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Meyerbeer

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harmonies in the piano part overwhelm: a kind of cocoon rather than a support from beneath,

For a comparative version my favourite to date is Véronique Dietschy, who would not get very far with a jury ('too thin' 'too bland' 'no variation of colour') but whose pillow-talk diction is not only impeccable but seductive, and whose high notes do it for me like no man's could ever.⁸ Sopranos take you up there: men have to strain. There lies the convolution of singing, quite regardless of the nuances of the French *mélodie* or the voice of the poet.

Richard Langham Smith
University of Exeter

Meyerbeer

Meyerbeer in Italy

Extracts from: *Il crociato in Egitto*, *Romilda e Costanza*, *Semiramide riconosciuta*,
Emma di Resburgo, *Margherita d'Anjou*, *L'esule di Granata*

Yvonne Kenny *sop* Bronwen Mills *sop* Maria Bovino *sop* Linda Kitchen *sop*
Della Jones *mezzo* Diana Montague *mezzo* Patricia Spence *mezzo* Anne Mason
mezzo

Bruce Ford *ten* Chris Merritt *ten* Paul Nilon *ten* Harry Nicoll *ten* Geoffrey
Dolton *bar* Alastair Miles *bass* Russell Smythe *bass* Ian Platt *bass* Ugo Benelli
bass

Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Geoffrey Mitchell
Choir

David Parry

Opera Rara ORR222 (71 minutes, DDD)

Notes and translations provided.

Lovers of Meyerbeer, and of many other lyric composers of Italian (and French) opera of the early nineteenth century, have long been acquainted with the recordings of Opera Rara. Loyal support by the Peter Moores Foundation, Opera Rara, over the last 20 years, has released a considerable number of CDs of whole operas, compilations of extracts, and recitals by individual artists of 'forgotten works' by composers such as Meyerbeer, Donizetti and Rossini, but also of lesser-known operas by Mercadante, Pacini, Carafa, Mayr and Pavesi to mention but a few. Such an adventure requires and delivers often painstaking reconstitution of scores and orchestral parts and in-depth musicological research of the highest integrity which is eruditely conveyed to its audience through well-presented, well-illustrated and thorough sleeve notes. Artistic director Patric Schmid works in close collaboration with Opera Rara's conductor David Parry to produce quality recordings of operatic gems that, without their enterprise, would remain unknown to all.

⁸ Ades 464 208–2.

'Meyerbeer in Italy' is a compilation of all the extracts of Meyerbeer's operas written for Italy between 1817 and 1824 that Opera Rara has previously recorded. Single extracts from *Romilda e Costanza* (1817), *Semiramide riconosciuta* (1819), *Emma di Resburgo* (1819), *Margherita d'Anjou* (1820) and *L'esule di Granata* (1822) – drawn from two CD collections: 'A Hundred Years of Italian Opera 1810–1820' (CD ORCH103) and 'A Hundred Years of Italian Opera 1820–1830' (CD ORCH104) – are interspersed with extracts drawn from its complete recording of *Il crociato in Egitto* (1824) (CD ORC10), all recordings made between 1985 and 1993. (Since the issue of 'Meyerbeer in Italy', Opera Rara has released a complete recording of *Margherita d'Anjou*.) Whilst the compilation under review here owns the merit of collecting all Meyerbeer's Italian operas under one 'roof', it appears to be the result of some marketing ploy to bring in a little extra cash at the least expense, and, in consequence, the notes provided fail to meet the standards of a typical Opera Rara product. This is not to say that the short introduction by Patric Schmid and the succinct yet informative programme notes by George Hall are not greatly appreciated, but the libretti (and their translations) are missing, as is a certain amount of information about what and who we are actually listening to. All these details can be found in the notes of the original recordings from which the present compilation is drawn, but that's not very helpful for the owner (or reviewer) of this particular CD.

