Ruggero Leoncavallo – I Medici (2007)

CD 1 - 78’43” Atto primo *01. Preludio e fanfara da caccia (Orchestra) - 2’46” 02. E nel papa un nemico tu supponi? (Giuliano, Lorenzo, Poliziano) - 3’39” 03. Tacita selva (Lorenzo, Giuliano, Poliziano) - 1’54” 04. No, de l’antica Grecia (Giuliano) - 1’59” 05. L’amore! Egli è la nuvola (Lorenzo, Giuliano, Montesecco) - 2’30” 06. Come amava il suo damo! (Simonetta, Fioretta) - 6’39” 07. Fiorin di prato! Sento fuggir dal cor (Simonetta, Montesecco) - 2’27” 08. Partì. Ma niuno scorgesi... (Simonetta, Giuliano) - 4’26” 09. Ninfa non sono (Simonetta, Giuliano) - 4’34” 10. Come poterti esprimere (Giuliano, Simonetta) - 2’42” 11. Taci, un rumor nel bosco... (Giuliano, Simonetta, Montesecco, Fioretta) - 4’29”* Atto secondo

12. Mosso e deciso (Orchestra) - 0’51” 13. Egli volle guidar l’ambasceria (Pazzi, Bandini, Montesecco, Salviati) - 2’26” 14. Perché pace durevole (Montesecco, Bandini, Salviati, Pazzi) - 4’42” 15. Laggiù! - Ascolta il canto mio (Lorenzo, Poliziano, primo e secondo cantore, la folla) - 6’10” 16. Che ne di’ tu? (Bandini, Salviati, Montesecco, la folla, Simonetta, Fioretta, Lorenzo) - 2’05” 17. Le mie modeste rime - Ben venga maggio (Lorenzo, coro) - 4’30” 18. Tutto è festa e tripudio (Simonetta, la madre di Simonetta, Poliziano, Fioretta, Giuliano, la folla) - 3’26” 19. Sì, canterò! - Le coppie s’intrecciano (Simonetta, la folla, Lorenzo, Poliziano, Fioretta, la madre di Simonetta, Giuliano) - 6’25” 20. Povera Simonetta! (Giuliano, Fioretta, la folla, coro) - 3’10” 21. Allora che più facili a noi sorridon gli anni (Giuliano) - 1’55” 22. Sì, questo nuovo palpito (Fioretta, Giuliano) - 4’49”

CD 2 - 46’21” Atto terzo

01. Andante sostenuto (Orchestra) - 3’09” 02. Va’, rinfranca nel sonno le fatiche (Fioretta, la madre di Simonetta) - 7’23” 03. È là - Si scorge lume (Pazzi, Bandini, Salviati, Fioretta, Giuliano, Simonetta, Montesecco) - 4’47” 04. Gli eventi non arrisero (Pazzi, Simonetta, Giuliano, Fioretta, Montesecco) - 2’41” 05. Me lasso! Io che pensava (Giuliano, Salviati, Montesecco, Pazzi, Simonetta, Bandini, Fioretta) - 4’25” 06. Qualcuno è là. Chi sei?... (Montesecco, Simonetta, Giuliano, Fioretta) - 3’49”

Atto quarto

07. Allegro con fuoco (Orchestra) - 1’17” 08. Credo in unum Deum (coro di preti e ragazzi, Montesecco, Bandini, un prete, congiurati, popolo) - 6’12” 09. Signor, prostrata in lagrime (Fioretta, coro di preti, popolo, congiurati, Montesecco, Bandini, coro di ragazzi) - 2’55” 10. Muori! - Ah! Soccorso! (Pazzi, Giuliano, Fioretta, Lorenzo, donne del popolo, congiurati, Bandini, Montesecco, popolo, Poliziano, i quattro della scorta) - 2’41” 11. Da lunga pezza i Medici (Lorenzo, popolo) - 3’42” 12. All’Arno! A morte! (popolo, Fioretta, Lorenzo, Giuliano) - 3’10”

Giuliano de' Medici - Plácido Domingo Lorenzo de' Medici - Carlos Álvarez Simonetta Cattanei - Daniela Dessì Fioretta de' Gori - Renata Lamanda Giambattista da Montesecco - Eric Owens Francesco Pazzi - Vitalij Kowaljow (Виталий Ковалёв) Bernardo Bandini - Carlo Bosi L'Arcivescovo Salviati - Arutjun Kotchinian (Арутюн Кочинян) Il Poliziano - Fabio Maria Capitanucci La madre di Simonetta - Debora Beronesi Primo cantore popolare - Angelo Antonio Poli Secondo cantore popolare - Alex Esposito Un prete - Alessandro Luongo Coro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Chorus Master - Piero Monti Coro di Voci Bianche della Scuola di Musica di Fiesole Chorus Master - Joan Yakkey Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Conductor - Alberto Veronesi Florence, Teatro Comunale; July 2007)

The extensive booklet essay by Michele Girardi tells us that Leoncavallo, unusually among Italian composers, came from a moneyed and cultured background. He had first-rate teachers of piano and opera composition at Naples then moved to Bologna, the centre of academic excellence in Italy, where he broadened his learning with studies in literature and philosophy. He also doubtless immersed himself in the discussions about Wagner's operas in a city that had hosted the first Italian performance of the German giant's works with Lohengrin in 1871. Without the urgent necessity to get out and earn his corn, he had a tendency to hatch ambitious plans. He did however realise his early Chatterton for which, like Wagner, he wrote both libretto and music.

