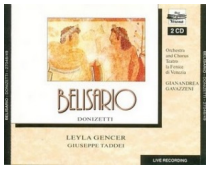
Gaetano Donizetti – Belisario (2000)



CD1:

1. Belisario, opera: Overture
2. Belisario, opera: Serto Amica... La Man Terrible Del Vincitor
3. Belisario, opera: Corri Amica... La Man Terrible Del Vincitor...
4. Belisario, opera: Plauso! Voci di Gioia...
5. Belisario, opera: Sin La Tomba È A Me Negata...
6. Belisario, opera: Ti Conforta...
7. Belisario, opera: O Desio De La Vendetta... play
8. Belisario, opera: O Nume Degli Eserciti... (Hymn Of Victory)
9. Belisario, opera: Cesara, Hai Vinto...
10. Belisario, opera: Liberi Siete... Quando Di Sangue Tinto...
11. Belisario, opera: Sui Campi Della Gloria...
12. Belisario, opera: Padre! Irene M'abbracia...
13. Belisario, opera: Che Mai Sarà!
14. Belisario, opera: Sostegni Del Mio Trono play
15. Belisario, opera: Ah! Da Chi Io Sono Tradito!
16. Belisario, opera: Madre Tu Fosti, E Moglie...
17. Belisario, opera: Pera L'empio Che Offese Natura...

CD2:

1. Belisario, opera: Oh Duce!
2. Belisario, opera: Di Belisario Voi Piangete!... A Sì Tremendo Annunzio...
3. Belisario, opera: Vien La Figlia
4. Belisario, opera: Trema Bisanzio! Sterminatrice...
5. Belisario, opera: Amici È Forza Separarci...
6. Belisario, opera: Chi Mi Regge... Chi m'aita
7. Belisario, opera: Ah Se Potessi Piangere...
8. Belisario, opera: Finale
9. Belisario, opera: Introduction
10. Belisario, opera: Qui Siedi, O Padre
11. Belisario, opera: Diffondasi Terribile play
12. Belisario, opera: Dì, Su Qual Riva Il Barbaro
13. Belisario, opera: Se Il Fratel...
14. Belisario, opera: Figli Partiam! Qui L'aura...

15. Belisario, opera: Itene Al Campo...
16. Belisario, opera: Da Quel Dì Che L'innocente...
17. Belisario, opera: Vittoria! Vittoria...
18. Belisario, opera: Di Pianto, Di Gemiti... play
19. Belisario, opera: Irene! Ricoproti, O Ciel...
20. Belisario, opera: Egli È Spento...
21. Belisario, opera: Finale

Leyla Gencer - Antonina
Giuseppe Taddei - Belisario
Nicola Zaccaria - Giustiniani
Mirna Pecile - Irene
Umberto Grilli - Alamiro
Rina Pallina - Eudora
Bruno Sebastian - Eutropio

Orchestra and Chorus Teatro la Fenice di Venezia
1969 - live recording
Gianandrea Gavazzeni - conductor

This "live" 1969 performance from Venice has occasional singing off mike - that pretty much goes with the territory - and an enthusiastic and sometimes noisy audience which, to my ears, simply adds to the sense of occasion. There is also a 1970 Gencer "Belisario" from Bergamo on a deleted Hunt CD (with Bruson in the title role), but Gencer is in better voice here. "Forgotten masterpiece" is perhaps too grand a description for this opera, but I feel it is one of Donizetti's best efforts. Its relative obscurity is probably attributable to the misfortune of its coming immediately after the composer's genuine masterpiece (Lucia di Lammermoor), which overshadows it. Belisario was a great success when it debuted in 1836 - it ran for 28 consecutive nights. Perhaps another reason for its being eclipsed: there are no love scenes at all. Belisario (Giuseppe Taddei) is a general in the court of Byzantine Emperor Justinian around 600 A. D. who has just won a great triumph over the barbarians in Italy. He is acclaimed by the people, but his wife Antonina (Gencer) curses him based on reports that he has had their own son killed. He releases his prisoners, but one of them, Alamiro (Umberto Grilli) remains at his side as a sort of son substitute. Belisario is later convicted of treason on forged evidence - he confesses to Antonina that he had their son killed, but only because he was commanded in a dream to do so in order to save the Empire.

In Act II, Belisario has been blinded, thrown in prison, and ordered into exile. He is led away by his daughter Irene (Mirna Pecile), who is disguised as a boy. In Act III Belisario and Irene take

refuge from their wanderings in a cave as troops approach. They overhear Alamiro and another young man planning an attack against Byzantium. Belisario steps forward and denounces their treachery and (surprise!) discovers that the second youth is none other than his son, who was not killed after all (he had been abandoned by the good-hearted servant charged with his death). Belisario proves his loyalty to the state by taking up arms against him. The imperial forces win, but Belisario is fatally wounded in the battle. He dies before his wife can win his pardon. Antonina now knows he was innocent, and laments her actions against him.

Well, it's not exactly Shakespeare. But there are some wonderful dramatic moments here. Gencer's opening declamation succeeds in immediately defining her character - and throughout the opera she is simply brilliant. I am not an opera buff - I spend far more time wandering through symphonies and chamber music. But once in a while it is very satisfying to hear a great bel canto singer who can really deliver the goods. Gencer's vocal trademarks - incredibly gorgeous floated pianissamos, superb legato, and some gutsy chest tones - are all on remarkable display here. In the final scene she caps her performance with an astounding, dead center high D that seems to last forever. The other singers are adequate or better (Taddei is a trifle wooly), and Gavazzeni's conducting is fine.

At less than the cost of standing room at a provincial opera house, this CD set represents excellent value. No, it's not in stereo, and it has the usual gremlins associated with "pirate" recordings. But all in all, the sound is certainly better than what is heard in the celebrated Callas/Giulini "La Traviata" on EMI. To hear more from this rather fabulous Turkish soprano, you might try one of her "Art of" sets on the Myto CD label, which capture her voice at its freshest (1954-59). Happy listening! ---Jeffrey Lipscomb

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