

## Recordings

*The Heroic Bel Canto Tenor* Chris Merritt (ten.): Munich Radio Symphony Orchestra/cond. John Fiore. Phillips 434 102-2PH (68mins)

Beware!!! If you think that great virtuoso singing is the sole province of sopranos and contraltos, this record is not for you. You will play it once, out of duty, and then let it gather dust. On the other hand, if you enjoy exciting singing, no matter what the voice - then this CD may well become one of your great favorites.

Chris Merritt has established a well earned reputation as a Rossini tenor, and has particularly excelled in roles originally written for Andrea Nozzari - such as Pirro in *Ermione*, Otello, Rodrigo in *La donna del lago* and Antenore in *Zelmira*. Thus, his superb singing in the four Rossini arias on this CD comes as no surprise. Nor should his singing of the Donizetti pieces have been a surprise. But, having only heard the aria from *Poliuto* as sung by more conventional tenors (and usually bereft of the first part 'Fu macchiato l'onor mio', I expected a dull aria. But I should have known better. After all, during the nineteenth century, Poliuto was one of the favorite roles of tenors like Enrico Tamberlick and Francesco Tamagno. Merritt understands the dramatic possibilities of the role, and has the means to accomplish what he sets out to do. His range is phenomenal, extending from a bass F sharp all the way up to the high D, and he makes very effective use of it.

The choice of selections is nearly perfect. Donizetti first. The excerpt from *Caterina Cornaro* is even more unusual and extremely well sung. On the other hand, the *Duca d'Alba* (not even by Donizetti!) and *Don Sebastiano* titles have been recorded occasionally by others, and are probably not heroic enough to be perfectly suited to Merritt's unique abilities. The Rossini selections are even more interesting. The pieces from *Otello* and *Elisabetta* have not been previously available on CD as sung by Merritt. The *Otello* is particularly striking, and is the first time that the aria has been recorded by a tenor with the right technique. Whenever I listened to previous recordings of the aria, I thought it was rather boring. But not on this recording. Merritt brings out all of the power and passion of the protagonist, and makes one want to play it again and again.

His singing of the *Ermione*, however, is already familiar, since he sings the role on the private label recording of the opera with Blake, Caballé, and Horne. Both versions are genuine "tours de force", and rank among the most exciting tenor recordings of this century.

This CD is a strong indication that Merritt should further explore the more unusual repertory of other great dramatic tenors of the nineteenth century, such as Donzelli, Tamberlick, Nourrit, Duprez and even Tamagno.

It is to be hoped that the recording companies will take full advantage of this great voice - and record it in more recitals such as French rarities (including the aria from *Robert le Diable*<sup>2</sup> that was sung the first time in over 100 years when Merritt sang the title role at Carnegie Hall), Mercadante rarities, Pacini rarities, and more Rossini and Donizetti (can there ever be enough?). Now that Merritt has been delving into the French repertory, can we hope for complete versions of Meyerbeer's *Robert*, Reyer's *Sigurd*, Berlioz' *Les Troyens*, Massenet's *Le Cid*, and Gounod's *La Reine de Saba*? And why not release the complete Rossini *Otello* which has supposedly been recorded? This latter recording would finally afford us an opportunity to hear this work sung by a tenor with the right voice and technique for it.

And lastly, the next time they have a gala program for great tenors, they should make it a *four tenors* concert.

Tom Kaufman

<sup>1</sup> It never ceases to amaze me how often this piece by Salvi finds its way into recordings of Donizetti rarities. Maybe some day, we will get a truly complete recording of Rossini's *Assedio di Corinto*, including the cabalata written by Donizetti for the Genoa premiere. This particular cabalata, "Pitoso all'amor mio", was applauded for some 30 minutes at the premiere, was long considered an integral part of the opera in Italy, and has even been credited with helping catapult Donizetti to fame.

<sup>2</sup> Originally composed for Mario, and omitted in the Paris revival of 1985.

(more Merritt)

From the U.S.A. more news about our high-flying tenor: it was only just last year that his fabulous New York concert was one of the major events of the season in May at the Carnegie Hall. Of all the generation of American tenors singing today Chris Merritt without doubt towers over the rest. Just recently I visited San Francisco and was privileged to hear Merritt bring the house down in one of the most spectacular performances I ever witnessed of Rossini's rarely produced bel canto treasure, the opera seria *Otello*, with Bruce Ford and Cecilia Gasdia. The San Francisco critic Allan Ulrich of *The Examiner* wrote: "When Bruce Ford and Chris Merritt's *Otello* met for their dazzling Act II duet and duel, both tossing off stratospheric notes as if they were everyday occurrences, it was all too easy to understand the elemental appeal of opera. Who cares if half the sports world is on strike?"

After his last success with Verdi's *I vespri siciliani* there, Merritt thrilled and excited audiences both in San Francisco and in the concert performances at Washington Opera in 1993. Merritt, a distinguished exponent of Verdi has once more proved he is THE AMERICAN tenor of the '90's.

In 1994 two European summer festivals - Salzburg and Verona' enjoyed his outstanding performances. He has just sung *Le Cid* at St.Etienne, *William Tell* in Lisbon, and *Der Freischütz* in Zürich this January, only days before a benefit concert in Baltimore that I went to. There he sang with Florence Quivar, Deborah Voigt and James Morris and thrilled the audience with his 'Ah si, ben mio...Di quella pira...'

Clarissa Lablache Cheer

'Salzburg: *La clemenza di Tito*. Verona: *Norma*.

[I can wholeheartedly endorse Clarissa's encomium above (Clarissa is of course the distinguished descendant of the greatest basso cantante of the nineteenth century, Luigi Lablache) in the wake of an *Ermione* at Brussels on 13 April 1995 of such outstanding virtuosity (Chris Merritt was singing Pirro in the company of Nelly Miricioiu, Penelope Walker, Bruce Ford and Stanford Olsen, all in towering vocal form) where Merritt's singing was of fabulous projection, projecting this Rossinian masterpiece to the skies, in the ranks of legendary interpretations. A dangerous, vivid, lifelike recreation of the *roi de l'Epire*, as compelling and memorable as any in our day AW Ed.]

