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Attila (review)

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(Review)

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The sound is excellent, in what might be described as a nonaggressive way: the listener gets a sense of the performance as a whole, without this or that detail being put under the sonic microscope for close inspection at any given moment. The producers have not gone overboard with extramusical effects, but the “stereo staging” is capably handled.

I put this recording to a logical test, by lending it to a newcomer to opera who had not yet heard *Don Giovanni*, or (incredible as it may seem!) any other Mozart opera. He was fascinated, and I practically had to pry the set out of his hands to complete this review.

Chandos usually issues, in due course, single CDs of highlights from these complete sets. In this case, however, I’d recommend springing for the complete performance, because it plays so well as drama.

Roland Graeme

Attila. Giuseppe Verdi

Attila: Simone Alaimo
Odabella: Tiziana Fabbricini
Foresto: Marco Berti
Ezio: Franco Vassallo
Uldino: Gianluca Floris
Leone: Enrico Rinaldo
Orchestra Giovanile della Sardegna

L. Canepa Chorus
Massimiliano Stefanelli, conductor.
Recorded live in performance at Teatro di
Tradizione, Sassari, Sardinia in December 1999
Kicco Classic (distributed by Qualiton Imports)
KC061.2 (2 CDs)

Early Verdi is back. Once dismissed as crude, unperformed, and unrecorded, many of the pre-*Rigoletto* operas have become familiar, several becoming almost repertory items. *Attila* can now be had on CD, on video, and on stage in the recent past at the Chicago Lyric and New York City operas.

When (Friedrich Ludwig) Zacharias Werner’s 1808 drama *Attila, König der Hunnen* caught Verdi’s attention, he turned to Francesco Maria Piave for a libretto but supplied the scenario himself. Eventually dissatisfied with Piave’s work, Verdi gave the project to Temistocle Solera, whose personal life got in the way of finishing the project. Act 3 went back to Piave, resulting in the weakest section of the text.

Werner’s huge historical canvas was replete with historical and fictional characters imagined in the vivid, neo-Shakespearian style of German Romantic tragedy. Little is available in English on Werner, but an entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* rues his early “dissipated life,” and opines that “he lacked self-control, and produced no work of lasting merit.” Pierre Bellemare rejects that view, citing Mme de Staël, among other commentators, as giving testimony to Werner’s stature that for at least a decade made him a viable successor to Schiller.¹

Werner, who knew his history, opposes a surprisingly noble Attila with Ezio

(Aetius), declining Rome's great warlord against the "barbarian" invasions. These two had created western Europe as we know it: the Hun by driving polyglot hordes camped on the empire's rim into the interior, and the half-Roman/half-barbarian general by settling the refugees wherever he could find available land. Werner's Attila recalls the historic Hunnish chieftain who kept a Roman architect/engineer in his retinue to create a bath complex wherever the Huns camped. His Ezio is a complex, ambitious, and sardonic leader. Solera produced a lean, mean, fast-moving reduction of Werner. More importantly, he gave Verdi an incendiary Italian nationalist tract. The new opera received an uncertain reception at its Venice premiere, but subsequent performances received tumultuous ovations. *Attila* became a Risorgimento icon.

Attila looks forward to the greater *Macbeth* of 1848 (the prelude, dance of the druid priestesses, and some of the choruses could be dropped unchanged into *Macbeth*'s distinctive sound-world) but in many ways remains the "son of *Nabucco*." Odabella is a throwback to Abigaille in range and vigor of expression; Attila's arias are cut from the same cloth as Zacharia's prophetic solos; the Italians are a conquered people struggling to free themselves from the forces of an alien faith and culture. Verdi eventually recognized *Attila*'s failings but staunchly maintained that it was far better than *Alzira*, the one score he resigned himself to disowning. Others who came later were more harsh. Francis Toye, who expected an Anglo-Saxon code of behavior from everyone, treated the Italians in the cast list with contempt and found musical value only in the two scenes of the prologue. But modern audiences have taken to the opera for the irresistible vigor and theatrical flair that rarely failed the composer. Situations might be contrived and played crudely by characters limned in lurid colors—but Verdi *believed*, and he makes us believe through the force and honesty of his conviction.

The cast of this Sardinian performance rises to the challenge with real success. Simone Alaimo is a noted Rossinian who presents an Attila of grandeur in line with Werner's original. He has far more flexibility of voice than some of the Slavic basses (Christoff, Nesterenko) who have left complete performances, along with strength and solidity at both ends of the range. While Alaimo's voice may not possess striking beauty per se or a large array of tone colors, it is a handsome, well-placed one that dominates with ease. The good news continues with Franco Vassallo, who makes a highly positive impression as Ezio. In the current operatic scene largely devoid of genuine Verdi baritones, he should be a major player (and recent reviews from Europe have been highly positive). Vassallo launches the long, arching lines with real authority and easily sustains a virile, confident sound up to an exciting top. There isn't much subtlety in his work here, but this is, after all, Ezio rather than Doge Boccanegra. It is a treat to hear again an Italian baritone who has the chops for the big moments and who can really sing this music.

Foresto is the least dynamic of the characters. And it is even harder to sympathize with him as Barco Berti, an otherwise perfectly adequate tenor with

some heft to his bright tone, whines and sobs his way through the role, suggesting that Foresto spends the majority of his waking hours in tears.

Soprano Tiziana Fabbricini has been controversial for almost the entire length of her career. Shortly after her emergence into major roles in big houses, those awaiting the Second Coming of Callas embraced her as the latest contender, whereas others heard only a seriously unfinished technique and early signs of ruinous vocal wear. As her performances in relatively lyric roles became progressively more problematic, slamming “La Fab” (the satirical nickname speaks volumes) became common everywhere from Internet chat rooms to mainstream print pieces. I had not heard her voice prior to receiving this set for review and was anxious to hear her, particularly in so demanding a part. My guess is that she has decided that her best days as Violetta are past and that she should “go for the brass ring,” in the manner of veteran tenors who take on Tristan and Siegfried once they have nothing left to lose, and to whom the prospect of a couple of years in the big houses at big fees before final vocal decline sets in seems attractive.

Odabella is a tough role, witness (just for starters) the infamous D-flat in the first, very energetic bars. If one can trust the acoustics (not guaranteed, see below), Fabbricini’s voice has gone huge, ballooning out on top with a hard glare, displaying real unsteadiness at times and a lot of raw patches—but commitment to burn. The last quality is a *sine qua non* for this role, as with the related ones of Abigaille and Lady Macbeth. Say what you will, and I’ll say right up front that her singing is rarely pretty, Fabbricini’s Odabella is exciting and dramatically involved. She proves a worthy opponent for this Attila and survives the lyrical passages better than expected.

A professional sound-engineer is credited, but one has to wonder. No mention is made of this set being CEDARized but the sound has obviously been heavily processed. The resonance sounds completely fake and passages performed at triple *forte* and above take on a ringing echo that is pure electronics. You hear everything clearly enough and the sound packs a real wallop, but none of it sounds like any opera house in this world. Edited applause is audible throughout.

Conductor Massimiliano Stefanelli knows how this piece should go. The ensemble was rehearsed to a respectable level—can this really be a youth orchestra?—and, to be honest, I enjoyed the performance more than the more polished ones, including the Philips studio set with Raimondi, Deutekom et al. under Lamberto Gardelli’s direction. The vigor and commitment of this cast carry all before it.

William Fregosi

N O T E

1. Pierre Bellemare, personal e-mail communication to the author.