

A Year in Classical Music: 1837, vol. 1

There was not a state of Italy in 1837, but the Italian unification movement was well underway. The Italian peninsula at the time was a collection of city-states and duchies and kingdoms, which had been reconstituted by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, after the Napoleonic Wars. So the French weren't in control anymore, but it hadn't been just a return to the old ways for Italians, either. Napoleon's invasion had fostered a sense of common identity and purpose on the Italian peninsula, just as it had in the areas that would become Germany, and in Eastern Europe. Napoleon had helped to spark the passionate nationalism we associate with the 1800's, the Romantic era. After Napoleon's defeat the Congress of Vienna had tried to restore an acceptable balance of power between the major European states. They gave the Austrian Empire control over central Europe, which meant that especially in the north, the Italian territories were subject to Austrian hegemony. Those calling for Italian unification saw Austria as the antagonist, then, and by 1830 revolutionary sentiment had spread throughout the peninsula, prompting uprisings in a number of areas. These areas had planned to unite as a single state, the United Italian Provinces; so Pope Gregory the Sixteenth asked Austria for military intervention, and in 1831, the Austrian army had marched south across Italy, subduing the revolutionary groups and forcing many of their leaders into exile. 1837 found Giuseppe Mazzini living in exile in London, where he led the local chapter of a revolutionary group called *Giovine Italia*, which means *Young Italy*. Giuseppe Garibaldi was likewise living in exile in southern Brazil that year, where he took part in a revolutionary war against the very young Brazilian government. These and other exiled insurgents would return to Italy to help lead the revolution of 1848 and the unsuccessful First Italian War of Independence, but in 1837 that was all still a decade away and the Italian unification movement was stalled, at least back home.

This installment of *A Year in Classical Music* features three Italian composers who were active in 1837. But the first of them hadn't lived in Italy since 1785, when at the age of 25 he'd relocated to Paris to compose for the Opéra there. He was Luigi Cherubini, an old, respected master – but one whose style had been out of date for many years. He was 77 years old in 1837 and had recently retired from composing opera, having produced his last, *Ali Baba*, in 1833. But in his heyday in the 1790's and early 1800's, Cherubini had been well ahead of his time, anticipating the Romantic emotionalism and spectacle of mid-1800's opera. Haydn and Beethoven had both admired his music. In fact, in 1817 Beethoven had called Cherubini the greatest living composer! Beethoven claimed that Cherubini deserved a place alongside Handel the other immortals. Most have puzzled over Beethoven's praise, though, seeing in Cherubini a pedantic academic, rules-bound and over-cautious, and have wondered how a composer as radical as Beethoven could have been so impressed with him. But on the other hand, Beethoven was known to have admired flawless technique

in other composers, and he certainly found such excellent craftsmanship in Cherubini's scores.

Towards the end of his life, after he had retired from opera, Cherubini devoted most of his time to teaching at the Paris Conservatoire (which was reorganized five separate times during his years as a professor there, as the different French governments came and went). It was in those years, at the end of his career and in the midst of his obligations to the Conservatoire, that Cherubini produced most of his chamber music: four string quartets and a string quintet date from 1834 to 1837. His style had become too dated for the opera house, so it was chamber music that provided him an outlet for his mastery of compositional technique. In 1837 he finished his *String Quartet no. 6 in A Minor* and *String Quintet in E Minor* – his last string quartet and his only string quintet. The quintet was Cherubini's last large-scale musical composition of any kind.

