

## Verdi

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*A Masked Ball* (Melodrama in three acts)

Libretto by Antonio Somma; English translation by Amanda Holden

Dennis O Neill (Gustavus III, King of Sweden, *ten*), Anthony Michaels-Moore (Count Anckarstoem, *bar*), Susan Patterson (Amelia, *sop*), Jill Grove (Ulrike Arvidson, *mezzo*), Linda Richardson (Oscar, *sop*), Christopher Purves (Count Ribbing, *bar*), Brindley Sherratt (Count Horn, *bass*), Roland Wood (Cristian, *bar*), Ashley Catling (Amelia's Servant/Lord Chief Justice, *ten*)

Geoffrey Mitchell Choir  
London Philharmonic Orchestra  
David Parry *cond*

Chandos CHAN3116(2) (126 minutes: DDD: recorded in 24-bit/96kHz)  
Notes and translations (French, German and Italian) included.  
English libretto only.

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I, like most opera lovers (and scholars), am exceedingly opinionated when it comes to how specific works should be performed. My opinions are influenced by musical instinct (having been a performer for many years), my respect for the composers who create these multifaceted artworks (as well as for the performers who re-create them), and the knowledge I have gained over the years as a music historian and editor of critical editions. Given that *Un ballo in maschera* is one of my favourite Verdi operas, I knew that it would be a challenge to contain my deep-rooted opinions and convictions when it came to reviewing the Chandos CD.

That challenge materialized when, upon opening the package, I read 'Opera in English' proudly displayed on the cover. My reaction to this was indeed a strong one: why on earth, in the twenty-first century, does anyone need an *audio* recording of a well-known Italian opera in English? Having admitted this, I will readily confess that I have never been a fan of opera in translation. In live performance, however, I can at least justify it from a practical point of view; for there is indeed something to be gained in spontaneity from understanding the words simultaneously with seeing the action and hearing the music. Yet even in the theatre, given the supertitles that modern technology has made readily available (even in some of the smallest local houses), there seems little reason for not singing these operas today (especially well-known ones) in their original languages.

Performing opera in translation and recording opera in translation, however, are not the same thing.<sup>1</sup> Audio recordings are routinely heard in private (often domestic) environments in which one can easily follow the printed libretto and its translation without being distracted by the need to view staging, costumes or scenery. Moreover, those who purchase audio recordings these days – when video recordings are readily available – are often knowledgeable enough to

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<sup>1</sup> Producing opera on audio recordings in any language has its own set of issues, for in many ways it can be seen to violate the integrity of the work by separating the aural from the visual. Nonetheless, audio recordings do serve a necessary purpose.

know the plot of the work and the sentiments expressed by individual numbers or else curious enough to follow the text while listening to the recording. Otherwise, most consumers are probably attracted more to a video production with subtitles than to an audio one. So why and for whom record *Un ballo in maschera* in English?

I found a partial answer to my question in the CD's accompanying booklet. The recording was supported by the Peter Moores Foundation, which is also responsible for the Chandos issues of other celebrated Verdi operas in English (as of 2004 these included *La traviata*, *Il trovatore*, *Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *Aida*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*), as well as familiar operas by Donizetti, Puccini, Rossini, Mozart, Wagner and numerous other composers. The aims of the foundation – to attract new audiences for opera and to provide young singers with performance opportunities – are to be applauded; indeed, there should be many more such efforts. These reasons – along with the implied goal of edification of the public – account for the existence of these English-language recordings. But, perhaps a different approach to accomplishing the objectives could be considered, for it is not clear precisely what void any of these audio recordings of standard repertory fill.

One other puzzling feature of this CD is that the opera's libretto is published in the accompanying booklet in English only. Surely, it would have been possible – and advisable, especially if this recording is in any way intended to edify its listeners – to include the original Italian verses as well. It goes without saying that for most Italian opera recordings, English, German and French listeners often are paid the courtesy of having parallel translations available in these booklets, so that they can know the meaning of what is being sung. Why should an English-language recording be any different? The lack of other languages for the libretto is especially perplexing given that the supplementary information in the booklet (two essays – which are quite informative – and the synopsis) is provided in English, German, French and Italian.

Beyond these practical considerations lie more significant, aesthetic ones. Music is sound; for any texted musical genre, language is part of that sound. Thus, the sounds of the Italian language are integral to the sound of Italian opera. And when the text is translated, the changes to the concept of the sound create several problems. No matter how good a translation is, it cannot compensate for the sounds of the original language having been separated from the pitches and rhythms of the music. English and Italian have very different cadences, accentuations, sounds and so on; they do not 'fit' the music in the same way, and, as shall be discussed below, this presents difficulties to the singers. Perhaps even more importantly, Verdi (and most composers: for example Mozart, Rossini, Bellini) was acutely sensitive to the joining of language sounds and musical sounds: there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that he took painstaking care to set specific words, specific vowel sounds, specific consonant sounds, to specific pitches for specific voice types to obtain the effects he desired. Opera in translation thus does an injustice to the composer's creative concept and dishonours his art; it leaves the listener with a less-than-faithful rendition of the opera – a corruption, if you will – which in some ways is only a shadow of what Verdi wrote. This said, the English translation by Amanda Holden is very good. It, in many ways, preserves both the spirit and the sentiment of the Italian text and is in these ways superior to other singing translations I have seen. Indeed, Holden has even managed at times to retain cognate words and individual vowel sounds on highlighted pitches. As a whole, her translation is as well done as it

could be. Nonetheless, the music was not written for English words, and singers struggle to make it work.

