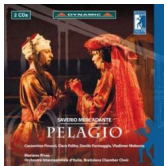


Mercadante - Pelagio (2010)

Written by bluesever
Monday, 20 August 2018 12:55 -

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Disc: 1 1. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Preludio ed Introduzione. O sospirata Gione 2. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Moviamo fra le tenebre 3. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. In terra solitaria 4. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Ah! No non so più reggere 5. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Almen di vaghe 6. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Immenso nel silenzio 7. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Alla gioia or t'abbandona 8. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Bianca, de' nostri voti 9. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Tu tremi, ah si tu tremi 10. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 1. Abdel viva! 11. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Che rechi? / Uno stranier chiede parlarti 12. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Ei gra gli estremi aneliti 13. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Deh! Ti mova questo pianto 14. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Ebben! Può ancor rivivere 15. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Asan... / Partì 16. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Non sai che Bianca all'Arabo 17. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 2. Già mano d'Iberi tra l'ombre raccolti

Disc: 2 1. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Fummo noi i primi 2. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Un battello 3. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Io non avea più lagrime 4. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Pelagio! / Che rechi? 5. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Ch'ella non osi offrirti 6. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Di sue pietose lagrime 7. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Signor! / Che rechi? 8. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Chi sei disvelati... 9. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Sì Pelagio / Padre! 10. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 3. Che avvenne? 11. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. Ah! Più ferve la pugna 12. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. D'un infelice oh ciel 13. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. Preghi / Ah! Sì 14. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. Nel sangue arrivi 15. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. Provocato il ciel istesso 16. Pelagio, opera in 4 acts: Act 4. Padre al tuo seno

Pelagio - Costantino Finucci
(Baritone) Bianca - Clara Polito (Soprano) Abdel-Aor - Danilo Formaggia (Tenor) Aliatar - Giovanni Coletta (Tenor) Asan – Vladimer Mebonia (Bass) Giralda – Paola Francesca Natale (Soprano) Bratislava Chamber Chorus Italian International Orchestra Mariano Rivas - Conductor

Mercadante's last-written opera enjoyed a successful premiere at Naples in 1857, but the chances of its remaining in favour at that time were as small as those of a traditional "well-made" play making headlines a hundred years later in an age which had fixed its sights on

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Beckett and Pinter. Let another half-century roll and the relative merits might begin to rearrange themselves. And that is what has been happening for several years now. Posterity tends to be less passionate and partisan about progressive movements in the past.

Pelagio tells the familiar story of lovers from opposing sides, here Moors and Spaniards. The unfortunate heroine in the middle is wrongly blamed in turn by both father and husband. In the course of her troubles she has a dramatic intervention moment, a prayer and a death-scene. Everybody has an aria and each aria has its cabaletta. Duets take a similar form, and the grand ensemble is in place too. It is a well tried formula and to us a matter of relative indifference whether it was written in the 1850s or the 1830s. It works. Mercadante, moreover, brings his own distinctive touch: melody, orchestration and construction are never simply predictable, and they are never shoddy. There are limitations also, even within the conventional forms, the most serious being the composer's apparent inability to seize, define, hold and exploit the emotional-dramatic moment.

There is fine singing by the soprano Clara Polito and baritone Costantino Finucci. The tenor Danilo Formaggia does sterling work but as recorded has an unpleasantly raw edge to his tone at a forte. The chorus sings lustily, the orchestra sounds thin. All, however, take second place to pride in this as a first-ever recording. The performance is recorded live at the Martina Franca Festival in Puglia where, in the words of the artistic director, they "rewrite History and reawaken a collective memory". ---John Steane, gramophone.co.uk

The Festival della Valle D'Itria, held every summer in Martina Franca, Italy, is one of the most valuable artistic ventures of our time. I say this, because to my knowledge, this small-scale festival (generally three operas per year) has never lost track of their mission: to research hidden corners of the operatic repertoire and bring long forgotten works (or alternate versions of familiar works) to the stage for reexamination. Founded in 1975, the festival has produced an ever-fascinating list of titles from composers both obscure (last year, they gave Antonio Cagnoni's *Re Lear*) and familiar (Mozart's *Idomeneo* in the re-worked version by Richard Strauss or the baritone 'Battistini version' of Massenet's *Werther*, for example).

The current artistic director, Sergio Segalini, has continued to uphold this lofty artistic mission since he was appointed in 1994. In addition to the explorations of unusual repertoire, the festival has also sought to hire aspiring young singers, and many now-famous names had

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significant international exposure through their work in Martina Franca. Fortunately, opera fans around the world have been able to enjoy the works staged at the festival through live recordings, many of which have been issued commercially over the last decade by the enterprising Italian recording label 'Dynamic'. The present recording, of Mercadante's Pelagio, was recorded at the festival in 2008.