Cherubini was not, of course, part of the Viennese tradition. His models in composing strings quartets and other sonata forms were French opera arias, and the *quatuor brillant* with its virtuosic first violin part, the three other instruments mostly providing accompaniment. To create chamber music dialog, Cherubini set lines and motives derived from these models in counterpoint with each other; his use of counterpoint establishes more equality between the four instruments than you find in the *quatuor brillant*. The French style of chamber music at that time was concerned with flashy virtuosity in performance and a sense of *joie de vivre*, not with the ambitious intellectualism of Viennese chamber music. Cherubini's quintet and four quartets are an homage to the great tradition of German and Viennese chamber music, which he knew and admired, but they're not an attempt on his part to participate in that tradition – Cherubini had no desire to attempt to match Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Mendelssohn at their own game, or using their style and techniques. Cherubini had developed his own unique ways of constructing large sonata forms, ways that his contemporaries found puzzling, or at least novel, whether their frame of reference was the First Viennese School or the chamber pieces of Luigi Boccherini and George Onslow which were popular in France and Spain. Robert Schumann wrote that, "You first have to befriend a particular spirit in this quartet style, which is uniquely his; it is not the familiar native tongue that approaches us, it is a distinguished stranger addressing us. The more we learn to understand him, the more we come to respect him."

I recommend the Melos Quartet's record of Cherubini's *String Quartet no. 6*, and as for the *Quintet*, the only recording available is by the Diogenes Quartet with cellist Manuel van der Nahmer. The Melos Quartet bring the greatest sense of spontaneity, conversational equality, and instrumental virtuosity to the *A Minor Quartet* – a bit better than Hausmusik London, the period instrument ensemble, and much better than the Quartetto David, who are in too much of a hurry, no time for attention to detail. As for the Diogenes recording of the *Quintet*, it's well played and won't leave you wishing for a

better reading. It comes paired with two of George Onslow's string quintets, which were composed at around the same time as Cherubini's.

In 1837 Italian opera was in the last several years of its *bel canto* era. *Bel canto* was the style that defined Italian opera from roughly 1805 to 1840. The term *bel canto* means "sweetly sung" or "beautiful singing." It was a lighter style of singing than those that would take its place by the middle of the century, with Verdi and Wagner. Today's popular clichés about opera singing are of huge voices singing at full volume, loud enough to carry over massive, thickly scored orchestras. But *bel canto* placed an emphasis on the purity and sweetness of vocal tone, and on agility and virtuosity – lots of scales and ornaments and other acrobatics, done with lighter singing, smaller voices. The singers' lines stand on their own in *bel canto* opera, with the lightly scored orchestra mostly in the background, not adding much to the vocal parts.

I grew up playing the trumpet; the compositional style of *bel canto* opera reminds me of *Carnival of Venice*, the well-known set of variations for trumpet and wind band, based on the Italian carnival tune. *Bel canto* opera, like *Carnival of Venice*, makes very little use of minor keys, prolonged dissonance, and other devices familiar to today's listeners through listening to so much late Romantic and Modernist music that depicts wrenching emotions and disturbing subject matter – think of Korngold's opera *Das Wunder der Heliane*, for example, which *A Year in Classical Music* chose as Best Composition of 1926. The innocence and naiveté of the *bel canto* style is a stark contrast. In a *bel canto* opera you can have a man being marched to his death or a queen going mad, but they're singing what sounds like Italian carnival music, or even a Sousa march. So you have to listen for more subtle expressions of intense emotion in *bel canto* opera: in the shape of the vocal lines, the vocal delivery, and acting.

Today we remember Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini as the great masters of *bel canto* opera, but they certainly weren't the only exponents of the style. In 1837, in the eyes and ears of his professional colleagues and of the public, Saverio Mercadante was the equal of his three famous peers; in fact, his music would be considered the equal of Verdi's for many years to come. Niccolò Zingarelli, the director of the Naples Conservatory of Music, died in 1837, and in selecting his replacement the Conservatory chose Mercadante over Donizetti. Mercadante had been chosen over Donizetti in 1833, as well, for the post of *maestro di capella* at the Novara Cathedral – one of the most prestigious appointments in the Catholic Church for a musician.

