

Jacques Halevy – La Juive (Almeida) [1989]

Written by bluesever

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Disc: 1 1. Act One: Introduction - PO/Almeida 2. Act One: Te Deum laudamus/Recitatif - Ambrosian Opera Chor/Schirrer/Varady/Massis/Gonzales 3. Act One: 'Since my lord Leopold, by the grace of God' - Gonzales/Shirrer 4. Act One: 'Ah! My father! Ah! I implore you!' - Varady/Gonzales/Carreras/Furlanetto 5. Act One: 'If harshness and revenge' - Varady/Gonzales/Carreras/Furlanetto 6. Act One: Recitatif/'This wretched crowd which is allways here' - Gonzales 7. Act One: Serenade/'Far from your sweetheart' - Gonzales 8. Act One: Recitative/'Samuel, so it is you!' - Varady/Gonzales 9. Act One: Chorus/'Let us hurry, for time is pressing' - Ambrosian Opera Chor. 10. Act One: Finale/'Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!' - Varady/Carreras/Massis/Gonzales/Shirrer 11. Act One: 'Ah, another surprise!' - Varady/Carreras/Gonzales/Shirrer 12. Act One: 'These noble warriors' - Varady/Carreras/Gonzales/Shirrer/Ambrosian Opera Chor. 13. Act Two: Interlude - PO/Almeida 14. Act Two: Prayer/O God, God of our fathers, come down amongst us!' - Carreras/Varady 15. Act Two: Cavatina/'God, let my quavering voice' - Carreras 16. Act Two: 'Someone is knocking, oh horror!' - Varady/Carreras/Gonzales 17. Act Two: Trio/'I am told you have a magnificent jewel' - Carreras/Gonzales 18. Act Two: Recitative/'My father has gone' - Varady/Gonzales

Disc: 2 1. Act Two: Romance/'He is going to come!' - Varady 2. Act Two: 'It is him! I have no more strength!' - Gonzales/Varady 3. Act Two: Duo/'When I gave myself to you' - Varady/Gonzales/Carreras 4. Act Two: Trio/'I see her guilty face' - Carreras/Varady/Gonzales 5. Act Two: 'My father, for him, for me' - Gonzales/Carreras/Verady 6. Act Two: Recitative/'All right then, since my avenging fury here' - Carreras/Gonzales/Varady 7. Act Three: Duo/'What brings you here?' - Anderson/Varady 8. Act Three: Recitatif/'Henceforth I accept your attentions as well as your zeal' - Anderson/Gonzales 9. Act Three: Bolero/'My sweet lord and master' - Anderson 10. Act Three: Recitatif/'Ah! This hellish torment is to much to bear!' - Gonzales/Anderson 11. Act Three: Pantomime and Ballet/Andantino con grazia - PO/Almeida 12. Act Three: Pantomime and Ballet/Allegretto non troppo - PO/Almeida 13. Act Three: Pantomime and Ballet/Allegro marziale e vivo - PO/Almeida 14. Act Three: Finale/(a)Chorus - Ambrosian Opera/Gonzales/Anderson 15. Act Three: Finale/'To celebrate a hero whose fame I Cherish'/Recitative/'The most heinous' - Anderson/Carreras/Varady/Furlanetto/Massis/Ambrosian Opera 16. Act Three: Finale/(b) Sextet with Chorus - Gonzales/Anderson/Varady/Carreras/ Ambrosian Opera/Furlanetto/Massis 17. Act Three: Finale/(c) Curse - Carreras/Furlanetto/Ambrosian Opera 18. Act Three: Finale/(d)Ensemble - Furlanetto/Ambrosian Opera/Anderson/Varady/Carreras/Gonzales/Massis 19. Act Three: Finale/'Anathema upon them!' - Ambrosian Opera/Anderson/Varady/Carreras/Gonzales/Massis/Furlanetto

