

Recordings

Gaetano Donizetti *Anna Bolena* Edita Gruberova, Dolores Ziegler, Stefano Palatchi, José Bros, Igor Morosow, Helene Schneiderman, José Guadalupe Ryes; Chor und Orchester des Ungarischen Ruffunks und Fernsehens, cond. Elio Boncompagni. Nightingale Classics 1994 NC070565-2 (3 CD's)

No one has ever suggested that Giuditta Pasta kept the role of Anna Bolena to herself, even from the very first years of this internationally successful score there was a succession of sopranos all of whom took a vastly different view of the unhappy Queen of England. Nor, in the same way, can any Maria Callas, even, attempt to call the tune, there is plenty of scope for very different interpretations than hers, the romantic effusions of Italian composers were never intended to be immutable. Donizetti and his peers would have thought the whole notion of critical editions to be a laughable nonsense (which, when not merely a commercial gimmick, they often are), all and every one was prepared to make revisions to an "original" score on receipt of a sufficiently persuasive request for transpositions, additions, amendments, even wholesale *rifacimenti* - Bellini and Verdi included at the beginning of their careers (Bellini at the end of his!); as for conceiving a role within the special vocal characteristics of any famous singer, this lasted for one staging only. True, it is not easy to forget a celebrated interpretation, especially nowadays when an irresistible version remains in permafrost on the shelves, but if opera is to evolve at all, the Callas-widows must be put aside.

My own response to this tragic plot is conditioned by a visit I made to Hever Castle, Anne Boleyn's teenage home, a year or two ago. Standing in the long gallery, in front of the very alcove where she entertained the ruthless seducer of her elder sister, now suborning her parents in favour of a new and terrible conquest, there remains a very tangible souvenir of this unfortunate girl, innocent or guilty who knows or cares, but tempted to accept the most flattering position of all, even though its offer was extended by a monster. Anne Boleyn, in real life, was no heroic figure, no tigress in repose, simply an ambitious young girl, taken up, discarded, and destroyed.

How much of this Edita Gruberova is aware of, I cannot say, but she is a most intelligent singer and has a most beautiful voice. The role of Anna Bolena, even so, would not at first glance seem to be for her, asking for a substantial middle and a command of decibels when she must sing against a full choral and orchestral backing; this said her interpretation is not only valid, not only makes the most of those formidable gifts we already know from previous interpretations, but actually makes a real point about this Queen. In general, it can be said that Edita Gruberova seeks realism rather than operatic convention. She is wise, as her brilliant voice is fairly slim and must resort to emotional nuance to gain the attention of a large house. She has appreciated that in this role she must offer a portrait of a unhinged and vulnerable consort, inward, hollow in places, sometimes nearly inaudible, carefully phrased and with formidable vocal control, making up for the lack of weight in the middle of her voice with artful verbal emphases. She reserves her more powerful impulses for times when the orchestra is relatively still, sustained pathos at the expense of solid projection. But it is a real image she makes of a young creature facing a dreadful death, frail, obsessed with longing for a happy youth. I can well imagine that anyone hearing the opera for the first time would grasp the character of the historic Anne Boleyn much more in this performance, than in that of any of her mesmeric predecessors. And then the sounds she makes in passing are absolutely ravishing.

An interpretation of this singularity must inevitably test the abilities of the rest of the cast to their limits, and indeed there is little vocal or stylistic coherence between them. All, or nearly all, the supporting roles are in some way lacking the necessary qualities even if perfectly adequate on their own terms. Only Helene Schneiderman as Smeton seems at ease with a well-rounded and pleasing delivery. As Enrico, Stefano Palatchi offers the conventionally menacing tones usually given to the Tudor, makes no errors and has clear diction, it is a pity however that a more lithe and younger-sounding voice was not proposed to counter this particular Anna; the same criticism goes for Delores Ziegler, a Giovanna whose vehemence is commendable but whose voice spreads under pressure and who sounds as though she has escaped from another and more conventional cast - her big duet with the betrayed Queen is particularly uneasy and miscast. Most disconcerting of all is José Bros as Percy, the voice sounds too piping and lightweight, almost childish. Of course it may have been recorded unfaithfully (all the voices, even that of the prima donna soprano, are recorded at a distance from the orchestra, giving a curiously detached effect to the drama), I remember a recent *L'elisir d'amore* at Rome where this tenor's nicely-schooled voice was the saving grace of the whole evening and for which we were all grateful, here he lacked the *physique-du-rolé* to an almost painful degree, failing to hold up his end in

ensembles and offering a lacklustre and underpowered 'Vivi tu', even, alas, a boring 'Vivi tu'. Can it be possible, a *boring* 'Vivi tu'?

A very real plus of the series of Nightingale Classics recordings is the scrupulous preparation of the score, aiming for a version that is intact, together with the lavish programme books in four languages - libretti and extensive notes included. This *Anna Bolena* lives up to this challenge especially where the orchestral score is concerned. Whenever the orchestra enters, the opera surges forward. From the fine overture onwards, Elio Boncompagni displays a genuine affinity for this music and leads the variable vocal forces impeccably with a notable lyricism and a consistent rhythmic pulse. Donizetti's score is far from easy, but here makes the most positive contribution of all. The coro sings well under his baton. This is certainly a version to be investigated by those many donizettiani unhappy with the more familiar versions. (One major blemish is the vulgar protracted applause that suddenly manifests itself at the end of the great final scene. Don't let them do it, Madame Gruberova. You don't need it!)

Alexander Weatherson