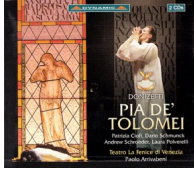


Donizetti - Pia de Tolomei (Arrivabeni,Ciofi) [2005]



CD1 1. *Prelude* 2. *Atto I. Ancor nel fosco (Coro)* 3. *Non puo dirti la parola (Ghino)* 4. *Mi volesti sventurato? (Ghino)* 5. *Qui posa il fianco (Bice, Coro)* 6. *A voi son grata (Pia)* 7. *Oh tu che desti il Fulmine (Pia)* 8. *Pia... Lamberto che fu? (Lamberto, Pia)* 9. *Di pura gioia in estasi (Pia)* 10. *Giurai svenarlo (Nello, Ghino)* 11. *Parea celeste spirito (Nello, Ghino)* 12. *Di ciel che non punisce (Nello, Ghino)* 13. *In questa de' viventi (Rodrigo)* 14. *Mille volte sul campo d'onor (Rodrigo)* 15. *L'astro che regge i miei destini (Rodrigo)* 16. *Di Ghino il cenno udiste? (Ubaldo, Coro)* 17. *Fra queste braccia (Pia, Rodrigo)* 18. *L'uscio dischiudi o perfida (Nello, Lamberto, Rodrigo, Pia)* 19. *Ahime quell'anelito (Ghino, Nello, Pia, Coro)* 20. *Quel codardo ne deluse! (Ubaldo, Nello, Ghino, Pia, Coro)*

CD2 1. *Atto II. Cinto di rosse nubi (Coro)* 2. *Ah! Si Barbara minaccia (Rodrigo)* 3. *A me stesso (Rodrigo, Coro)* 4. *Tu, Ghino, alle Maremme? (Ubaldo, Ghino, Pia)* 5. *Si, morrai dai viventi abbominata (Ghino, Pia)* 6. *Ti muova il gemito (Pia, Ghino)* 7. *Ah! Nel tuo seno atroce (Pia, Ghino)* 8. *Puo la mia fiamma spegnersi (Ghino, Pia)* 9. *Divampera tremenda (Ubaldo)* 10. *Temporale/ Il mugghiar di si fera procella (Coro)* 11. *Un calpestio di rapidi cavalla (Piero, Nello)* 12. *Lei perduta in core ascondo (Nello)* 13. *Fragor di spade? (Nello, Ghino, Piero, Coro)* 14. *Ciel pietoso un cor ti parla (Nello, Piero, Coro)* 15. *A questo nappo bevera tra poco (Ubaldo, Pia)* 16. *Sposo, ah! tronca ogni dimora (Pia)* 17. *Pia.../ La voce... (Nello, Pia)* 18. *Ah! di Pi ache muore e geme (Pia, Rodrigo, Nello, Coro)*

Pia – Patrizia Ciofi Ghino degli Armieri – Dario Schmunck Nello della Pietra – Andrew Schroeder Rodrigo – Laura Polverelli Piero – Daniel Borowski Ubaldo – Francesco Meli Bice – Clara Polito Lamberto – Carlo Cigni Il carceriere – Luca Favaron Orchestra e Coro del Teatro La Fenice di Venezia Direttore – Paolo Arrivabeni Paolo Arrivabeni, P.Ciofi, D.Schmunck, A.Schroeder, L.Polverelli

Donizetti composed Pia de' Tolomei during the summer and autumn of 1836 in Naples, where he was living at the time. In December he set out for Venice, where the premiere was planned for February the next year at the Teatro La Fenice He travelled via Livorno and Genoa but when he arrived in Genoa he was met by the news that the theatre had been destroyed by fire on the night of 12/13 December. He realized that there was a great risk that the premiere would be jeopardized. However the production was moved to Teatro Apollo and the premiere took place on 18 February 1837 as planned. Fanny Persiani, who had been the first Lucia di Lammermoor

a couple of years earlier, took the title role. The opera was not an immediate success and Donizetti reworked it twice. The second time was for Naples in 1838, where the censors enforced important changes and a happy ending. The present production is based on the critical edition published by Ricordi, where the original tragic finale is restored.

History often repeats itself and on 29 January 1996 Teatro La Fenice was again destroyed by fire. After seven years of intense reconstruction work a Phoenix arose from the ashes. Its inauguration took place on 14 December 2003, almost to the day 167 years after that first disaster. When Pia de' Tolomei was scheduled less than 1½ years later the performances were carried through without mishap and the result can be seen and heard on this wholly attractive set of DVDs.