Mercadante was based at Novara from 1833 to 1840. Novara is in northern Italy, close to the border with Switzerland and to Milan and Bergamo, where Donizetti was from – Mercadante was from Naples, so the two composers had essentially traded places, Mercadante moving to the north and Donizetti to the south. Mercadante's years at Novara were the most productive and successful of his career; the generous paid leave in his contract at the cathedral allowed him time to compose two or three operas a year in addition to his Church commissions. But the 1830's also presented Mercadante with

some uncertainty as an opera composer, prompting him to experiment with new ways of writing. Living in the north had uprooted Mercadante and deprived him of the familiar cultural environment of Naples, and he'd felt the spontaneous artistic inspiration of his youth begin to wane. Then in 1836 his opera *Briganti* had been coolly received in Paris – in large part because it was so completely overshadowed that winter by the premiere of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, which was the great event of Parisian opera in the 1830's. This had been a significant blow to Mercadante's confidence. It led him to seek new and better ways of doing things.

So it was in 1837 that Mercadante composed and produced his masterpiece: his opera *Il giuramento*, which means *The Promise*. It was the first of a series of great operas that marked Mercadante's artistic maturity. It was also Mercadante's first contribution to the reform movement begun by the exiled revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini in 1836, that would soon bring an end to the *bel canto* era. These reform operas gave the orchestra a more important role, and they moved away from singing purely for the sake of singing, adapting the style and structure of the music to suit the drama – in this, the “reform operas” of Mercadante, Pacini, and others prepared the way for Verdi. By the start of the following decade Mercadante would produce several more of these reform operas, which earned him a reputation amongst many of his contemporaries – not least amongst them Franz Liszt – as the most important composer of Italian opera in the later 1830's.

The story of *Il giuramento* is taken from Victor Hugo's 1835 play, *Angelo the Tyrant of Padua*. In the opera, it's the year 1300. Bianca has been forced by her parents to marry Manfredo, the villain of the story. Bianca is in love with Viscardo, though, while Manfredo has been trying to seduce Elaisa. Of her many suitors, Elaisa is most impressed with Viscardo. So both Bianca and Elaisa love Viscardo, but when Viscardo meets Bianca it's love at first sight, so it's the love of Bianca and Viscardo that's meant to be. Now, during a war that had taken place some years earlier, Bianca had saved Elaisa's father's life. Bianca's father had captured Elaisa's father during a battle, but Bianca had convinced her father to let him go instead of having him executed; so Elaisa had sworn eternal gratitude to Bianca. Back to the year 1300, then, when Elaisa realizes that Bianca, her rival for Viscardo's love, is none other than the young girl who had saved her father's life, she remembers her vow of gratitude and decides to give up on Viscardo so that Bianca can have him. But Manfredo suspects that Bianca has been unfaithful, so he fakes her death and stages her funeral, all as part of his elaborate plot to get revenge on her lover. Elaisa knows about Manfredo's plot for revenge, though. Manfredo is planning to poison Bianca, so Elaisa manages to swap out the poison with a narcotic that puts Bianca in a deep sleep instead of killing her. But then Viscardo bursts in, and it looks to him as though Elaisa has poisoned Bianca. In his rage he stabs Elaisa. Just as she stabs her Bianca wakes up, and Viscardo realizes his mistake. It's too late for Elaisa, though. Viscardo and Bianca can only stand by helplessly as she dies.

Il guiramento was a spectacular success, receiving more than 400 performances in Europe and America before it fell out of the repertoire around the year 1900, to be revived again more recently. There's a good story behind the best available recording of *Il guiramento*. The Vienna State Opera had been rehearsing for an unstaged, concert performance of the score in 1979, but four days before the premiere the tenor who was cast as Viscardo had to cancel because he'd gotten sick. It so happened that the great tenor Plácido Domingo was in Vienna for another recording project, so he agreed to learn the role of Viscardo in just three days, and with only one rehearsal. But he sounds like he'd known the role for years on the recording, which stars Agnes Baltsa as Bianca under the direction of Gerd Albrecht. The recorded sound is good, though it favors the voices at the expense of the orchestra, which you ought to be able to hear much better in performances of these reform operas, which were intended to give the orchestra a more important role.

