

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.

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## Rossini

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*Il Signor Bruschino* (Comic opera in one act)

Alessandro 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

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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'.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

through the many complications. Only the description of a key moment – the misleading evidence by which Florville is identified as Bruschino Jr – is handled poorly, leaving confused those readers who are unable to understand the Italian of the enclosed libretto. (Bruschino Sr is asked by a police officer to identify the handwriting of two letters, both written by Bruschino Jr but one conveyed to Gaudenzio by Florville, who thus appears to be the author. Since Bruschino Sr recognizes both hands as those of his son, Florville is identified as Bruschino Jr.) Some opera connoisseurs might also wish that the original alignment of the verse, so helpful in conveying the opera's structure, would have been preserved and that the liner notes (by Keith Anderson) focused on the featured work rather than a survey of Rossini's career.

As for most recordings of its catalogue, Naxos has once again drawn on lesser-known but carefully prepared performers. The singers bring the characters to life, pay careful attention to diction, and inflect the vocal lines to convey the meaning of the text, supported by an orchestra that plays with the kind of energy we have come to expect in Rossini recordings over the past twenty years.

At the beginning of the *Introduzione*, Florville is about to be reunited with his love Sofia but is plagued by premonitions of thwarted wedding plans. Alessandro Codeluppi beautifully captures the melancholy of this solo with an even, though uniformly open, tone and elegant phrasing. In the nineteenth century, this section would have been embellished by *portamenti*, *messe di voce* and short melismas, and while Codeluppi includes the former two at fermatas, his interpretation would have gained in interest through occasional embellishments elsewhere.

In his cavatina 'Nel teatro del gran mondo' (No. 3), a number that has no direct connection to the plot, Gaudenzio offers his opinion on the dangers of striving for wealth and honour. Baritone Maurizio Leoni emphasizes Gaudenzio's pomposity and hypocrisy with mechanically accented but not always clean coloratura, while his fairly big vibrato, deliberate or not, adds to the characterization. When the triplet coloratura of the fast section recurs, Leoni sings attractive alternative embellishments in a lower, more comfortable register. Although this variation is musically convincing, it lowers the level of excitement instead of raising it; a reversal of the two versions would have been more convincing in dramatic terms.

The *Terzetto* 'Per un figlio già pentito' (No. 4) is one of the highlights of this recording. Here, the elder Bruschino, introduced in the preceding recitative, finds himself in a doubly uncomfortable situation: he not only suffers from gout but has to deal with Florville, who pretends to be his son. Dario Giorgelè as Bruschino Sr takes full advantage of the situation's comic potential, easily changing between intense exclamations, comic staccato and moaning, as he feels cornered by Gaudenzio and Florville, contemplates his misfortune, or suffers from a spurt of gout. In this number, neither Codeluppi, Leoni nor the orchestra matches Giorgelè's characterization; the effect that could be achieved with equally strong efforts from all participants can be gauged from Carlo Maria Giulini's 1951 live recording.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the breathtaking speed and precision of the patter in the trio's fast concluding section, as Bruschino resolves to see the police, is much more exciting on the Naxos recording.

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<sup>2</sup> Gioacchino Rossini, *Il Signor Bruschio*, Sesto Bruscantini (Gaudenzio), Afro Poli (Bruschino, padre), Antonio Spruzzola (Florville), Alda Noni (Sofia), Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano della RAI, Carlo Maria Giulini, Golden Melodram 5.0046, 1951, CD.

In her aria 'Ah donate il caro sposo' (No. 5), Sofia pleads with Bruschino Sr to let her marry his impostor son. Elena Rossi makes a convincing case, both in the pleading slow and the more threatening fast section of this composite aria. She is the only member of the cast who repeatedly embellishes beyond what is written in the score. In the repeated portion of the fast section, however, some of Rossi's embellishments strain her voice (which already is a bit shrill in the middle and upper registers) and belong to Mozart's Queen of the Night rather than Rossini's Sofia.

In his *aria con pertichini* 'Ho la testa o è andata via?' (No. 6), Bruschino Sr vents his frustration and disbelief over having to accept Florville as his son. The aria lies very high for a bass, repeatedly reaching up to Fs and Gs and thus 'facilitating' the expression of Bruschino's anger. As Rossini may have intended, Giorgelè struggles with the *tessitura* but cleverly turns it to his advantage: instead of rushing through the final g' and the subsequent stepwise descent in interlocking triplets, for instance, he lingers, effectively conveying his pain to those who have caused it.

The energy in the performance of the Virtuosi Italiani, the tasteful instrumental solos (especially the cor anglais solo in Sofia's aria), and the imagination of the fortepiano continuo player greatly contribute to the quality of this recording. The obvious stylistic flair of the musicians for Rossini's music is tempered only by an occasional lack of attention to detail. Some perfectly logical markings of dynamics and articulation in the score are ignored or only half-heartedly followed, and the orchestra, especially the wind section, is sometimes out of tune, most notably in Gaudenzio's aria (No. 3) and in Sofia and Gaudenzio's duet (No. 7). In addition, some splendid details of Rossini's instrumentation are covered up by a lack of attention to balance: the pizzicato triplets in the violins accompanying Sofia and Florville's duet section of the *Introduzione*, for example, can be heard only when the singers rest, and the trembling demisemi-quavers on the downbeat of the mock funeral march in the finale (no. 8), reflective of Bruschino Jr's fear of having to face the wrath of his father, are hardly audible.

In all, this recording captures the imagination and fun of Rossini's last opera before his breakthrough with *Tancredi* and adds to the ever growing collection of good Rossini recordings. And thanks to a few carefully chosen, unobtrusive cuts in several recitatives, the entire opera fits on one compact disc – a real bargain.

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