“Why is it attractive? I’ve read that this is one the worst of Donizetti’s operas.” I can hear more than one jaded opera-freak’s distrustful grumble. Yes, I have read that too and I wasn’t all that hopeful when I started viewing. Things began badly by mistake I started playing the second disc first and ended up hopelessly at sea. “What has happened before and why don’t we know that?” was my reaction. I shouldn’t blame Dynamic but since the disc I put in my player was in its usual place on the right-hand side of the opened box and to the left was the booklet, I didn’t even notice the admittedly very large 2 on the label. Unfortunately disc 1 was obscured by the booklet. However, when starting from the beginning, I found the plot and layout fully comprehensible – which is not always the case with these more obscure operatic byways. The origin of the story is to be found in a few lines in Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and according to some scholars they refer to events in the poet’s own time, taking place in 1297. A poem on the subject had been published in 1822 and in April 1836 a play by Giacinto Bianco was staged in Naples. Donizetti must have known it and been inspired by it. His librettist Salvatore Cammarano was no mean author – no one can deny the dramatic qualities of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. This drama unfolds with few digressions from the main story in what is certainly a clear-cut libretto.

The plot goes along these lines: Ghino is in love with Pia but she is married to Nello, his cousin, and turns him down. In revenge he informs Nello that Pia is going to have a secret meeting with a lover. Her visitor is however her brother Rodrigo, who has just escaped from captivity. Rodrigo manages to escape Nello’s guards but Pia refuses to tell her husband who the visitor was and is condemned to imprisonment for life in his castle. Ghino visits her there and promises to set her free if she becomes his. She tells him who the visitor was and Ghino decides to tell Nello the truth. On his way he is attacked and mortally wounded. He manages to tell Nello about Pia’s innocence and Nello rushes to the castle to save her, since he has ordered Ubaldo to poison her. He arrives too late but before she dies Pia reconciles her brother to her husband. OK, this may not be a masterpiece of a story or a libretto but there are standard works that are not one iota better.

Secondly the music is fully worthy of the drama. Rarely in Donizetti's operas is everything perfect. This was his 61st opera in twenty years – if we include often far-reaching revisions of some works. There was little time for him to go back and tidy up details. In most of his works he tends to lapse into clichés. That said, it is remarkable how often he avoids the temptation; how frequently he finds new expressions, new structures. In *Pia de' Tolomei* he has long abandoned the recitative-aria-recitative pattern and builds long, continuous scenes – not seamless as later Verdi but still pointing forward to his brilliant successor. He is stuck in the aria-cabaletta pattern, rather along the same lines as middle period Verdi. In addition he far too often builds the cabalettas and other numbers on the almost mechanical rum-ti-tum rhythm with which we are also well acquainted from early and middle Verdi. But it really doesn't matter as long as it is captivating – and very often with Donizetti it is. The opening chorus of act 2 – the first thing I heard in my reverse-order listening – is one stirring example. Rodrigo, a trouser role, has a rousing cabaletta in the dungeon scene in act 1 and in the same act there is a fine cabaletta duet for tenor and baritone that should be a splendid recital item. More original are Pia's big solos which make her a close relative to the likewise ill-fated Lucia di Lammermoor. Technically this role requires the same amount of florid singing and sensitive pianissimo singing and it should be an attractive role for any good lyric-dramatic soprano. The leading tenor also has a couple of vocally and dramatically attractive arias. Then there is a beautiful duet for Pia and her brother Rodrigo – for soprano and mezzo-soprano – accompanied by plucked strings.

Thirdly the production is visually pleasing. The sets are of the modern-minimalist kind, with strict geometrical constructions and evocative lighting. Sometimes screens with texts are inserted. The costumes are timelessly-historical, if you can accept the contradiction in terms. The soldiers' armoury could be anything from late 13th century to the Thirty Years' War while Pia's nightdress could be from the latest issue of *Vogue*. The grouping of the soldiers in the mass-scenes is also decorative though hardly based on dramatic necessity.

Fourthly the singing and acting of the principals is uniformly at the highest level. It has been a long time since I saw a DVD production with such high quality singing even from the comprimarios. Patrizia Ciofi's Pia is ravishingly sung, deeply felt and convincingly acted. She seems in a state of mental disturbance from the very outset - an innocent victim. Technically speaking she is brilliant with fluent coloratura and the gift of delicate embellishments. Dario Schmunck is a lyrical and ardent Ghino – a singer I eagerly look forward to hearing again. His acting may be rather reticent but is still efficient. Andrew Schroeder is a powerful and dramatic Nello and sings with glowing tone. Laura Polverelli's Rodrigo is also a character not to be taken lightly. In the smaller parts Carlo Cigni, sporting a magnificent basso cantante, is surely predestined for a grand career. The chorus have a lot to do, especially the male soldiery. They are vivid and powerful but not always the most homogenous of ensembles. The orchestra play well and Paolo Arrivabeni is obviously deeply inspired by this long neglected score.

Donizetti - Pia de Tolomei [2005]

Written by bluesever

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Is it a forgotten masterpiece? Maybe not but it is far better than some works regularly performed and should not be returned to the archives for the eternal sleep. If it is, the Teatro La Fenice forces have seen to it that it will not be totally forgotten and opera lovers with a taste for the unusual should hasten to acquire this set. Technically this set is fully worthy of the occasion. There is a good booklet and subtitles are available in seven languages.

A work that is far better than its reputation, in an attractive production with splendid singing and acting. Should be snapped up by all opera lovers with a feeling for the unusual. ----- Göran Forsling, MusicWeb International

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