

# Recitals by Michael Spyres and Joyce El-Khoury on Opera Rara

Alan Jackson

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Two new CD recitals have been issued by Opera Rara, devoted to music connected with the stars of the Paris Opéra, Julie Dorus-Gras and Gilbert Duprez and sung by Joyce El-Khoury and Michael Spyres with the admirable Hallé Orchestra under Carlo Rizzi. In recent years we have seen a glut of CDs from singers, often counter-tenors, devoted to baroque music sung by the great castrati of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but tributes to 19<sup>th</sup> century singers have been rarer. These two discs are fascinating and can be taken together as well as separately.

At the centre of each is a long duet featuring both singers: the *Lucia* love duet on El-Khoury's and a rarity from Halévy's *Guido et Ginévra* on Spyres'. Both programmes are refreshingly un-hackneyed, though there are few items that are "rara" in the Opera Rara sense of the word from twenty years ago, namely works that are known only to a few scholars who have consulted the scores. The only items I had never come across are on the Spyres disc: in addition to the duet from *Guido* there are arias from that opera, Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* and Auber's *Le lac des fées*. Also included are arias from Rossini's *Othello* (no, not a typo as he sings a French translation), Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra*, *Dom Sébastien* and *La Favorite*, Verdi's *Jérusalem* and Berlioz' *Benvenuto Cellini*. El-Khoury also sings arias from *Lucia* and *Cellini*, plus Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* (three items), Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, Halévy's *La Juive*, Hérold's *Le Pré aux clercs* and Weber's *Le Freyschütz* (in French, though labelling this as by Weber/Berlioz is perhaps misleading as Berlioz' contribution was recitatives to replace the dialogue, which doesn't affect Agate's big scene). For me, the big discoveries are the *Guido* excerpts, which are very beautiful; Berlioz too greatly admired the aria.

Only *Lucia* is standard, definitely un-rara, repertoire. A curious decision has been made with the final scene. Spyres sings the recitative "Tombe degli avi miei" and the cavatina "Fra poco a me ricovero". The tempo di mezzo with its contributions from Raimondo and the chorus is cut and then we get just one verse of the cabaletta "Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali" plus the coda. Thus Edgardo's suicide and the cabaletta's second verse are missing. Given that its special effect of the vocal line being shared between the tenor and solo cellos was suggested to Donizetti by Duprez (at least according to Duprez), this cut sits strangely on a CD honouring Duprez.

El-Khoury's *Lucia* offering is the fountain aria "Regnava nel silenzio". The harp introduction and recitative are not performed and there is no Alisa for the tempo di mezzo. We do have both verses of the cabaletta "Quando rapito in estasi", but not the coda. This last is almost never sung and while I can understand the economics behind not hiring an Alisa, restoring the coda is exactly what I would have expected from Opera Rara. Or did Dorus-Gras cut the coda too?

Another excision on the El-Khoury disc bothers me. The aria "Jours de mon enfance" from *Le Pré aux clercs* has a long and beautiful introduction featuring a solo violin, which takes nearly half of the track's running time. The absence of the aria's cabaletta leaves a truncated and unbalanced impression, especially as comparisons are possible with Sumi Jo (on a CD entitled "Carnaval") and Marie-Ève Munger on the Palazzetto Bru Zane recording of the complete opera. I also find that it is taken rather too slowly (the Alexander Grus score suggest crotchet = 72 and we are certainly slower than that) though Munger is equally slow so I'm in a minority over this. I do prefer the speed on Jo's version and also find her in a different class from both El-Khoury and Munger as regards coloratura fluency, even if she

regrettably makes a cut of a few bars in the Plus animé section of the cabaletta. (The complete recording is nonetheless delightful. See Newsletter 125 for my review of the Opéra Comique production on which it is based – coincidentally, it has Spyres as leading tenor.)

Which raises the question – how do Spyres and El-Khoury measure up as singers to Duprez and Dorus-Gras? Of course we cannot know. But listening to these two discs left me with much admiration for both singers, and just a couple of reservations. If you look at the music that was written for Dorus-Gras – as well as Alice in *Robert le diable*, Princess Eudoxie in *La Juive* and Teresa in *Benvenuto Cellini*, she created Marguerite in *Les Huguenots* – it is clear she was a virtuoso of the first order. I don't think El-Khoury is quite that. The trills in the Fountain aria are sketchy and they are important. Elsewhere, some of the coloratura is a shade cautious, the notes are there but they don't dazzle. Could this be a reason for the omissions already mentioned? Or for the choice of arias from *Robert le diable*? She gives us Alice's "Va, dit-elle, va, mon enfant" and "Quand je quittai la Normandie" and Isabelle's "Robert, toi que j'aime" none of which demand exceptional flexibility, but not the latter's showpiece "En vain j'espère", which can be heard from Sutherland at her least droopy and most virtuosic on her "Romantic French Arias" recital. Having said that, there is much to admire, especially in the purely lyrical arias such as the Meyerbeer arias mentioned, Agate's scene from *Le Freyschütz* and "Sombre forêt" from *Guillaume Tell* (given with its introduction and recitative). There is much beautiful tone throughout a wide range. To my ears the voice sounds lighter and brighter than on the Opera Rara sets of *Belisario* and *Les Martyrs*.

Duprez is famous for being the first tenor to sing high Cs from the chest. But as Spyres points out in his note on the singer, "... as you will discover within these often extremely delicate and beautiful compositions, he was also a true lyrical tenor". I'm sure this is correct. The music written for Duprez frequently has markings such as "piano" or "doux" on high Bbs which I think shows he was more than just a trumpet-toned purveyor of high Cs. Spyres is impressive in the way he incorporates his upper register into the overall vocal line and his singing is firm, lustrous and sensitive throughout. And his very high notes are exciting too. As well as a numerous top Cs, the liner notes alert us to the high Db in "Seul sur la terre" (*Dom Sébastien*) and two high Ds in the duet from *Guido*. There are also a high C# in the aria from *Guido* and even two high Ebs: an interpolation at the end of "Ils s'éloignent! je reste" (*Le Lac des fées*) and the inclusion of the almost always cut flourish near the end of the *Lucia* duet where there is a short downward scale in sixths, she beginning on high C, he on high Eb, and thrilling it is too. Quibbles? The fioritura in the *Othello* aria is not all ideally articulated (more Bruce Ford than Juan Diego Florez), though the two-octave downward runs near the end are pretty stunning. I still long for the sort of long drawn out diminuendos that "old" singers like Fernando de Lucia and Alessandro Bonci brought to some of their Donizetti recordings. Minor quibbles indeed.

A number of arias have linking passages cut and are shorn of their choral parts and contributions from other characters; there is no Jago in the *Othello* aria for example. But these don't spoil my enjoyment as they do in the *Lucia* excerpts mentioned earlier. But with Spyres on hand so to speak, it is a shame that we lack Robert's contribution of four groups of four "non"s in reply to Isabelle's pleas of "grâce pour moi" in her aria from *Robert le diable*. When Beverly Sills recorded this aria around 1970, EMI employed Keith Erwen to supply them. Both CDs are generously filled, running to nearly 80 minutes each, and that no doubt precluded opening some of the snips, just as economic considerations probably ruled out hiring a chorus and supporting soloists. Full texts and translations are included along with the dramatic context for each piece and interesting information about the involvements of Duprez and Dorus-Gras. So both CDs are recommended, particularly the one from Spyres for its choice of repertoire.