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Early Operas (review)

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speech. While text expression is of paramount importance in Baroque recitative, several singers do not enunciate clearly, and the pacing often drags.

In addition to a clear picture, the Blu-ray format offers stunning sound quality. The disc is organized in a way that makes the opera accessible. Each piece receives its own chapter, enabling straightforward navigation for classroom use. Viewers may

watch a synopsis, which is read over a montage of scenes from the opera, providing a useful overview of plot and characters. The disc features subtitles in English, Spanish, French, German and Italian and is accompanied by a booklet providing a history of the opera and a summary of each act.

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Gioachino Rossini. Early Operas. DVD. Gianluigi Gelmetti / Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra. With David Kuebler, Vito Gobbi, Amelia Felle, Alessandro Corbelli, Alberto Rinaldi, Oslavio di Credico, Carlos Feller, Janice Hall, John del Carlo, Monica Bacelli, Robert Gambill, Susan Patterson, Natale de Carolis, Stuart Kale, Jane Bunnell, Luciana Serra. [Germany]: EuroArts, 2009. 2057388. \$34.99.

For more than fifty years, the Schwetzingen Festival has presented operas from the Rokokotheater at Schwetzingen castle, which served as the summer residence of the elector Palatine Carl Theodore. The intimate theater eliminates the need to project to the upper balconies of a larger house, permitting the cast to deliver performances that contain many acting and vocal subtleties. Through its various programs and numerous radio broadcasts, the festival also has become the world's largest radio classical music festival. From the festival's performance archives, EuroArts has released *Rossini: Early Operas*, a DVD set containing four of the five one-act *farsas* (*Il signor Bruschino*, *La cambiale di matrimonio*, *L'occasione fa il ladro*, *La scala di seta*) that Rossini wrote for the Venetian Teatro San Moisè, which specialized in the genre, as a teenager (all were written before he reached the age of 21).

Director Michael Hampe, whose credits include productions at Salzburg, Paris, Milan, Edinburgh Festival and London-Covent Garden, combines his wealth of experience with the superb talents of a well-rehearsed ensemble company to present these operatic trinkets. Among the principal male singers are Alessandro Corbelli, Alberto Rinaldi and David Kuebler, talented actors as well as singers; representing the female singers are stars such as Luciana Serra, Susan Patterson and Monica Bacelli. The soloists are ably supported by members of Oper du Stadt Köln and the Stuttgart

Radio Symphony, conducted by Gianluigi Gelmetti. Three of the four operas are quintessential Rossini, worthy of a regular place in the repertoire.

La cambiale di matrimonio, Rossini's first professional work for the stage and the weakest in the collection, foreshadows elements of wit and sentiment that are refined in his later works. Rossini also benefited from the experience of librettist Gaetano Rossi in this collaboration, as well as from the musical style of Giovanni Paisiello and Giovanni Simone Mayr, whose style he studied and parodied here. The sets are wonderfully elaborate and realistic, with extravagant costumes. The singing is of the highest quality, with a coterie of *bel canto* specialists that offsets the generic nature of the musical ideas. Rossini liked the *cabaletta* of Fanni's to such an extent that he reused it virtually intact in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

La scala di Seta, the third Rossini *farse* and an excellent collaboration with the librettist Giuseppe Foppa, is an operatic treasure for a host of reasons. First, because certain aspects of the story invoke French comedy, notably the plays of Beaumarchais and points to Rossini's long association with French theater. Second, the plot of *La scala di Seta* is delightful—firmly from the world of amorous intrigues, wily servants, forced betrothals, secret marriages and deceived older men. Finally, Michael Hampe and the cast are both charming and witty in their 1990 rendition of the score, which employs the then-recent critical edition

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.

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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