

Franco Alfano – Cyrano De Bergerac



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In a previous issue of Fanfare, I wrote an article about Franco Alfano suggesting that his music was unfairly neglected. It was the Metropolitan Opera's new production of Cyrano de Bergerac with Plácido Domingo that ignited my curiosity and sparked a thorough exploration of Alfano's music. The more I heard of it, the more highly I regarded it. Alfano is most well known, unfortunately, for his completion of Puccini's Turandot, a thankless task if ever there was one.

There does seem to be a growing interest in Alfano's operas, and on top of two audio recordings of Cyrano, we now have this DVD—and it is without question the finest version yet. Alagna's voice doesn't have that dark richness that Domingo brought to the role in his astonishing Met performance, but he is in a league beyond the two tenors who have left broadcast recordings of the opera—William Johns (Gala) and Roman Sadnik (cpo). Johns is the

better of those two, but Alagna brings a liquid beauty of tone that is simply not at Johns's disposal. Alagna also sings here with passion, variety of dynamics and colors, and utter freedom. He clearly enjoys this role and throws himself into it. At times, his voice sounds like it might be one-half size too small for the role, but those moments are infrequent. His Roxane, Nathalie Manfrino, is a delightful and attractive lyric soprano who can float a lovely piano and can open up full throttle without turning harsh. The rest of this cast clearly believes in the opera and is fully engaged dramatically as well as being more than adequate vocally.

If I have any musical reservations, they center on conductor Marco Guidarini. He lets the impetus go slack at many key points, and he indulges the singers and the music's lyricism excessively, at the expense of tautness and forward motion. Still, the music's beauty comes through, and the orchestra plays very well. The recorded sound is quite natural. This was recorded at the Festival de Radio France et Montpellier in July of 2003, and although there is applause at the end (after a very long pause), one feels that it may have been recorded without the presence of an audience—because there is no audience distraction at all.

The stage direction and lighting are by Alagna's brothers David and Frédéric, and from a television perspective, their work is very convincing. It looks like it worked in the house too. It is a naturalistic production, and it is easy to become involved with the characters here without feeling jerked around by some director's "concept." George Blume's camera direction is particularly admirable. Unlike many directors, he seems to have the patience to linger on shots and let the music and the production speak for themselves. This is one of the most natural and un-intrusive operatic videos I have seen in a long time.

It is not, however, without some flaws. The worst is the translation for the English subtitles. They are clumsy, ungrammatical at times, and occasionally laughable. At no point does the translation just let you go along for the ride—it is bad enough that it always calls attention to itself. In addition, Seven Stars provides no notes with this package except for a very cursory plot synopsis. Nonetheless, I recommend this DVD with real enthusiasm. --- Henry Fogel, FANFARE

This is, by operatic standards of fidelity, a very faithful musical treatment of Edmond Rostand's classic drama about the swashbuckling poet and swordsman with the big nose. The music is competent but not spectacular; that quality is found in the libretto. The title role is expertly filled

by Roberto Alagna, who not only has the best tenor voice in France but also turns out to be an accomplished actor in a demanding role. He is well-supported by a cast that clearly loves the story, its various characters and its often brilliant dialogue.

Franco Alfano is best-known for his completion of Turandot which was not quite finished at Puccini's death. Among his other work, he produced one operatic masterpiece of his own, Cyrano, which was long neglected but now has a fitting representation on home video. The opera also exists in an Italian translation, but Alfano originally used the superior French text by Henri Cain, which is used in this production.

Nathalie Manfrino is charming as the beautiful but superficial Roxane, whom Cyrano loves hopelessly through his whole life without telling her, and Richard Troxell characterizes precisely the handsome but not particularly bright Christian, whom Cyrano assists in his wooing. The chorus, orchestra, sets, and costumes are all excellent, helping to make this a first-class production. ---Joe McLellan

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