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Disc: 3

1. Act Four: *Scena and Duet*/'This is the supreme decree of the Cardinal' - Anderson/Varady 2. Act Four: 'Ah! Let my plaintive voice' - Anderson/Varady 3. Act Four: *Scena*/'Madam, the Cardinal is to come to this place!'/*Duettino/Recitative* - Anderson/Varady/Furlanetto 4. Act Four:*Duo*/'At this moment you daughter is before the council'/*Recitative* - Furlanetto/Carreras 5. Act Four:'Ah! Fearfully I beg for mercy' - Furlanetto/Carreras 6. Act Four: *Air* - Carreras 7. Act Four: 'Rachel,when the Lord's saving grace' - Carreras 8. Act Four: 'God shows me the light' - Carreras 9. Act Four: *Funeral march* - PO/Almeida 10. Act Five: *Finale*/'The council has pronounced a severe sentence' - Massis/Carreras/Varady/Ambrosian Opera/Furlanetto 11. Act Five: *Finale*/'I am to depart this earth' - Varady/Carreras/Furlanetto/Ambrosian Opera 12. Act Five: *Finale*/'It is time! It is time!' - Massis/Carreras/Varady/Ambrosian Opera/Furlanetto
Eleazar - Jose Carreras Rachel - Julia Varady Leopold - Dalmacio Gonzales La Princesse Eudoxie - June Anderson Le Cardinal de Brogi - Ferruccio Furlanetto Ambrosian Opera Chorus Philharmonic Orchestra Antonio de Almeida - conductor

This recording of a once-popular opera, now neglected, is a landmark on several fronts. No commercial recording of the complete opera has ever been available in this country, let alone one with so starry a cast as this. It also marks the return of Jose Carreras to the recording studio after his recovery from leukaemia, taking the title role long coveted by great tenors of the past, most notably of all Enrico Caruso. La juive ("The jewess") was the last opera Caruso added to his repertory right at the end of his career, and his very last appearance in public, at the old Metropolitan in New York on Christmas Eve 1920, was as the Jew, Eleazar. The principal solos became regular recording items before the age of LP, and as recently as 1973 the same conductor as here, Antonio de Almeida, with the then New Philharmonia Orchestra and Ambrosian Opera Chorus, recorded for RCA a well-chosen if dully performed collection of excerpts (nla).

Almeida's conducting this time is altogether tauter and more dramatic, helped by an atmospheric well-balanced recording, which undistractingly presents a convincing stage picture in a plot which for all the splendour of the setting in the French grand opera tradition is relatively simple in human terms, involving only five principal characters. Eleazar the Jew and his adopted daughter, Rachel, are set against Prince Leopold (who loves Rachel) and his wife, Princess Eudoxia. The fifth character is the Cardinal de Brogni, who has two superb bass arias, including one where he vehemently pronounces anathema. Musically it is not a help that the roles of the Jew and of Leopold are both for tenor, the one weightily heroic, the other much lighter and involving a very high tessitura. Similarly flouting convention, Halevy made both Rachel and Eudoxia sopranos, and though Julia Varady as Rachel and June Anderson as Eudoxia have very different voices, they are not so sharply contrasted as to avoid confusion entirely.

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With Carreras already ill, there were problems over the original schedule of sessions. The main recording was done in an intensive period of nine days in the summer of 1986, and plainly that speed helped to intensify the performance's dramatic thrust, with fine playing from the Philharmonia and powerful singing from the Ambrosian Opera Chorus. But it was a case of Hamlet without the prince. Then early this year, taking a whole week over the task, the great Spanish tenor recorded his part in what must be the most ambitious exercise yet in 'over-dubbing', with the singer's voice superimposed on the original tape. If that sounds a dubious exercise, the results are astonishingly convincing. From the clear placing of Carreras on the stereo stage, not to mention the sense of presence, I would never have known that there had been any such engineering trickery. Even knowing the deception I am readily able simply to sit back and enjoy a vividly recorded opera, with the coordination between Carreras and the others in the many ensembles astonishingly exact.

Given first in 1835 the same year as Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Halevy's *La juive* very much represents a Parisian look towards the future. In five acts, its scale is vast, and the grand choral climaxes are pivotal in the well-crafted libretto of Eugene Scribe. But Halevy, far less than his more prominent colleague, Meyerbeer, used the grandeur not as an end in itself but to underpin and intensify the central, personal drama. Even the opening prelude is lyrical and unassuming, predominantly gentle, and the key solos regularly lead almost at once into duets and ensembles, in which they are developed both musically and dramatically. Small wonder that Wagner—who was in Paris around the time of the first performance was a firm admirer of the piece, suppressing his usual anti-semitism both over the subject and over the composer himself, Halevy, ne Levy. As Almeida notes, Wagner in *Die Meistersinger* barefacedly cribbed Halevy's idea for the opening of Act 1: as the curtain rises you hear offstage organ and chorus in church, as vividly atmospheric here as at the start of *Die Meistersinger*.

