Mercadante *Il proscritto* – the Opera Rara CD recording

Alan Jackson (May 1, 2023)

The Opera Rara recording of Mercadante's *Il proscritto* has now been released. Just after it was made last June the same forces gave it in concert at The Barbican, London and I posted my extremely enthusiastic **review** on this website. I won't repeat it all here, but it may clarify some of what follows. So how does the recording compare with my memory of the concert?

The opera still impresses, not just the showpiece two-tenor duet and the contralto's cabaletta, but also the whole series of duets which adapt the traditional forms for dramatic ends. A character may have his or her opening statement but rarely does the second character complete their own statement before dialogue or intervention sets in. The performance is very good too, but honesty compels me to say that it doesn't quite have the impact and abandon of the concert. Maybe this is inevitable. The conditions of a recording venue, the repeated takes and the search for "perfection" can lead to a loss of spontaneity and listening at home highlights flaws that if they were present in the concert passed without damage or notice. So, on disc I am conscious that Ramón Vargas would have sounded better a decade ago, that occasionally the microphone catches and emphasises Irene Roberts' vibrato and that the supporting roles are weaker than remembered. And perhaps most importantly, the acoustic of the Henry Wood Hall as captured here is not as exciting as that of the front stalls of The Barbican. Turning up the volume improves this but alas, I have neighbours. And something curious happens with the huge concertato in the Act I finale. The overall wall of sound makes its effect but of the soloists I can hear throughout only the tenor Iván Ayón-Rivas. I don't really hear the Odoardo, Elizabeth DeShong, or, except towards the end when the texture thins, the Malvina, Irene Roberts. Mercadante doesn't help matters by having four sets of verses with uncoordinated rhyme schemes being sung simultaneously, but surely the three principals should stand out more than they do even if the supporting soloists are doubling the chorus lines.

Having said that, I should stress that all four principals are quality artists who provide a great deal of pleasure and anyone who wasn't at the concert may well wonder where my criticisms come from. My admiration for Irene Roberts portrayal of Malvina has increased with repeated listening. She may not have the most refulgent voice but her responses to the changing situations and emotions in her final scene are subtle and moving. As her brother, Elizabeth DeShong is astounding in the cabaletta of her aria with its rapid coloratura brilliantly executed over a wide range. (Its theme has now become an ear-worm – see my review of the concert for my previous mention of memorability.) The duet for the two tenors is fine by any standard; both Vargas and Ayón-Rivas as husbands 1 and 2 respectively battle excitingly. (A second reconsideration makes me mention that, though there are no super-high notes, Ayón-Rivas' line in the cabaletta sits taxingly at the top of and just above the stave – he copes splendidly.) The orchestral playing and choral singing are excellent. Mercadante gives his flautist, clarinettist and harpist their solo chances, well taken by members of the Britten Sinfonia. Carlo Rizzi tells of his discovery of *Il proscritto* in the booklet accompanying the CDs; that he loves and admires the opera shines through. Roger Parker's excellent article from the concert programme is included as is an interesting one from Teresa Poggiali on the transition from Soulié and Dehay's source play to Cammarano's libretto.

So, maybe it doesn't rate five stars, but this recording nevertheless represents a considerable achievement. It is a valuable contribution to the Mercadante discography and lovers of operas of this period shouldn't hesitate. Many operas feature two men vying for the love of the same woman. This one has both men willing to cede to the other, even if not at the start or for very long. The heroine of course still dies, but I suppose that was inevitable. A ménage-à-trois, even in an opera that in part reflects its composer's reform agenda, would have been a step too far. And for the record, I still haven't found that Tristan chord.