PROJECT MUSE®

Alfonso und Estrella (review)

Eftychia Papanikolaou

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 623-624 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0297>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376361>

published by the Rossini Foundation in Pesaro, incorporating an autograph discovered in Sweden, making this production a landmark in Rossini videography.

Next, *L'occasione fa il ladro* was Rossini's fifth opera premiere in 1812 and although legend implies that it was written in eleven days, this production reveals the opera's outstanding construction, expressive melodic language and subtle character delineation. This is a striking production. The attractive sets and costumes are consistent with the locale and period. Michael Hampe's direction is sensible and straightforward and is the perfect vehicle for the fine cast that has been assembled. The production, a collaboration between the Oper der Stadt Köln and the Opéra de Montpellier, displays the fruit of the collaborative musical labors of Hampe and Gelmetti.

Finally, *Il signor Bruschino*, the last Rossini farsa and his third collaboration with

Foppa, inventively displays delightful use of double-entendre and effectively demonstrates Rossini's fully developed and outrageous opera-buffa style. This work is the direct conduit to *L'italiana in Algeri*. Michael Hampe stages the opera at the time and location of its original setting, culminating in an appealing, lively production. Amelia Felle and David Kuebler deliver the best singing, exhibiting excellent coloratura.

This unique collection of one-act comedies from Rossini's early output fills a significant void in the sparse video collection of composer's works. The performance quality is exquisitely consistent within the collection and the pricing is attractive, thereby making it an excellent acquisition.

ELDONNA L. MAY
Wayne State University

Franz Schubert. *Alfonso und Estrella*. DVD. Nikolaus Harnoncourt / Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Arnold Schoenberg Choir. With Luba Orgonasova, Thomas Hampson, Endrik Wottrich, Olaf Bär, Alfred Muff. Stage direction by Jürgen Flimm. Canada: Naxos, 2009, 1997. 2.110260. \$29.99.

It is one of my favorite questions to ask when I teach a course on the history of opera: name one composer of German opera between Weber and Wagner. I can't remember a single time when a student came up with a correct answer—probably because the names of Spohr, Lortzing, and Marschner do not lie in the core of the operatic canon. When Schubert's name comes up in this context, everyone is surprised to find out that the great composer of Lieder actually did venture into the genre of opera, although unsuccessfully. Watching this production of *Alfonso und Estrella* will not, unfortunately, help dispel the typically negative reception of Schubert's operatic efforts.

Schubert composed *Alfonso und Estrella* between September 1821 and February 1822 set to a story by his friend Franz von Schober (1797–1882). A poet of questionable talent, Schober created a libretto that has invariably been described as dramatically static, deficient and flawed—later in his life, in 1876, he even famously called it

a “miserable, still-born, bungling piece of work that even so great a genius as Schubert was not able to bring it to life” (Elizabeth Norman McKay, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 118). The plot, which McKay has related to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, involves a number of conventional characters and predictable situations: Alfonso, the son of exiled Froila, former King of Léon, meets by chance and falls in love with Estrella, the daughter of King Mauregato, the usurper of Froila's throne. Adolfo, Mauregato's general, leads a rebellion against the King when the latter refuses to offer him Estrella as his wife. Alfonso manages to squash the revolt and arrest Adolfo and, after he has learned of his royal lineage, witnessed the two kings' reconciliation, and consented to his father's abdication of the throne, he claims Estrella as his wife and Queen of Léon. In a similarly predictable manner, the music is replete with hunting and battle choruses, pastoral and romantic evocations of love, a chorus of

conspirators, an obligatory farewell duet, and even a ballad sung by Froila on the leg-end of the “Cloud Maiden,” a trope on the Lorelei myth. In an interesting departure from Singspiel tradition, Schubert replaces spoken dialogue with accompanied recitatives, imbues the texture with beautiful melodies, borrows intricate Rossinian-inspired ensemble scenes, and intimates a move toward the emerging romantic tradition.

Endrik Wottrich and Luba Orgonasova are charismatic and vocally wonderful in their respective eponymous roles. The role of the deposed King Froila is sung superbly by Thomas Hampson, whose made-up old and feeble look contrasts with his remarkable vocal prowess. Nikolaus Harnoncourt leads an effective performance of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, an ensemble that was founded in 1981 by young alumni from the European Union Youth Orchestra. Redoubtable director Jürgen Flimm (who will assume the position of artistic director of the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin, after his recent resignation from the Salzburg Festival) undertook the extremely challenging task of extracting every bit of dramatic nuance out of this otherwise static libretto. There was very little Flimm could do to enhance scenes of sub-standard dramatic coherence, such as the dramatically unconvincing series of tableaux of Act Three. Florence von Gerkan’s austere cos-

tumes are an appealing mixture of period-inspired and contemporary-looking outfits that complement Erich Wonder’s minimalist and dimly-lit *set*.

It is no wonder the opera received few performances after its 1854 premiere in Weimar by Franz Liszt, and it is thanks to the Schubert bicentennial that this production was filmed at the Theater an der Wien in 1997. The DVD includes a booklet with biographical notes on the performers, a short essay on the opera, and an informative track-by-track synopsis by Richard Lawrence. For Schubert lovers (who have the option of either English or German subtitles), this is a unique opportunity to view a staged production of this opera on DVD, even if it comes with a delay of more than a decade since its filming. General opera goers will probably find it difficult to add *Alfonso und Estrella* on their list of must-see operas. Music scholars, however, may have one more opportunity to lament the fact that, had Schubert been able to collaborate with librettists of a higher caliber, and had he lived longer and under more auspicious circumstances, he might have provided us with the missing link in the great tradition of *romantische Oper* between Weber and Wagner. But these are too many hypotheses for this production to undo.

EFTYCHIA PAPANIKOLAOU
Bowling Green State University

Jules Massenet. *Manon*. DVD. Jesús Lopez-Cobos / Orchestra and Choirs of the Opéra national de Paris. With Renée Fleming, Marcelo Álvarez, Jean-Luc Chaignaud, Alain Vernhes, Michel Sénéchal, Franck Ferrari. Directed by Gilbert Deflo. [Halle (Saale), Germany]: Arthaus Musik, 2008, 2001. 107 003. \$39.99.

One century and a quarter after its premiere, *Manon* (1884) continues to hold the stage, inspiring scores of sopranos to reenact the innocent maiden’s metamorphosis into femme fatale. Speaking to this enduring success is the recent release of no fewer than three DVDs (on Virgin, Deutsche Grammophon, and Arthaus) starring such celebrities as Natalie Dessay, Anna Netrebko, and Renée Fleming. By re-issuing a classic production from the Opéra Bastille—it was premiered in June 1997, taped by France 2 in 2001, and first re-

leased by TDK in 2003—Arthaus perhaps played it safe, yet no opera fan will regret to have an audio-visual souvenir of Renée Fleming sharing the stage with Marcelo Álvarez (Des Grieux), Franck Ferrari (de Brétigny), and even the veteran Michel Sénéchal (Guillot de Morfontaine).

Musically speaking, the Arthaus *Manon* leaves little to be desired. Lopez-Cobos’ conducting may lack the analytic precision of Barenboim’s (on the DG version), still it is colorful throughout and in line with Massenet’s delicate blend of opéra-