

COLBRAN THE MUSE

JOYCE DIDONATO

Rossini with the Orchestra and Chorus of the National Academy of St Cecilia conducted by Edoard Muller.

Virgin Classics 5099969457906 (72. 05)

Armida

D'amor al dolce impero

La donna del lago (The Lady of the Lake)

Oh mattutini albori

Tanti affetti in tal momento

Fra il padre, e fra l'amante

Maometto II

Giusto ciel, in tal periglio

Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra

Qant'è grato all'alma mia

Semiramide

Serena i vaghi rai... Bel raggio lusinghier

Bel raggio lusinghier di speme

Excerpts from Othello

Ah! Dagli affanni oppressa

Nessun maggior dolore

O come infino al core

Assisa appiè d'un salice

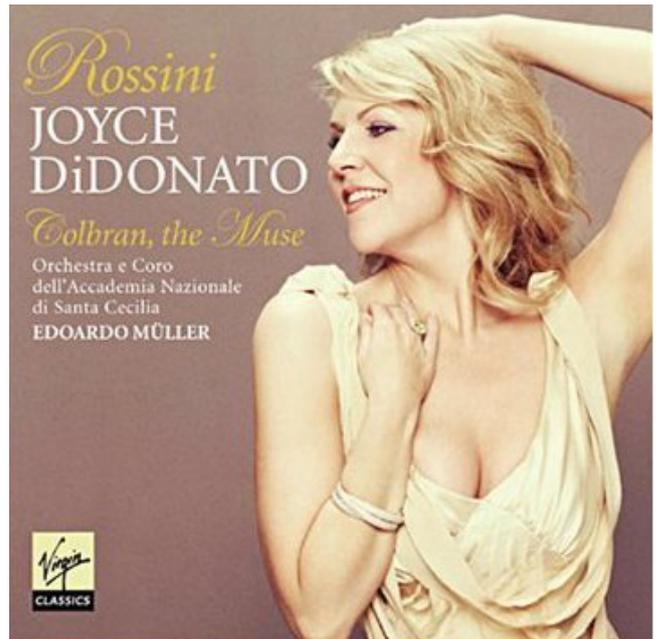
Deh calma, o ciel, nel sonno

Excerpts from Armida

Se al mio crudel torment

Dove son io!

È ver... gode quest'anima



Colbran the Muse refers to Isabella Colbran, (1785-1845) the great Spanish soprano who sang Semiramide in February 1823. There seems no doubt that Rossini (1792 - 1868) was in love with her, although she was the mistress of another. She had sung Paisiello's Nina in Naples in 1811 and Rossini wrote Elisabeth, daughter of the regiment for her.

What exciting music Rossini put into his operas as well as glorious lyricism. His music has tunes and a structure which makes sense. He did not just compose music. He planned it.

The opening of the first aria has an invigorating introduction and then a delightful solo melody and the choral part is hugely enjoyable.

Who says that DiDonato is a mezzo? Yes, her low notes are choice but her top notes are sheer delight.

Her phrasing, particularly on long phrases, and her melismata is quite superb. And so many of these arias are virtuosic and calls for a singer with extraordinary skill and technique. At times, DiDonato is stunning and sensational. The end of the first aria brings tears to the eyes and a thrill to the soul.

The Lady of the Lake is not as well known as some of Rossini's operas but contains some beautiful music. The tenderness in the first aria is mesmerising... *O sweet image of my beloved...* the drama is caught without exaggeration... *But you will not return to me, you whom I love with passion.*

The next excerpt is amazing... *so many emotions at such a moment are crowding my heart*. Her trills are perfect and the absence of ghastly portamenti is welcome. Enter the chorus with drama and power. Utterly thrilling music... *may the violent enmity of fate now cease*. And listen to the sparkling woodwind before Ellen enters with another cadenza-like solo... *standing between my father and mother, oh, moment of blessedness*. The tessituras are staggering. The excitement is overwhelming. The CD is worth its price just for this item. Mind-blowing!

And now to Anna in Maometto II. This is a very beautiful aria praying to the gods for pity. The control of the voice is perfect and I admire the effortless change she has in the different registers. The women's chorus is very effective and, in the nicest sense, a tear jerker. This is a rewarding experience not just music and it throws up what a great composer Rossini was. As someone said, "He wrote enjoyable operas that those who hate opera will enjoy"

Elisabeth is the daughter of the regiment rejoicing at the contentment of her people and the chorus refers to her as a royal lady who has endured many cruel events. DiDonato's skill and impeccable technique is again here and throughout the CD. There is feeling in her singing but it is never mawkish. The use of arias with choral parts is a good judgement giving variety.

And Rossini knew how to end an aria with soloist and chorus!

To Semiramide. The first excerpt begins with the women's chorus..... *Banish sadness from your lovely eyes* and Semiramide sings of the return of her beloved Arsace who will come to her. And how thrilling this aria ends as well.

The opening of the first Othello excerpt opens with cheerful music... strange. Emilia sings of Desdemona weighed down by her troubles. Lawrence Brownlee sings the part of the Gondolier singing of the great sorrow recalling past happiness in the midst of misery. Roberta Di Nicola is the other 'mezzo'. Desdemona is moved by his song.

Here Rossini brings a pathos to his music. I must admit that I found this fifteen minutes or so a little wearisome.

Armida excerpts follow and Rossini's jolly music is not suitable for Armida's suffering! That aside, marvel at the voice, the control, the sensitivity and virtuosity of DiDonato. There are three small parts for tenors sung by Corrado Amici and Carlo Putelli although we are not told who sings Rinaldo, Ubalo and Carlo. There is some fine music here and I must investigate this opera. Thank you Miss DiDonato.

Hear her dramatic aria when she realised that Rinaldo has fled. One feels for her! If the real Rinaldo had heard DiDonato sing this he would be back at once!

The excerpts end with tremendous power and excitement. The men's chorus join Armida. There is tuneful percussion over excited trombone (incredible) and Joyce DiDonato soars us to heaven!

What a voice! What consummate artistry... the best opera disc I have ever heard in 50 years!

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