précis of what I wrote, full of dreadful boobs (poor Lipparini is described as *ill-disposed* instead of *indisposed* for example), and should be ignored.