There are many other anticipations, both musical and dramatic. When at the close of the opera *Eleazar*, at the moment of Rachel's execution (thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil), reveals to the Cardinal that she is the long-lost daughter he has been looking for, the parallel with Verdi's *Il trovatore* could hardly be closer. It is to Halevy's credit that he brings the curtain down on the coup just as briskly as Verdi. It is striking, too, that Halevy's imaginative instrumentation sometimes anticipates mature Verdi, most strikingly in the darkness of timbre from heavy woodwind associated with *Eleazar* himself. That has me thinking above all of *Don Carlos*—one of Verdi's own essays in French 'grand opera'—and no one will miss the parallel in the famous passage introducing *Eleazar*'s big final aria, "Rachel, quand du Seigneur", where Halevy has two cor anglais playing in thirds and sounding very different from the chains of thirds favoured by Donizetti.

As to the text used, the conductor and the recording producer, Erik Smith, have opted for an expanded version of the score published by Schlesinger after the premiere in 1835. That had

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many cuts, but rather than resurrecting every single note that Halevy had written—the whole probably never performed on a single evening—Almeida and Smith have aimed "to woo the opera public to this remarkable work with a dedicated performance of manageable length", actually well over three hours. The main cuts are of crowd scenes, drinking choruses and the like, some of which, as at the start of Act 5 seriously hold up the action. On the other hand, the whole of the grand finale to Act 3, culminating in the Cardinal's Malediction solo, is included as the opera's centre-piece. Among the solo items preserved, but omitted by Schlesinger, is Eudoxia's delightful Bolero, first recorded on Almeida's previously mentioned RCA record. Balancing that, another of her arias, "Je l'ai revu", is omitted. The ballet scene of Act 3 is included "not only for its real charm but because ballet was such an indispensable element in Grand Opera". In other words, the tailoring of the text has been done, not with savagery, but with concern for the opera's effectiveness on record.

Hearing this fine performance has me full of admiration for the finesse and technical mastery of Halevy and his librettist. There are occasional absurdities of a kind inevitable in romantic opera but characterization, mood and motivation are strongly drawn to convey instant conviction, with the basic simplicity of the plot to help. Handling of musical structure and texture is masterly, and my one serious doubt—which I am convinced explains the failure of the work latterly to hold the stage is over the melodic writing, free and uninhibited, but rarely distinctive enough to be really haunting, even in the big solos. Halevy also tends to let down his big moments by allowing ensembles to lapse into jaunty 'oom-pah' rhythm, too close for comfort to French operetta.

None the less, there is much to enjoy in this well-made opera. The most involving singer is Julia Varady, who gives a tender yet positive portrait of Rachel, moving and convincing in all her confrontations, whether loving or defiant as a daughter to Eleazar, whether loving or accusing in her devotion to Leopold, or whether simply responding to the pleas of Eudoxia, Leopold's wife. The voice has all its usual distinctiveness and beauty, to make June Anderson as Eudoxia sound a little raw by comparison, agile as she is in the dramatic coloratura passages. Her Bolero in the opening scene of Act 3 is delightfully pointed. The bass, Ferruccio Furlanetto, makes a splendid Cardinal de Brogni, relishing above all his two big solos "Si la rigueur", the most striking arioso in Act 1, as well as the anathema solo of Act 3, not to mention the final confrontation with Eleazar. Like most Italians singing French he rolls his 'r's, but no French bass today begins to match him in a role once associated with Ezio Pinza.

The two tenors are well contrasted by timbre. Dalmacio Gonzalez—best known on record as the Fenton in Giulini's DG Falstaff recording and as one of the tenors in the Philips set of Rossini's La donna del lago has a slightly throaty production, not unpleasing except when under strain as he is in parts of his opening serenade with its stratospheric high notes. Carreras as Eleazar not surprisingly, shows signs of strain too, and the exposed unaccompanied solos which alternate with the chorus in the lovely Passover service music of Act 2 show that the voice, still distinctive

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has lost much of its honeyed tone. Production and tone are not so firm as they once were, but the wonder is that Carreras copes with the big outbursts with such heroic weight. I imagine that Caruso drew the portrait of this rather unsympathetic character, obsessive in anti-Christian hatreds, more distinctively than Carreras, but even the element of vulnerability in the voice is apt for a mature character under extreme stress.

As with so many complete recordings of French opera there are few French singers in the cast. In the two comprimario bass-baritone roles Rene Massis as Ruggiero, the city provost of Constance where the opera is set, and Rene Schirrer as Albert, sergeant in Leopold's regiment, are both first-rate exceptions here, but I would not envy a record producer today intent on casting entirely from French sources. Far better to put up with the occasional rolled 'r' or odd vowel. This recording was made with the help of the Friends of French Opera. The layout on three discs is generous, and involved only one break within an act—in the middle of Act 2 before the meeting of Rachel and Leopold. --- Edward Greenfield, Gramophone

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