There's one other entry in Mercadante's catalog in 1837: he and Donizetti, who we'll get to in a minute here, were two of the contributors to a group composition project. The previous year had seen the death of mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran, who had been considered the greatest singer of all time by many of her contemporaries. A cantata was commissioned in her memory, the composition of its different movements assigned to Mercadante, Donizetti, Pacini, Vaccai, and Pier Antonio Coppola. But the piece received only a single performance and was judged to be bad music; there are no recordings available today.

Gaetano Donizetti had been 18 when the Congress of Vienna reorganized Europe. In 1837 he was 40 years old, and in the next-to-last of his sixteen years based at Naples. At the time, Naples was the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies – a union of the monarchies of Naples and Sicily that had been in place since 1442 (though not without interruption). The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies included the southern half of the Italian peninsula and the island of Sicily. As for Donizetti, by 1830, with the premiere of his opera *Anna Bolena*, the composer had reached his artistic maturity. By the middle 1830's he was becoming better and better known internationally. Donizetti lived in Naples with his wife Virginia, but he traveled extensively to various theaters around Italy to produce his operas. He wrote music at astonishing speed: he more than once turned out a full-length, three-hour opera in only eight or ten days. Sir Charles Hallé – for whom the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, England is named – would later ask Donizetti if it was really true that Rossini had composed *The Barber of Seville* in just two weeks. Donizetti replied, “Oh, I quite believe it. He was always such a lazy fellow.” Like Rossini, then, Donizetti composed music so quickly that even in exploring a single year of his output, there's a great deal of music to talk about. (It must be acknowledged, though, that the ability to work this quickly depended on the use of certain cookie-cutter formulas – but they were formulas that Donizetti, at his best, was able to manipulate with real artistry.) In 1837 Donizetti completed three full-length operas, several songs, a secular cantata for the birthday of the wife of the king

of Naples, and four sacred works for voices and orchestra: two requiems, a *Miserere*, and a Mass setting, the *Messa di Gloria*. (Donizetti composed one of those three requiems, for his colleague Niccolò Zingarelli, in just three days.) So Donizetti completed at least a dozen pieces that year, but we have recordings only of the three operas, together with a single recording of the *Messa di Gloria* by the Budapest Philharmonic and its Italian conductor, Rico Saccani.

Donizetti's *Messa di Gloria* is a lightweight but very attractive piece. In the opening *Kyrie* and in a few other passages it seems to be cut from the same cloth as the Mozart *Requiem*: a dramatic, operatic take on Catholic liturgical music in minor keys, bookended by solemn brassy chords. But as the piece develops, most of the music turns out to be major key and cheerful; all in all it's not dark and searching like Mozart's *Requiem*. The Donizetti is dominated by the vocal soloists, not the choir, with the same procession of arias and ensembles that you'll hear in his operas. Saccani leads a good performance by the Budapest players, with graceful singing in good balance with the orchestra. You can buy the CD or download MP3 files of it at amazon.com.

Donizetti's first 1837 opera was *Pia de' Tolomei*. The well-known American Donizetti scholar William Ashbrook considered *Pia de' Tolomei* to be one of the composer's weaker operas. But in light of recent revivals of this opera by different companies, some commentators have begged to differ, insisting that if any of Donizetti's operas deserves a reappraisal, it's *Pia*. They point to the two lead characters, Ghino and Pia, as amongst the composer's more inspired creations, and to Ghino's death scene as one of the most moving passages in Donizetti. The tragic heroine plot comes from a passage in Dante's *Divine Comedy* that describes the death of a real-life woman of Dante's time, of whom we have no definite historical record. As rendered in the opera, the story goes like this. Ghino is in love with Pia, but Pia is married. Ghino finds out that Pia is going to meet a man in secret late at night, and decides to tell her husband about it, thinking it will break up their marriage and give him a chance to win Pia's heart. Pia's husband has her ambushed and captured at the meeting place, and imprisons her. But when Ghino visits Pia in prison, he realizes that the man she had gone out to meet was her brother, not a lover. Pia had not been unfaithful to her husband. Ghino is filled with remorse. He decides to go and confess his scheme to Pia's husband, but he gets ambushed along the way and is mortally wounded. Even so, Ghino makes his way to Pia's husband and tells him the truth just before he dies. Pia's husband rushes to the prison to try to call off her execution, but he gets there too late, so both Ghino and Pia end up dead.

