

Recordings



Mercadante: *Caritea, Regina di Spagna* Nana Gordaze, Sonia Lee, Jacek Laszczkowski, Gregory Bonfatti, Nicolas Rivenq, Ayhan Ustuk; Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia Opera - Coro da Camera di Bratislava; Nuova Era 7258/60 (3 CDs)

This is only the second successful opera between Rossini's *Semiramide* (1823), and Bellini's *Il Pirata* to become available on CD. The first was, of course, Meyerbeer's *Il Crociato in Egitto* (1824) on Opera Rara. Anyone who is familiar with this period realizes that there is a great gulf between the Rossini and the Bellini, and is likely to wonder whether all the innovations were instituted by Bellini, or whether there are one or more missing links. This subject, as it pertains to *Caritea* is discussed by fellow Donizetti Society member Thomas Lindner in *Mitteilungen der Wiener Donizetti Gesellschaft*, September 1995.

Il Crociato in Egitto, already shows a few departures from Rossini's style. The Vaccai *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825-to be performed in Jesi shortly) may well be another "missing link", and the *L'Ultimo Giorno di Pompei* (Pacini, also 1825, and just revived) definitely is, and anticipates Bellini, and to a lesser extent, Donizetti at many points. Mercadante must have been familiar with the Pacini work, since he was in Naples at the time it was first given.

While there are many small departures from Rossini's style in *Caritea*, these are less prominent than in the Pacini opera, and are not enough to dispel the initial impression on hearing it that one is listening to Rossini, rather than to an opera by the Mercadante we know from his later works, beginning with *Il Giuramento*.

But the music is extremely beautiful, and the erstwhile success of the opera was very well deserved. The once famous chorus "chi per la patria muor" is outstanding, and I challenge anyone who listens to the CD not to play this piece again, after first hearing it. It has a particularly "catchy" tune, which is hard to forget. There also are many other beautiful moments in the score, all of which help make it memorable. Thus, this recording is extremely welcome, and I am delighted to have it.

However, I do feel that it was not the best possible choice as the only Mercadante opera to be revived in honor of the bicentenary of the composer's birth. The reason is that, beautiful as it is, *Donna Caritea* is really far too characteristic of Rossini to demonstrate the important reforms that Mercadante was to make starting about ten years later. An opera that is more typical of Mercadante than of Rossini would have been a better selection. In view of the

composer's comments about his reforms, *Elena da Feltre*, written at that time, would have been my first choice. Or, perhaps, *Medea*. As it is, a *Medea* opera was also given at the Festival, but it was Cherubini's, a work already familiar to most. Undoubtedly, the 1997 festival will concentrate on Donizetti, as well it should. But, perhaps for 1998 the directors of Martina Franca can make amends for this mistake and produce a more suitable work by Mercadante. If, for some reason, they are reluctant to pick one of his later operas, some other recommendations might be *Gabriella di Vergy* (excerpts from which, also given at Martina Franca, were so impressive), *I Normanni a Parigi*, *Emma d'Antiochia* (written for and created by Pasta) or *I Briganti* (written for and created by the Puritani quartet), all operas in which Mercadante has already taken far more significant steps away from Rossini than he did in *Caritea*. Sergio Segalini, the director of the festival, does comment on the selection of *Caritea* in the recording. But, his comments leave me unconvinced. Perhaps, the very fact that he found it necessary to defend his selection reinforces my own views on the matter.

As for the recording itself, the singing does leave a lot to be desired. However, in view of the difficulties with the casting, so ably explained by Segalini, we must be delighted that it did take place. Undoubtedly, if the tenor originally desired for the role of Alfonso had been available, and had Dupuy (the intended Diego) not gotten ill, the performance would have been much better. The singing of the Alfonso in particular makes me wish that Chris Merritt had not decided to specialize in French and German opera. The role would have been perfect for him, but in his absence, Bruce Ford could have done a wonderful job. Hopefully, the work will be repeated, and both Ford and Dupuy will be free.