In his dreams, and encouraged by the great baritone Victor Maurel, creator of Verdi's Iago and Falstaff, Leoncavallo plotted a trilogy of works called Crepusculum, the first part of which is I Medici. The second and third parts remained unwritten, as Leoncavallo suddenly, in 1892, became world famous as the composer of I Pagliacci. This epitome of Italian verismo opera scored an overwhelming success at its premiere in Milan in 1892.

The story of I Medici has some relationship with historical fact around the end of the fifteenth century. It revolves mainly around the love triangle involving Simonetta, Giuliano de' Medici and Fioretta. Complications come with Fioretta revealing she is pregnant whilst Simonetta is Giuliano's representation of ideal love. However, that love is never consummated because of her fragile health with tuberculosis. This overwhelms her in the third act finale. The second strand of the story revolves around a conspirators' plot involving the two Medici brothers and which involves the death of Giuliano in the last act.

The musical demands in I Medici, and particularly on the tenor singer of Giuliano, can be gauged from the casting at the premiere of the great Tamagno, creator of Verdi's Otello. Herein,

I suspect, lies the reason for this recording, which is the second to appear of Leoncavallo conducted by Alberto Veronesi. The first, of songs sung by Domingo with piano and orchestral accompaniment, was recorded at the same venue (DG 477 6633 GH). I suspect that they were contemporaneous. Why the wait for three years for issue I do not know; perhaps in-house editing is in excessive demand over supply these days!

At the time of this recording Domingo was, if the biographies tell the truth, sixty-six years of age; long past the time most singers, let alone tenors who have been the sans pareil interpreter of Verdi's Otello for more than a generation, hang up the remains of their vocal chords. As I write in July 2010, Domingo, never one to sit back and take it easy, followed this recording by performing the new role of Cyrano de Bergerac in Alfano's rarely-staged opera. He sang staged performances at New York's Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden, Valencia (see review) and La Scala, in the year of this recording. He has followed this in his sixty-ninth year with the learning and singing of Verdi's Simon Boccanegra, normally a baritone role. This latter assumption has just been seen, to acclaim, at Covent Garden on its way from the Met to La Scala. A vocal superman indeed!

If, in this 2007 recording, Domingo doesn't sound quite the same as the strong-voiced lyric tenor who made his recording debut at age twenty-six, for Teldec, recently re-issued by Warner (to be reviewed) that is hardly to be expected. Importantly, he still sounds here like a lyric tenor who, if not needing to scale high C, can still hit the money notes without strain. He brings depth of interpretation, variety of colour and consummate vocal characterisation to bear on the role of Giuliano. There are only one or two contemporary tenors I can think of who would match this performance in this work and none who would bring such insights to his interpretation even if he was prepared to learn the role. It is a fach of considerable vocal demands and he meets them with conviction, dramatic intent and vocal aplomb as is demonstrated from the first act aria (CD1 tr.4), and many ensembles through to Giuliano's death (CD 2 tr.12).

The role of the chaste Simonetta is sung by the Italian lyrico spinto soprano Daniela Dessi. Her extensive repertoire has included the likes of Maria Stuarda and Lucrezia Borgia as well as Mozart. In recent years she has specialised in the heavier Verdi and Puccini roles while maintaining vocal flexibility. Her vocal capacity is well up to the demands in range and characterisation of Simonetta. Her skills extend from the roles' emotional development from her duet with Fioretta (CD 1 tr.6) to Simonetta's death (CD 2 tr.6). Hers is an accomplishment to match that of Domingo. Likewise is that of Carlos Álvarez as Lorenzo, which he sings with tonal variety, strength, and vocal resonance. He, like Dessi has missed out as a result of the dearth of studio recordings in the last twenty years. His inclusion is particularly welcome here where he is able to exhibit his vocal and histrionic strengths, characterisation and steady well-covered and coloured tone. I cannot say the same for the singing of Renata Lamanda as Fioretta finding her dramatic voice too heavy with a pronounced vibrato for my ears. However, I recognise such

reactions vary from person to person and others will be less discomfited than me. The American bass Eric Owens strays from his usual repertoire in contemporary music and conveys the villainous Montesecco well. His voice contrasts nicely with the other two bass singers.

As to the music? Well, in my household opera is often the staple of relaxation, equally enjoyed by my wife and I. Shortly after this recording arrived, I put it into the CD player. We were hardly into the prelude (CD 1 tr.1) when she enquired which Wagner opera this was, as she did not recognise it. Too simple in a way, but also indicative of a definite influence that is also present in the brief openings of acts two and three (CD 2 trs.1 and 7) and elsewhere. It must also be stressed that in most ways the music is veristic Italian, albeit set in the late fifteenth century, just as much as other works of the period. It has not, however, the distinctive patina, or melodic invention, of the more justifiably famous Pagliacci by the same composer.

The booklet includes an extensive, rather long and at times diffuse essay, titled Wagnerism's Italian Inroads by Michele Girardi. Both this and the libretto are given in English, German and French translations. ---Robert J. Farr, musicweb-international.com

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