

Luigi Boccherini - Clementina (Heras-Casado) [2009]



Disc 1 Clementina, G.540 1 *Sinfonía* 6:13 Act I 2 *Terceto*: 'Huid, corazones' 3:27 3 *Aria graciosa*: 'Del tiempo dos rigores' 3:54 4 *Aria*: 'Sol puntual' 4:41 5 *Duetto*: 'Blanca paloma' 1:20 6 *Aria*: '¡Ay, de mí!' 4:51 7 *Duetto*: 'Duda si vive' 1:21 8 *Aria*: 'Incauta mariposa' 3:04 9 *Cavatina*: 'Con una buena cata' 3:33 10 *Aria*: 'El amante que se queja' 6:02 11 *Finale*: 'La comida está servida' 6:00

Disc 2 Act II 1 *Copla*: '¡Almas que Amor sujetó!' 3:15 2 *Rondó a 6*: 'Para que los placeres' 3:27 3 *Cavatina*: 'Quien libre ha vivido' 2:49 4 *Aria*: 'Sabrá por mis lecciones' 4:21 5 *Aria*: 'Cruel, injusta' 4:18 6 *Minué*: 'Vos sois su padre' 4:16 7 *Recitado*: '¿Amor? ¿Amor? ¿Y llanto?' / *Duetto*: 'No imploro tus piedades' 6:44 8 *Recitado*: '¡Oh, natural amor!' / *Aria*: 'Hablándome al oído' 6:32 9 *Finale*: 'Huid, corazones' 1:12

Maria Hinijosa – soprano, Clementina Sonia de Munck – soprano, Narcisa Marta Rodrigo – mezzosoprano, Donña Damiana David Alegret – tenor, Don Urbano) Tony Marsol – baritone, Don Lázaro La Compañía del Principé Aranjuez Pablo Heras-Casado – conductor

This is an important recording. For nearly fifty years anyone interested in Ramón de la Cruz and Luigi Boccherini's zarzuela has had to be content with a decent Swiss Radio broadcast in Italian translation, strongly cast but slightly cut. So all power to Pablo Heras-Casado and his Aranjuez forces – the team who surprised us with José Castel's agreeable *La fontana del placer* a couple of years back – for reviving this legendary work. Now at last we can hear *Clementina* musically complete in its original language, handsomely packaged with full historical notes, synopsis and song texts.

When in 1787 the widowed Contesa-Duquesa de Benavente asked (that is, ordered) her in-house composer to join the day's leading stage writer in concocting a two-act zarzuela for performance by her aristocratic friends – allowing for a substantial lunch to be served at half time – she can hardly have expected the forced marriage to turn out as well as it did. Ramón's suave 'lost baby' intrigue may be slight, his aristocratic puppets familiar from Italian opera buffa; but he carefully obeyed the Unities, even to the point of having the characters go off for their

lunch at the act break. And by introducing a comic music master to give the soprano sisters their singing lesson, he enabled many of the musical numbers to emerge elegantly from the play's action. His texts for the solo arias and ensembles (the spoken dialogue is neither performed nor printed here) are witty, concise, and eminently singable.

Boccherini's contribution is at a high level. Putting Mozart (whose own *Le nozze di Figaro* first saw the light this same year) to one side, I doubt whether there was another composer around who could have done the job better. Granted that Haydn's operas have at least as much musical interest, but Boccherini outpaces his older contemporary in delineation of character, theatrical speed and comedy through music. Almost every number transcends convention, and the whole score easily stands comparison with its nearest Italian parallel, Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto*. The Contesa-Duchesa's little zarzuela may have been only an occasional piece, but Boccherini endowed it with lasting quality.

And how many music theatre works before Wagner were bold enough to feature a passionate brother-sister love duet? The gentle heroine and her tenor suitor may not exactly be Siegmund and Sieglinde – Don Urbano is a scrupulously well-mannered first cousin to Mozart's Don Ottavio, and the pair don't realise they're siblings until after their dúo – but in such a prettily refined world the sexual frisson is there. There's shade as well as sun in this Spanish formal garden.

Clementina may indeed be the one-off sport Ignacio Jassa Haro found it to be in his review of the recent Madrid staging, but in its musical and verbal excellence it stands alone as the 18th century bridge between zarzuela barroca and the classics of the romantic era. This zarzuela isn't like quite anything else, though it is certainly written in the international (i.e. Italian) style of the time. More to the point, its rare use of a high-quality Spanish text is no mere claim to academic fame: it's an important part of Clementina's distinctive charm. Nationality can be manifest in words as well as music.

The Aranjuez performance does it justice in many ways. Heras-Casado's direction is spruce and nicely paced, highlighting Boccherini's juicy harmonic and rhythmic touches just enough without labouring the point. The period string playing is often exquisite, its lightness and diverse tonal flavour more revealing than the solid, modern chamber orchestra of the Swiss-Italian set under Angelo Ephrikian. Vocal ornamentation is conservative, almost to the point of plainness. The acoustic of the Royal Palace's chapel has a less than ideal echo, but that's been tamed well enough for only the minimum of detail to go missing and the overall sound is far superior to the thinly antiquated Swiss recording.

When it comes to the singers, honours are more evenly divided. Toni Marsol's slightly mushy comic baritone could hardly have been expected to eclipse the memory of the great Fernando Corena as the music master, but David Alegret (familiar from the recent *Giravolt de Maig* on Harmonia Mundi) is a light lyric tenor of quality and technique secure enough to challenge even Ugo Benelli's Urbano. His recitative when he discovers the disastrous truth about his fiancée, darkened by darting forays into remote minor keys, is one of Boccherini's boldest strokes, and the heroic coloratura aria which follows is as daunting as anything in Mozart. Alegret is up for it – and almost as up to it – as his eminent Italian rival on the old set, finding a clarion ring to his voice without resorting to falsetto for the fast passage work (what a talented tenor friend the Dowager Duchess must have had!)

There's not much to choose between the women either. Narcisa is a showier and more emotionally varied role than her titular sister, whose simpler music suggests the reflective girl who might well go choose to go into a convent if the right man doesn't ask for her hand. Sonia de Munck and María Hinojosa are well contrasted in timbre, and more characterful than their Italian equivalents. If there's one thing everyone knows Boccherini could write, it's a minuet: and Doña Damiana, the girl's governess, is given a peach of one here, its gracious melody spiced with rhythmic and instrumental sublimities. Marta Rodrigo sings it beautifully, and Elena Rivero manages the servant girl's appropriately simpler (and even catchier) numbers with aplomb.

This *Clementina* benefits hugely from having been recorded during rehearsals for Ignacio García's fully staged, outdoor production. There's an interactive sense here not surprisingly missing from the 1964 Italian concert performance. Good though that was, this one is better in almost every respect. I've enjoyed it tremendously, seduced time and again by the sensual theatricality of the score. Was there ever such an underrated composer as Boccherini? It is a pity that this was to remain his only mature stage work, but no matter. The Spanish original proves that opera's loss was zarzuela's gain. ---Christopher Webber, zarzuela.net

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