Supposedly in the interest of a varied programme, the CD opens with a bravura extract from *Il crociato in Egitto*, and then inserts three other scenes from the same work in between extracts from the other operas, presented in chronological order. However, the striking progression of Meyerbeer's musical maturity and his own personal assimilation of Italian operatic writing – the extracts from the operas of the 1820s are not only the most musically accomplished but are also more convincingly performed and eloquently executed – is somewhat masked by this programming issue. The first number is drawn from the second revised version for Trieste of *Il crociato in Egitto*, that proto-French grand opera performed two years before Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* in Paris, and equally inspired by the Greek war of independence. Indeed, the CD is remarkable in that it presents extracts of *Il crociato in Egitto* in its original version as well as from its two revised scores. In a sparkling entrance scene, the tenor Adriano (Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of Rhodes and uncle of the hero Armando, who now serves as an Egyptian warrior in the service of the Sultan of Damietta, whose daughter he has secretly married and with whom he has a child) disembarks from his ship in Damietta harbour, magnanimously bearing a peace treaty. The vocal and choral writing, the orchestral accompaniment, the dramatic pace, all go to show Meyerbeer's erudition at this early point in his career. The conducting and orchestral playing (the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra) is elegant but the male chorus, battling against noisy, militaristic orchestral forces, is a little disappointing. (We hear individual voices, it sounds as though they are few in number, and the balance with the orchestra can sound artificial. The chorus is, on the whole, rather uneven for, whilst the CD names the Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, the recording dates, spanning an eight-year period, prevent the likelihood of the same chorus members (or even the same numbers) being present for each ensemble involving chorus.) Adriano is sung by the internationally renowned *bel canto* tenor Bruce Ford, who is nothing short of stunning. Unfortunately, this blazing introduction to the CD is short-lived, and by following *Il crociato in Egitto* with a naively charming yet immature extract from *Romilda e Costanza*, sung by a British cast which by no

means lives up to the lofty artistic heights reached by Bruce Ford, the dynamic of the CD takes an almighty plunge. This is not to say that the British singers featured on the recording are inadequate: the mezzo Patricia Spence, the tenor Chris Merritt, the baritone Geoffrey Dolton and the basses Russell Smythe and, particularly, Alastair Miles deserve special mention. But the generally homogeneous ensemble is let down from the top end by sopranos who lack the agility and beauty of tone necessary in the top register of their voices.

The Romantic influence of Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott is largely felt in the plots of *Romilda e Costanza*, *Emma di Resburgo* and *Margherita d'Anjou*. The Act II trio for three basses (as designated in the score but nowadays sung by a baritone, a buffo bass and a bass) from this last *opera semiseria* is a real gem and enough to make me want to acquire Opera Rara's new complete recording of the work. Margherita, disguised as a Scottish peasant, is being hidden from her persecutor Riccardo (Richard III to be) by her faithful highland leader Carlo Belmonte and the French quack-surgeon Michele. The trio portrays Riccardo questioning the two other men, the scene dramatically culminating after this trio as Margherita and her son are discovered. Despite the serious situation, the opera's *semiseria* character is embodied by Michele and his typically Italian and Rossinian patter line, sung as he narrates his past exploits to help throw Riccardo off the scent. Yet this underlying patter, set against melodic figuration in the orchestra, along with the choice of three bass voices, inevitably evokes the eminently more dramatic trio in Act II of *Don Giovanni*, as the statue of the Commendatore comes to life and asks Don Giovanni to repent his ways, despite Meyerbeer's adherence to modern, *bel canto* operatic writing.

The duet from *L'esule di Granata* for mezzo (Spence) and bass (Miles) voices is the other pearl of the CD, and it is by this point (tracks 11–13 of 16) that we start to realize the progression of sophistication in Meyerbeer's art, as demonstrated by the chosen extracts. The duet comes as a disguised Sulemano, the deposed leader of Granada, returns with the intention of assassinating the king Almanzor who seeks to marry Sulemano's daughter. The duet follows a Rossinian structure with an introduction that leads into an appealing and melodically characteristic slower section, followed by a *tempo di mezzo* as the murder is attempted and prevented (where the chorus make an impressive and dramatic appearance), finally moving into a faster movement which, with its unexpected rhythmic patterns, demands (and receives) agility and accuracy from the performers. The last scene presented is the Act I finale from *Il crociato in Egitto* which, after the characters have voiced their dismay at the turn of (the very complicated) events, comprises a declaration of war, signalled by a great tamtam crash. As the Muslim and Christian banners are unfurled, the drums and the bands of the Egyptians and the crusaders sound in battle and the climax is truly splendid. The CD ends as impressively as it began – the orchestras and conducting are stylish throughout – and despite the aforementioned misgivings, 'Meyerbeer in Italy' is a must for any hard up lover of early nineteenth-century opera. Those with a bit more ready cash would do better to buy the four boxed sets from which it is compiled.

Clair Rowden
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