Rossini

Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra
Dramma per musica in two acts to a libretto by
Giovanni Schmidt after Carlo Federici

Jennifer Larmore (Elisabetta, *mezzo*), Bruce Ford (Leicester, *ten*),
Majella Cullagh (Matilde, *sop*), Antonino Siragusa (Norfolk, *ten*),
Manuela Custer (Enrico, *mezzo*), Colin Lee (Guglielmo, *ten*)

Geoffrey Mitchell Choir
London Philharmonic
Giuliano Carella *cond*

Opera Rara ORC22 (3 CDs, 147 minutes: DDD)
Notes, texts and translations included.

Opera Rara makes bold claims for its *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*: it has 'made a new performing edition from the autograph manuscript and, for the first time, Rossini's opera has been recorded absolutely complete, with the original orchestration'. Literally bold, that is ('absolutely complete' and 'original orchestration' are in heavy type on the company's website), and, given the irrepressibly plural nature of the sources for most Italian operas of the nineteenth century, perhaps unwise. Sure enough, the credits in the booklet accompanying the discs are more modestly phrased, venturing only that 'a new edition of Rossini's opera was made specifically for this recording by Ian Schofield' and that he worked 'from a facsimile of the autograph manuscript'. As a text for performance it actually works very well, restoring those few corners of the opera cut for previous printed versions and judiciously supplying music not in the autograph but required by nineteenth-century convention, for example timpani and percussion parts in the closing finale – perhaps this is what is meant by 'original orchestration'. Research carried out by Vincenzo Borghetti for the Fondazione Rossini/Ricordi critical edition, however, has recently uncovered further material: additional recitative hidden under glued-on inserts in the autograph and a *spartitino*, or supplementary partial score, containing the missing trombone, timpani and bass drum parts – not for the end of the opera but for the chorus 'Vieni, o prode'.[1] Not absolutely complete, then (even assuming that an opera from this period could ever be so), but near enough for all but the most exacting Rossini purist.

The same goes for the booklet: the translation of the libretto is unfussy, and Jeremy Commons's essay is substantial, informative and highly readable, in the first place because the layout is so good, with the text in a sensible font-size and the many illustrations satisfyingly large. It has all the traditional ingredients, in just the right amounts. He has a word or two to say about the formal structure (no *aria di sortita* for Leicester; two crucially placed duets lacking the conventional slow section); he takes the time to correct one or two more-or-less popular misconceptions (concerning the source of the libretto, for example);

[1] My thanks to Dr Borghetti for outlining some of his discoveries prior to publication.

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and he makes useful points such as that, although *Elisabetta* is the first Rossini opera in which all the recitatives are string-accompanied, the significance of this innovation should not be exaggerated because the texture is still essentially *secco*. Alongside, there is plenty of space to include some of those attractive (but probably apocryphal) stories that enliven nineteenth-century opera history, among others the one about Manuel García, who sang Norfolk at the premiere, not having bothered to learn any of Rossini's music and improvising his part from beginning to end. As scholarly work there is little to quarrel with in the booklet. It is slightly unsystematic, perhaps, for although there are footnotes, not all of the quotations (and none of the illustrations) are given with the source, and there is the odd error (for example, Cinti-Damoreau misspelled). But generally this is such a handy survey of the sources, performance history and so on that you wonder whether it should not be in a book or an article somewhere: while there is nothing really essential in it that is not available elsewhere, at least if you read Italian, it's easy to agree with Harold Powers how frustrating it is that useful work on opera is often not necessarily available in even the best libraries but buried in programme-booklets or liner notes.[2]

All the material prepared for the recording, then, can at least boast musicological respectability, an increasingly valuable commodity among opera-lovers. Indeed, one of the most interesting things about the consumer reviews the recording has generated is the competition between this and other more traditional enthusiasms, the die-hard voice-fetishists pining for Caballé (who sang Elisabetta in the last commercial recording) in spite of all Larmore's brilliance, while those who prefer historical propriety express satisfaction with the casting, pointing to the fact that Isabella Colbran, creator of the role, was in reality not a soprano at all, but a mezzo-soprano with an unusually developed upper register. But if the way these discs have been packaged (in the figurative sense) seeks to reassure you of the seriousness of the whole project, it aspires to draw you into the excitement of it too; for instance, Commons makes a great deal out of the auctioning of a collection of Rossini's correspondence at Sotheby's 'only a few months ago'. Actually nothing much seems to have been added to our knowledge of the opera as a result, but it sounds more fun than scholars sitting in archives for weeks on end.

Patric Schmid, the much-missed founder and Artistic Director of the label, was more explicit on the subject. He was positively evangelical, in fact, in his desire to share with a wider public the thrills of re-discovering forgotten repertoire, from the intellectual satisfaction to the physical pleasure of handling the materials themselves.[3] The process was always very much a part of the product, with listeners being invited to engage not just with the finished musical item but with its manufacture as well; to find something of the pioneering researcher inside themselves. Given that the market is so much less of a niche than it was when the company started out 35 years ago, however, with the early nineteenth-century repertoire much more popular and with everyone now using responsible editions, it is perhaps worth asking what its mission is these days, especially since Schmid's death in 2005. Clearly some sort of advocacy for the works is to be expected, not just their exhumation, and here the case is made

[2] See Harold Powers, 'Verdi's *Don Carlos*: An Overview of the Operas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L. Balthazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 210, n. 3.

