

Bellini – La Straniera (Parry) [2008]

Written by bluesever

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Disc: 1 1. Act 1. *Introduzione e Coro. Voga, voga* 2. Act 1. *Recitativo e Duetto. Trista, pensosa* 3. Act 1. *Recitativo e Duetto. Io la vidi* 4. Act 1. *Recitativo. Osburgo?* 5. Act 1. *Scena e Duetto. Alaide* 6. Act 1. *Coro di cacciatori. Campo ai veltri* 7. Act 1. *Coro di cacciatori. Ti trovo alfin* 8. Act 1. *Coro di cacciatori. Che mai penso?* 9. Act 1. *Terzetto. Ah! non partir* 10. Act 1. *Terzetto. Leopoldo!* Disc: 2 1. Act 2. *Scena ed Aria. Udimmo. Il tuo racconto* 2. Act 2. *Scena. Tu che osasti mentir* 3. Act 2. *Scena. A tempo io giungo...* 4. Act 2. *Scena e Quartetto. Valdeburgo!* 5. Act 2. *Scena, Coro ed Aria Finale. Sono all'ara...*

Montolino - Roland Wood (Baritone), Valdeburgo - Mark Stone (Baritone), Arturo - Dario Schmunck (Tenor), Alaide - Patrizia Ciofi (Soprano), Isoletta - Enkelejda Shkosa (Mezzo-soprano), Osburgo – Aled Hall (Tenor) Prior - Graeme Broadbent (Baritone).
Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, London Philharmonic Orchestra David Parry – conductor

La straniera has never achieved the popularity of other Bellini operas, but is that a result of lack of familiarity, or perhaps the fact that the composer is striving for a concision that he later abandoned? Straniera follows Pirata in the canon, and shows a desire to advance the opera constantly by rarely stopping for a full-blown aria, with many ariosos interjected in the recitative. This did not prevent contemporary audiences from reacting enthusiastically. Bellini even goes so far as to deprive the tenor of an aria, perhaps because Rubini was unavailable. The baritone's aria is perfunctory, but then two full, slow cabaletta verses follow. But it is especially in ensembles that the characters react, and that they must—because the story is extremely complicated, derived from a French gothic novel. After the premiere, the composer revised his score when Rubini did become available, mostly with adaptations of the tenor's vocal line when singing alone (which seem to be the choice for this recording), but also revisions in the duets with baritone (as described by Philip Gossett in *Divas and Scholars*) that are not followed in the recording. Benjamin Walton is the author of *Opera Rara's* accompanying essay, as authoritative as Jeremy Commons. A performance list by Thomas Kaufman is also fascinating reading, as we encounter singers who moved from seconda donna to prima donna as their fame grew.

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In the title role, Patrizia Ciofi is her customary expressive self, though we might ideally want a voice of greater weight. But the soprano knows her limitations and never pushes the voice beyond its capacities, which does not mean that she is bland. In role after role, she has shown us an amazing capacity to absorb styles and provide characterizations to match: Mozart's Susanna, the heroines of Hoffmann, Lucie, Strauss's Sophie, Puccini's Lauretta. Dario Schmunck may not have the requisite elegance, but he does have the thrust that is an essential aspect of his role. Engaged to Isoletta but in love with Alaide (who turns out to be the reinstated Queen Agnes), jealous of Valdeburgo who is in fact the brother of Alaide—does this give a sufficient notion of the plot?—Arturo has much cause to be in a constant state of distress, and the tenor captures this aspect of the role quite well. Isoletta is far less present (a duet in the first act, an aria and quartet in the second, but Enkelejda Shkosa's full-blooded mezzo seizes every opportunity. Mark Stone's light baritone does not always meet the requirements of his role, but the promise is there; for high-note fanciers, he delivers a stunning high A[♯] Minor at the end of his aria. Graeme Broadbent is not totally imposing as the Prior, but it is Aled Hall whose over-emphatic delivery in an unpleasant voice unfortunately attracts more than its fair share of attention.

David Parry once more demonstrates his versatility, the London Philharmonic Orchestra its virtuosity, so that Bellini's score is brought to life. A rival recording on Fonit Cetra or Ricordi features the affectations of Lucia Aliberti and the inadequacies of Vincenzo Bello, which are offset by the touching performance of the young Sara Mingardo as Isoletta. Conductor Gianfranco Masini gives us an old-fashioned reading with lots of old-fashioned cuts, while the current recording is complete (in accordance with my Ricordi score). I have not heard the recordings with Renata Scotto or Montserrat Caballé, which could very well offer further defense of the work. --- Joel Kasow, Fanfare

La Straniera is nowadays widely considered to be Bellini's problem piece, but it was hugely popular in its day. The complex narrative is curiously prophetic of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The hero Arturo, unstable and suspicious, is drawn to the mysterious Alaide, who is a refugee from marital disaster. Arturo interprets her occasionally strange behaviour as evidence of past sexual extravagance and catastrophically assumes his friend Valdeburgo to be her lover when he is, in fact, her brother. Bellini's decision to replace his usual flexible coloratura with something more altogether angular leads, however, to a score that his contemporaries considered radical, but which now feels expressively rigid. Made in tandem with Opera Rara's revival last November, the recording makes a strong case for the work, but can't disguise its occasional longueurs. Patrizia Ciofi is a sensitive Alaide, but can't make up for the fact that the role needs a fuller tone than she possesses. ---Tim Ashley, guardian.co.uk

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