

Recordings



Giovanni Pacini *MEDEA* Arkadia AK 146.2 (2 CD)

Ever since Maria Callas revived Cherubini's *Medea* in the 1950's, an opera by that name and the composer Cherubini have been almost synonymous. But it was not always so - in mid-19th century Italy, whenever *Medea* was announced, everybody knew, without any further elaboration, that they would get to hear an opera composed by Pacini. Mayr's opera had already disappeared from the repertory by then. The Pacini work had a long career - at least 43 productions up to 1869 or thereabouts (which was far more than all but the most successful operas of the period, and, almost certainly, more than Cherubini's *Médée* had by that year) all over the world, from Russia to several Latin American countries and even New York City. It never did make its way to Austria, France, Germany or Great Britain, but, if this recording gets the wide dissemination it deserves, that is likely to be remedied as more and more opera directors realize *Medea*'s tremendous potential.

It might seem almost blasphemous to suggest to a generation that grew up on Callas (and successors) singing the Cherubini *Médée* (*trans.* as *Medea*) that there actually is a better and more exciting opera on the subject. But, at the risk of having everything but the kitchen sink thrown at me from all over the world, that is what I am about to do. My reasoning is quite simple - Cherubini's opera is just fine when you have a Maria Callas to sing it. But later versions have tended to fall flat - perhaps because it is so much a one woman show. This is not true of Pacini's *Medea*. It is much more melodious than Cherubini's (not surprising since, as is now beginning to be recognized, Pacini was one of the all time great melodists), and, perhaps even more importantly, it is more musically balanced and not as dependant on one star soprano. It is a work in which there are two great duets (one each for the prima donna with the tenor and the baritone), effective arias for all the principals (especially *Medea*'s stunning final scene), as well as some magnificent ensembles and choruses.

I am tempted to say that *Medea* sounds like middle-period Verdi - but would prefer not to do so. It is time that Verdi's contemporaries are praised for their own achievements, rather than, as is too often done, that the highest compliment paid to them is that they are reminiscent of Verdi. Also, as Alexander Weatherston so correctly states in his excellent notes "who initiated what and when in nineteenth century opera is still a closed book". But we must remember that not all of the important ideas originated with the best known composers.

The performance is pretty standard for the first attempt at reviving a long forgotten work. It is centered around the fine Polish soprano Jolanta Omilian. She might not be a Jane Eaglen (who sang *Medea* in the wonderful Opera Rara recording of Mayr's version), or a Cecilia Gasdia, but comes close - and does a wonderful job. The bass, Marcello Lippi who sings Creonte (actually a baritone role), is quite authoritative. Even the tenor Serjio Panaja, a last-minute replacement for an indisposed Marco Berti, while probably the weakest link, is more than acceptable.

The presentation does leave something to be desired, there are quite a few cuts, especially in the choruses and ensembles. An English translation of the libretto would also have been a distinct plus.

To return to the music, it is an eye opener. Knowing how successful many of his operas had been, I had long been interested in hearing more of Pacini. Based on the two operas I was already familiar with, I expected a great deal from this recording. But I did not expect the combination of dramatic confrontations in the two great duets and the gorgeous melodies elsewhere in the score. If anything, hearing this wonderful piece increases my hopes that 1996, the bicentenary of Pacini's birth, will induce opera houses and festivals² all over the world to start a Pacini renaissance. It should unearth countless long-forgotten treasures.

Tom Kaufman

¹ A production in Corsica is a distinct possibility, there is no way of being sure since very little is available on opera performances in Bastia and Ajaccio.

² See page 9 of this Newsletter.

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