

Giacomo Meyerbeer - Margherita d'Anjou (2002)

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Disc: 1 1. Sinfonia Militare 2. Quatro! Cinque! Che Bel Colpetto! 3. Miei Fedeli! 4. O Speme D'un Regno 5. Ma Qual Suono 6. Il Contento E Il Piacer Di Vittoria 7. Proffittiam Del Tumulto 8. Alfin Respiro 9. Ah! Tu Non Sai 10. Questa Speme Che Mi Avanza 11. Insomma Mia Signora 12. Fra Gli Applausi 13. Regina, Al Nostro Oprar 14. E'riposta In Questi Accenti 15. Da Così Bell'impresa 16. Per Noi Di Gloria Già Splende Un Raggio 17. Maesta, Due Francesi Qui Giunti Poco Fa' 18. Non Vi E Ripato 19. Eccolo, O Caro Sposo 20. Si Mesto E Pensoso 21. Secondiam Si Dolce Istinto Disc: 2 1. Regina, In Questo Istante 2. Eccovi, O Prodi 3. Fra Gli Applausi 4. E Carlo Ancor Non Torna? 5. Fra Quest'ombre 6. Ciel! M'assisti 7. Quintetto 'Curdel Cimento' 8. Allegro Con Spirito 'Fissami Gli Occhi In Fronte' 9. Stretta 'Ma Più D'appresso 10. Che Bell'alba 11. Dolci Alberghi Di Pace 12. Che Mai Giova Il Serto 13. Cabaletta - 'Incerto Palpito' 14. Ritiratevi Amici! Disc: 3 1. Finche Della Tenzon 2. Ah Si! Pur Troppo 3. Andantino - 'Tu Che Le Vie Segrete' 4. Allegretto - 'D'un Tal Piacer' 5. Eccomi Di Chirugo E Dottore 6. Pensa E Guarda, Amico, All'erta! 7. Ecco Altezza A Voi Davanti 8. Andante Sostenuto 'Oh Rabbia! Oh Furore!' 9. Allegro Alla Breve 'Piomba Il Fulmine Del Cielo' 10. Bravi! Bravi Amiconi! 11. Scena 'O Ciel! Qual Mai Contrasto' 12. Aria 'Mio Pianto Rasciuga' 13. Rondo 'Ah! Sposo Adorabile' 14. Dolce Albergo Di Pace 15. Perche Mai Sedurmi Amore 16. Cabaletta - 'Incerto Palpito' Margherita D'Anjou, (widow of Henry VI of England) - Annick Massis, (soprano) The Duke of Laverenne, (Grand Senechal of Normandy) - Bruce Ford, (tenor) Isaura, (Laverenne's wife), Daniela Barcellona - (mezzosoprano) Carlo Belmonte, (A general banished by the Queen, in the service of Gloucester) - Alastair Miles, (bass) Riccardo, (Duke of Gloucester) - Paul Putins (bass) Michelle, (a French physician) - Favio Previati, (bass) Geoffrey Mitchell Choir London Philharmonic Orchestra David Parry - conductor

Premiered at La Scala in 1820, this opera was a grand success. It is a semi-seria; that is, with possible tragic elements along the way, it still manages to end happily. The plot is ridiculous and absolutely does not matter, but here goes: We are in the Scottish highlands. The tenor, Lavarenne, leader of the troops of our eponymous soprano heroine (widow of Henry VI), is in love with her; his ditched wife Isaura (mezzo) has tracked him down and is disguised as a

young male soldier, accompanied by Michele (baritone), a comic doctor who later becomes a cook. The troops are fighting Gloucester (bass); there is a traitor, Carlo (bass), who was on Margherita's side but defected to Gloucester and later returns to Margherita. Troops change loyalties left and right. Eventually Lavarenne realizes that although he's wild for Margie, Isaura's the one he really loves, and it is she, Isaura the mezzo, who gets the final aria. Oh, never mind.

It is not a great work, but I defy anyone who hears it to have a bad time. There is some piano-accompanied recitative, but mostly it's fun, showy music, composed for virtuosos--and performed here by virtuosos. There's a trio for three basses that's as intricate as it is entertaining, an aria or two for Margherita--at least one of which is gorgeously lyrical with a violin obbligato to die for (did Verdi know it?), some fine music for tenor with high Bs and Cs popping up in the oddest places, offstage bands, two duets with mezzo, and a 10-minute sextet in Act 2 (which grows organically from the trio) that would make most composers proud.

As I said, we're in virtuoso land. Mezzo Danielle Barcellona's Isaura is thoroughly convincing; she has a substantial sound that is agile and appealing. Bruce Ford is endlessly impressive in this type of music, and his voice has taken on a certain density that doesn't detract from his ardency. He's militarily reliable, always sings on the note, and is fluid in passage work. Bass Alastair Miles is a Carlo with a nice dark tone and a seriousness of purpose, and amazingly, newcomer (to me at least) Fabio Previati makes the enigmatic, vaguely silly Michele a real character. As Margherita, soprano Annick Massis is perfect--she's a great under-recorded (and under-famous) singer, with a beautiful tone (she ends Act 1 on a high-D that's not only impressive, but rounded and lovely) and spectacular agility. Is she interested in the character? Is there a character to be interested in? It seems not to matter.

The rest of the singers are terrific, and the Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, with plenty to do (they're an army, after all), is just as good. David Parry (when will he have an American career?) leads the London Philharmonic Orchestra with a sense of great purpose and they react accordingly. The notes in the accompanying booklet are a veritable course in Meyerbeerian lore, informative and entertaining. It ain't Don Giovanni, it ain't Otello (anyone's), it ain't Giulio Cesare, but it's a great time. Sound is just about ideal. ---Robert Levine, ClassicsToday.com

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