Practical and aesthetic considerations aside, one could conceivably justify an English-language recording of *Un ballo in maschera* if in some way the rendition presented new insights or interpretations of the work, or else rendered a fresh and exciting performance. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the Chandos recording, which is less than satisfying in various matters pertaining to both sound engineering and performance style. The manipulation of the sound on this recording makes for an artificial and tedious listening experience. Modern technology makes clear, crisp sound an expectation, and those for whom this is important will at times find it a positive feature of this recording – except when the reverberation effects muddy the clarity. But the quality of sound comes at a price. Problems of balance abound. Above all, the singers are sometimes (often the wrong times) obliterated by the orchestra, while at other times it seems that the orchestral accompaniment does not matter for the voices are so amplified that the orchestra is subordinated. This is especially problematic in those sections of *parlante*, where Verdi allows the voice to pick up fragments of the melody carried by the instruments. Similarly, in instrumental passages, the melodic lines frequently dominate the accompaniment; indeed, in general, there appears to have been little concern for appropriate weight among performance forces. Dynamically, the recording is somewhat ‘flat’; in fact, there is little range from loud to soft (for instance, I hear little I would label *pianissimo* or that could be considered *piano*). Of course, the engineers may have been attempting to follow the conductor’s wishes on both balance and dynamic considerations.

In addition to a lack of adequate dynamic range, there is a nearly uniform tempo employed throughout the recording, something I would attribute to the conductor’s perception of the work. Theories that Verdi at times placed ‘pillars’ of tempo to which all sections relate have been discussed, but these do not suggest that there should be no perceptible variations in tempo within an opera.<sup>2</sup> In this recording of *Un ballo in maschera* there seems to be little deviation from a ‘middleground’ tempo. The intended slow tempos are not slow enough; conversely, many passages simply are rendered too slowly and thus lack the necessary sparkle. The latter problem may well be related to difficulties of singing the less fluid sounds of the English language in rapid passages. Overall, the performance is ‘heavy’, which is especially egregious given the lightness of the dance music, Oscar’s songs, Horn and Ribbing’s buffoonish music and ‘laughter’, Amelia’s arias and Gustavus’s expressions of love.

On the whole there is little attention paid to Italian operatic style in this performance. The chorus sounds as if it were singing English choral music rather than Italian opera. The use of English renders the melodic phrasing awkward: the singers are sometimes required to breathe in unusual places within the musical phrase to preserve the meaning of the English text. Phrasing in the instrumental music and accompanimental passages does not flow smoothly. Ensemble is chaotic in full choral or solo group passages, such as at the end of Act I, scene 1, or Act, I, scene 2. Diction is also sometimes a problem in this recording. The singers all appear to be native English speakers (born and/or educated in Britain and/or the USA); thus it seems reasonable to expect the English words to be enunciated

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<sup>2</sup> On Verdi’s use of tempo, see my ‘Aspects of Tempo in Verdi’s Early and Middle Period Italian Operas’, in *Verdi’s Middle Period: Source Studies, Analysis, and Performance Practice*, ed. Martin Chusid (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 393–411.

properly – but unfortunately this is not always so. While the tenor (O'Neill) and baritone (Michaels-Moore) seem to make the English verses understandable to the listener, the female singers normally fall short, requiring the listener to read the libretto to know what is being said, which clearly undermines the purpose of recording the work in English in the first place. This is particularly problematic for the fast-moving passages for Oscar, but fault should not necessarily be found with the soprano (Richardson), but rather with the near impossibility of anyone's being able to enunciate English words with the notes and rhythms intended for the more fluid Italian verses. However, my criticisms aside, all of the singers normally perform with focused and precise pitch and fairly accurate rhythm.

Verdi composed *Un ballo in maschera* between late 1857 and early 1859, setting a libretto by Antonio Somma (who based his text on the libretto *Gustavo III* by Eugène Scribe); it had its premiere on 17 February 1859 at the Teatro Apollo in Rome. Because of censorship issues it encountered before its premiere, the opera exists in multiple versions, two of which are routinely performed.<sup>3</sup> The 'original' (actually the opera titled *Gustavo III*, not *Un ballo in maschera*) is set in Stockholm in March 1792; the censored modification, the 'final' version known as *Un ballo in maschera*, in Boston at the end of the seventeenth century. Each has different names and titles for its characters. The Chandos recording uses the Swedish characters, probably believing this was more faithful to Verdi's original intent. It is, however, rather unfortunate that the 'American' setting was not chosen, for then, on some level, singing English verses and thus this recording may have been justified.

Roberta Montemorra Marvin  
University of Iowa

### York Bowen

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Piano Sonata No. 6 in B, minor op. 160

24 Preludes op. 102

Rêverie op. 86

Joop Celis *pf*

Chandos CHAN 10277 (69 minutes: DDD)

Notes and translations included.

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Perhaps when we have examined or listened to the works of Granville Bantock, Hubert Bath, Paul Corder, York Bowen, W.H. Bell, A. von Ahn Carse, Arthur Hinton, Benjamin J. Dale and Joseph Holbrooke we have mentally decided that these composers were all, more or less, especially gifted and naturally endowed with remarkable powers; ... But these men, who seem to embody the hope and glory of our present English school of composition, received their instruction in the art of

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<sup>3</sup> David Rosen discussed the situation in 'A Tale of Five Cities: The Peregrinations of Somma's and Verdi's *Gustavo III* (and *Una vendetta in dominò* and *Un ballo in maschera*) at the Hands of the Neapolitan and Roman Censorship', *Verdi Forum* 26–7 (1999–2000): 53–66.