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Adriana Lecouvreur (review)

William Fregosi

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(Review)

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Corelli fans need not hesitate. For lovers of Puccini's opera, stick with Callas/Di Stefano/Gobbi or Price/Di Stefano/Taddei.

Roger Pines

Adriana Lecouvreur. Francesco Cilea

Adriana Lecouvreur: Renata Scotto

Maurizio: Giacomo Aragall

Princess of Bouillon: Elena Obraztsova

Michonnet: Giuseppe Taddei

Prince of Bouillon: James Courtney

Abbé: Joseph Frank

Quinault: John Davies

Poisson: Robert Johnson

Mlle Jouvenot: Pamela South

Mlle Dangeville: Mildred Tyree

San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Gianandrea Gavazzeni, conductor

Live performance, 9 September 1977

Myto (distributed by *Qualiton Imports*)

2 MCD 005.234 (2 CDs)

With the possible exception of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, has any opera been subjected to the amount of contempt directed at Francesco Cilea's tuneful, seemingly harmless *Adriana Lecouvreur*? In the United States it has against it the history of "two" productions at the Metropolitan Opera — the one that didn't happen and the one that did. The one refused by Gatti-Casazza to Rosa Ponselle was reputedly the catalyst that sent her into early retirement, angered at being denied a role that would have suited her fading top perfectly. The opera was finally wrested from an unwilling Rudolf Bing by Renata Tebaldi, who premiered it and then withdrew from performing for a year to deal with a vocal crisis. The incident engendered Bing's caustic comment about "the wretched opera" in his memoirs.¹

Adriana is a soprano magnet, especially for the mature diva who may find it hard to resist the four gorgeous costumes spread over four relatively short acts (the first of which has the cast praising her artistry to the skies); that ever-so-friendly tessitura; the sure-fire arias; and a death scene that is unvarnished, highly effective claptrap — like *Traviata* with delirium added. For the "serious" critic, what's not to hate?

In defense of Cilea's magnum opus, the work is well crafted and filled with buoyant melody and reprises of its hit tunes (though no more than other operas of its time and style). While one never looks to opera plots for historical fidelity, *Adriana* scores better than most via Scribe and Legouvé's tragic drama on the life of the Comédie-Française legend celebrated in all theater-history texts. Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692–1730), a very early forerunner of dramatic realism, dressed in appropriate costumes for her classical roles. She decreed an end to the wealthy dandies' onstage benches, which clogged entrances to the set and destroyed all theatrical illusion. Most importantly, she simplified the artificial, vibrato-ridden chant affected by French tragic actors into something still theatrical but far more direct and natural. In the process, she gained the uncondi-

tional admiration of Voltaire and critics on both sides of the English Channel. She died young, of either typhus or dysentery, but who wants to see that on an opera stage? The play picked up instead on the abundant rumor, which circulated after her death, that she had been poisoned by one of the mistresses of her lover, Maurice, comte de Saxe.

To succeed as Adriana requires a tricky balance of voice, technique, emotional vulnerability, and winning personality. Surely the audience is meant to fall in love with her, Michonnet being its intermediary. Renata Scotto, here taking on the part for the first time (at San Francisco Opera in the fall of 1977), brings all her many virtues to it. She was still in quite good voice, with only some passing glottal attacks and slightly less-than-optimal steadiness on occasion to betray the heavy dramatic roles she had by then been exploring. The still-firm focus and many colors of her attractive lyric soprano combine with superbly projected Italian, good use of chest voice, and lovely floating pianissimi. While avoiding bathos, she doesn't apologize for the purple passages, meeting them head-on with her own brand of dramatic conviction.

Her antagonist, the Princess of Bouillon, is Elena Obraztsova, who possessed one of the biggest voices of the second half of the twentieth century. Her virtues largely ended there. Undeniably born with a great instrument, the Russian mezzo generally chose to operate at one volume-level (overpowering), and almost exclusively in clangorous chest voice. Her approach is certainly exciting for a minute or so (her little scena at the beginning of act 2 is greeted by an animal roar from the audience), but it can easily turn coarse and exhausting for the listener over time. Although not as bad as her truly grotesque Adalgisa from a Metropolitan Opera broadcast of *Norma*, Obraztsova's Princess will be of interest mainly to fans of power-singing of the most insistent kind.

Spanish tenor Giacomo (Jaime) Aragall always seemed to me an underrated singer. Here, his voice matches Scotto's ideally in focus, clarity, and elegance of phrasing. It is a lyric tenor, and he does push just a bit in one or two of the climaxes, but he refuses to shout. His Maurizio is an ardent, attractive figure, and his firm, virile, Italianate tone would be more than welcome on today's stages. The same can be said for the great veteran Giuseppe Taddei. Although his big, juicy, powerful Italian baritone was just beyond its prime by this time, voice alone is not what Michonnet is all about. The man is a substitute father figure to Adriana and has fallen in love with her to boot. Taddei wonderfully underplays what could easily turn into sentimental overkill and, by the way, sounds pretty good throughout (despite the apology in the booklet notes for the state of his instrument).

Two of the supporting parts require some authority and strong voice. James Courtney and Joseph Frank do well as the Prince and the Abbé; but the real strength of the ensemble is the work of Pamela South, Mildred Tyree, John Davies, and Robert Johnson as four actors from the Comédie-Française who work together in scenes supporting Adriana in acts 1 and 4. They handle these gossip, conversational, operetta-like scenes with fresh voices and just the right

light touch. Gianandrea Gavazzeni's conducting revels in the warm colors of the orchestration and breathes with the singers. This does not mean indulging them inordinately. He conducts right through the end of "Io son l'umile ancella," for example, instead of coming to a full stop for applause, and although his pace is leisurely in places, it is never slack.

Myto has presented this performance in crystal clear, warm, undistorted sound with good balance between stage and pit. I can only assume that the source of the recording was a radio broadcast; the accompanying booklet is sorely lacking in information. The essay is uncredited, the Italian-only libretto appears in Lilliputian point-size and, worst of all, the track listings are not for this *Adriana* at all but for some unidentified performance of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*!

If you like *Adriana*, this set would be a fine recording to have. However, I must in conscience mention the live 1959 Naples San Carlo performance (released over the years on a number of labels, including Melodram and Agorá Musica). Magda Olivero, Cilea's favorite *Adriana* of all, had rushed to replace the indisposed Renata Tebaldi, and her colleagues included three of postwar Italy's finest singers: Franco Corelli, Ettore Bastianini, and Giulietta Simionato. The four of them sang one of the most incandescent performances ever recorded.

William Fregosi

N O T E

1. Sir Rudolf Bing, *5000 Nights at the Opera* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), p. 200.

Nelly Miricioiu: "Bel Canto Portrait"

Scenes from *Emma d'Antiochia*, *L'assedio di Corinto*,
Belisario, *Parisina*

Philharmonia Orchestra

Geoffrey Mitchell Choir

David Parry, conductor

Opera Rara (distributed by Harmonia Mundi) ORR217 (1 CD)

Nelly Miricioiu has recorded frequently for Opera Rara, including several complete operas; the label has now built an impressive recital around this soprano's considerable talents.

I applaud the decision to present four substantial scenes (complete with chorus and supporting singers), rather than a collection of shorter formal numbers. Should one choose to play the CD straight through, the selections are grouped in a way that creates an interesting and varied program: the intensely dramatic final scenes from *Emma d'Antiocha* and *Belisario* are each followed by more introspective, predominantly lyrical sequences. All of this music was first per-