[3] For a long while Schmid could be heard extolling these joys *viva voce* in a recording posted on the Opera Rara website, www.opera-rara.com.

not only by competent work behind the scenes but, more importantly, by a cast mostly very well suited to their roles. Larmore has a wide expressive range, from nicely excitable in her opening scene to convincingly unhinged when swearing revenge on Leicester; her passage-work is almost uniformly impressive. Ford's performance is always beautifully nuanced, attesting to his character's depth, while Siragusa's is crisp and energetic. Cullagh gets across well the tension of Matilde's situation but sounds slightly tight in the register just below the very top; in general she seems the least comfortable of the principals. Lee's Italian pronunciation is suspect now and then, and Custer is a bit hurried early on, but all in all the quality of the singing is high – and that goes for the chorus too, even if the articulation of their consonants sometimes doesn't match the vibrancy of their tone.

But any really persuasive argument in favour of a dramatic piece must demonstrate that it will work well in the theatre, and here the evidence is less than compelling. The problems are partly technical: the sound engineering is inexplicably uneven, which means that far from giving too little impression of stage action, as many other opera recordings do, the dramatic space is exaggerated because Siragusa is almost always too close to the microphone. In the scene and duet he has with Leicester in particular, he seems to be shouting his sly asides right into your ear, so by contrast Ford's skilfully covered voice sounds over-subtle. Similarly, the accompanimental playing is bright and versatile, and so punchy that from time to time it makes Rossini sound like many recordings of Beethoven, but there is none of the familiarity, the approachability, of the theatre orchestra. The acoustic is very live, so the LPO never sounds like anything other than what it is: a symphony orchestra playing opera in a church. Final responsibility must lie with the directing, though, both musical and dramatic, and while Larmore and Siragusa make an excellent job of their scene and duet, the latter's ardour filling out an erotic motive for Norfolk that the libretto leaves unarticulated, and both working up such excitement at the prospect of Leicester's fate that they make you think of *Macbeth*, there just isn't enough thrust across the rest of the opera. It would have been good, for example, to have a really strong reading of the work when in Act 1 scene 5 (the only place in the libretto where Leicester unambiguously denies any sexual relationship with Elisabetta) Rossini does not set the crucial lines (in a nice follow-through of nineteenth-century practice, they are included in the text, marked off by double inverted commas). The composer obviously saw the character as more ambiguous; elsewhere, where Leicester is especially ingenuous, those lines are not set either, whereas Elisabetta's accusation of 'betrayal' is.

It comes as no surprise, in short, to learn that this recording was put together with no theatrical performance in view. Siragusa and Custer, as it happens, sang the same roles at the Rossini Festival in 2004, and although the production as a whole was not well received at the premiere, by all accounts they at least were effective on stage.[4] The context of the Opera Rara project, on the other hand, was a concert performance of the work in honour of the golden jubilee of the heroine's namesake Elizabeth II in July 2002. Although it would be a little unfair to say that it shows, there's no doubt that the drama could have been better shaped, more consistently vital. On the other hand, what that concert in the royal banqueting hall does succeed in communicating vividly (there is a photograph

[4] Daniele Abbado was the director and Renato Palumbo the conductor; it was reprised at the Teatro Comunale, Bologna, in May 2005.

in the booklet) is the institutional aspect: going back to the packaging (this time in its literal sense), you notice that the well-known portrait of Elizabeth I reproduced on the box has been purchased by the Peter Moores Foundation (which financed the recording) for display at the charity's stately-home-cum-art-gallery, Compton Verney. You have the feeling, even, that as well as being drawn into the musicological narrative, and experiencing along with Schmid and the rest of the team that frisson of historical distance, you're participating in a much larger cultural enterprise, one with charitable status and even, perhaps, the royal imprimatur. Certainly something with more pomp and circumstance than Rossini himself – who would write 15 more operas in the next five years – had time for.

Cormac Newark
University of Ulster

Rossini

Il Signor Bruschino (Comic opera in one act)

Alessando Codeluppi (Florville, *ten*), Maurizio Leoni (Gaudenzio, *bass*), Elena Rossi (Sofia, *sop*), Dario Giorgelè (Signor Bruschino, *bass*), Antonio Marani (Filiberto, *bar*), Clara Giangaspero (Marianna, *mezzo*), Massimiliano Barbolini (Bruschino Figlio, *ten*), Vito Martino (Commissario, *ten*)

Il Virtuosi Italiani
Claudio Desderi *cond*

Naxos 8.660128 (80 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and German; libretto in Italian only

The premiere of *Il Signor Bruschino* on 27 January 1813 at the Teatro San Moisè in Venice was, by the few surviving accounts, a failure. Legend has it that the impresario of the San Moisè, in an effort to slow down Rossini's rise to prominence, asked the librettist, Giuseppe Foppa, to create a libretto 'so execrable as to be impossible to be set to music or to be tolerated by the audience'.[1] As the introduction to the opera's critical edition points out, this story does not hold up to historical scrutiny. Nevertheless, the plot certainly is complicated, despite the overall simple scenario: Sofia loves Florville but is promised to Bruschino Jr, who is currently locked up in a local inn for his inability to pay the bill. As it happens, neither Bruschino Sr nor Jr has ever met Florville or Sofia's guardian Gaudenzio, and this allows Florville to devise a series of ploys to trick the elders so that he himself will be married to Sofia. The track-by-track synopsis provided in English and German in lieu of translations of the libretto admirably leads the reader

[1] A. Zanolini, *Biografia di Gioachino Rossini* (Bologna, 1875); quoted in the introduction to Gioachino Rossini, *Il Signor Bruschino*, ed. Arrigo Gazzaniga, Edizione critica delle opere di Gioachino Rossini, I/9 (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1986), esp. xxi–xxv.

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