The Italian composer Saverio Mercadante was born in Altamura in 1795 and made his operatic debut at the illustrious Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1819. Rossini was at the height of his fame during this period, and was by several accounts, very encouraging to Mercadante, urging him complete his first opera, *L'apoteosi d'Ercole*. Although he traveled as far abroad as Spain, Portugal, and Austria, Mercadante was thoroughly immersed in the Italian bel canto tradition, and over a long career, premiered most of his approximately sixty operas at Italian theaters. While he didn't achieve the same sort of lasting fame as the three bel canto masters – Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti – Mercadante was widely celebrated in his day, and many of his operas scored major financial successes.

Along with Giovanni Pacini, Mercadante helped the evolution of Italian opera from an art form dominated by bel canto conventions into a strikingly less regimented form – one we might now recognize as 'proto-Verdian'. In fact, Mercadante – like Gluck – went through a 'reform' period in which he sought to dispense with traditional closed, 'set-piece' forms in favor of a more 'through-composed' style. Several of his most important works were composed during this period in the late 1830's, including *Il giuramento*, *Elisa e Claudio*, and *La vestale*. These operas show the composer moving away from intricate vocal acrobatics, excising repeated statements of melodic material, and dispensing with cabalettas almost entirely. Despite the public success of these operas however, Mercadante did not permanently adhere to his own reforms, and gradually reverted back to the more traditional conventions over the succeeding years. As he aged, his compositional style moved backward, while his contemporaries – especially the younger Giuseppe Verdi – continued to innovate, causing Mercadante's works to fall out of public favor.

Pelagio was the last opera Mercadante completed and was premiered in Naples in 1857. Despite its roots in the bel canto tradition, its forward-looking structural layout clearly shows the influence of Verdi – particularly in the orchestrations and the demanding vocal parts, which require both agility and power. The story concerns the Spanish military leader Pelagio (baritone) and his attempts to thwart the political marriage of his daughter Bianca (soprano) to his Arab enemy, Abdel-Aor (tenor). Though Bianca and Abdel-Aor are sincerely in love, Pelagio cannot tolerate his daughter's racial and religious betrayal. Eventually, Abdel-Aor is convinced that Bianca is secretly betraying him, and he stabs her, leaving her to beg for her father's forgiveness as she dies. The plot themes are strikingly similar to those of Bellini's *Zaira* and even Rossini's *Maometto Secondo*. Marco d'Arienzo's utilitarian poetry serves the rather

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all-purpose story effectively enough and sets up all the confrontations and emotional turmoil Mercadante could possibly want in order to compose exciting, crowd-pleasing arias and ensembles.

If you enjoy early and middle period Verdi, then you will love Pelagio. I won't argue that it's a lost masterpiece, but there is plenty of excellent music here, and the opera easily outclasses some of Verdi's more routine scores like *Alzira* or *Il corsaro*. The soprano role is very difficult: it's long and requires agility, a two octave range and vivid acting ability. Soprano Clara Polito gives her all, and succeeds in convincing the listener that Bianca is a cousin to both Bellini's *Zaira* and Verdi's *Elvira*. She has a good thrust to her voice – a bit overly darkened at times – and her agility and high register are above average. Best of all, she seems to understand the style, including the need for an extroverted approach to her role. She's a committed artist and her sheer involvement will win you over, despite some occasional, minor lapses in intonation and some smudged passagework.

Baritone Costantino Finucci offers true Verdian amplitude in his assumption of the title role, yet he is able to scale back as necessary, showing off both fine flexibility and attention to phrasing. Tenor Danilo Formaggia has an occasionally grainy tone, but otherwise fills out his vocal lines impressively with admirable technique and the same persuasively energetic approach as his soprano and baritone co-stars. His aria and cabaletta at the end of Act 2 are very well done, and he truly shines in his heartfelt rendition of the Act 3 scene in which he laments Bianca's (supposed) betrayal. The remaining roles are all adequately taken, and both choir and orchestra offer solid, no-frills support to the soloists.

Conductor Mariano Rivas gets credit not only for leading the forces with a steady, well-informed baton, but also for much of the research that went into finalizing the textual edition used for these performances. He has done a great service to the legacy of *Mercadante* by promoting this excellent score and catalyzing its first modern performances. And he has given us a chance to hear another valuable link in the development of ottocento opera. Hopefully, the strength of this recording, together with the well-received concert performance in Gijon, Spain will encourage other festivals to mount this worthy opera. It would be an ideal score for the Chelsea Opera Group, the Washington Concert Opera, or the Opera Orchestra of New York. I hope to have the chance to hear it again soon. ---David Laviska, musicalcriticism.com

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