

Gounod – Polyeucte (Benzi) [2005]

Written by bluesever

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1. CD1 2. CD2 Giorgio Casciarri (Polyeucte) Luca Grassi (Sévère) Pietro Naviglio (Félix) Vincenzo Taormina (Néarque) Fernando Blanco (Albin) Emil Zhelev (Siméon) Nicola Amodio (Sextus) Nadia Vezzu (Pauline) Tiziana Portoghesi (Stratonice) Italian International Orchestra Bratislava Chamber Chorus Manlio Benzi – conductor

About Charles Gounod's 1878 opera Polyeucte, its composer once said "Let my work perish, even Faust, but may Polyeucte live!" A very different view is proffered by the Italian writing staff of the Simon & Schuster Book of the Opera, published in 1978; "(Polyeucte) is often lacking in inspiration or ill-adapted to the religious qualities of (its) characters." Nonetheless, Polyeucte contains tenor arias and duos sometimes singled out as encore pieces, and the Italian company Dynamic has produced the inevitable complete recording of the whole work, as staged in what looks like was an especially handsome production at the Vallée d'Itria Festival.

As to Gounod's music, the criticism above is mostly unfounded, as all of it is delightful. Polyeucte is just as well worked out as anything to be found in Faust or Roméo et Juliette, except that once the story line truly kicks in during the second act, things are a little bogged down. However, the same is true of many more well-known and popular operas of the nineteenth century. Polyeucte is based on a Ben Hur-like play by seventeenth century French playwright Pierre Corneille; set in Ancient Rome, it is about a Greek noble who faces the lions rather than renounce his conversion to Christianity -- the same source as Gaetano Donizetti's Poliuto. Polyeucte's overall design is in a sense "neo-classic," representing the French Romantic ideal of classical balance and purity. So corrupt might this very concept seem that just a generation ago a revival of Polyeucte would have been unlikely. The brilliance of the music, despite being framed in a stagy, stand-up-and-sing opera-oratorio-like format, has the unusual result of resulting in an opera that is probably more interesting to listen to than to see, and the Vallée d'Itria Festival presents Polyeucte in a performance that would have made Gounod proud.

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The cast, made up of no-name singers, is very good, and the Coro da Camera di Bratislava is excellent. Tenor Giorgio Casciari looks a little like actor Johnny Depp in his Polyeucte get-up, and the disc sounds like it was recorded in an outdoor amphitheater, so that applause sounds like only about 30 people attended this event. Fans of neglected operas may well feel like applauding along, as Polyeucte is a gem that, from its description and baggage, wouldn't seem like a candidate worthy of revival, but in this recording nonetheless outstrips all expectations in sound, performance, and quality. --- Uncle Dave Lewis, Rovi

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