I compared three recordings of *Pia de' Tolomei*, and I don't recommend the one available both on CD and DVD by the Teatro La Fenice di Venezia. The orchestra is too far in the background, and the tempos and conducting sap the music of much of its spirit and style. Also it's a live recording, with the singers sometimes moving too far from the microphones. *Pia de' Tolomei* is at its musical best in the recording with the Radio and Television Chorus and Orchestra of Italian Switzerland, led by Bruno Rigacci. But there are a couple

of problems with this album. First, it's a selection of highlights on a single CD, so you don't get the entire opera. In between the musical numbers, a narrator explains what's going on in the story. But it's all in Italian: everything the narrator says and all the text in the booklet. Everything's in Italian with no translations provided, so unless you're fluent in Italian this recording won't be of much use to you by itself. That's why I've also provided a link, at ayicm.com, to the Opera Rara label's record of *Pia*, led by David Parry and starring the fine *bel canto* tenor Bruce Ford as Ghino. Again, the musical performance is lesser than on the Rigacci album, but it's still serviceable, and you get the entire opera, plus an extra CD of revisions Donizetti made to the original score, plus an excellent booklet with the full libretto and translation and historical essays. The best way to get to know *Pia de' Tolomei* would have to be to get both the Rigacci and Parry albums, and listen to them side by side.

Donizetti's second opera of 1837, *Roberto Devereux*, is one of his best. *Roberto Devereux* was regularly produced at European and American theaters until around 1882, where *Pia de' Tolomei* received only around twelve or fifteen productions before 1860, when it lost its place in the repertoire. *Roberto Devereux* boasts the most dramatically effective plot of Donizetti's 1837 operas, "clearly motivated and well-paced," as Ashbrook put it. The story is historical fiction, weaving a tragic love-triangle plot around a loose telling of the 1601 execution of Robert Devereux, who was the Earl of Essex and a member of the court of Queen Elizabeth. In the opera, Queen Elizabeth loves Robert, who has been away at war in Ireland and has been charged with treason against the Queen. Robert arrives back in London, where Elizabeth is prepared to pardon him as long as he still loves her. But Robert has fallen in love with the Queen's favorite lady in waiting, Sara; and this is a double problem because while Robert was away in Ireland, Queen Elizabeth arranged for Sara to marry the Duke of Nottingham. Sara knew of Elizabeth's love for Robert, so she hadn't been able to refuse to marry Nottingham by explaining to Elizabeth that she was in love with Robert, too. But when Robert gets back from Ireland and presents himself before the Queen, he thinks, wrongly, that she already knows he loves another; so Robert handles the meeting badly and gives away his secret. Elizabeth is furious that Robert loves someone else, and refuses to pardon him for the charges of treason. Robert is condemned to death. Queen Elizabeth offers to call off Robert's execution if he'll tell her who he's fallen in love with, but Robert won't betray Sara. At the last minute, Sara runs to Queen Elizabeth and tells her the secret. Of all her ladies, Sara had been the Queen's favorite, so she's moved to pity and decides to call off the execution. But it's too late: just like at the end of *Pia de' Tolomei*, they're just minutes too late to call the execution off.

Roberto Devereux's depiction of Queen Elizabeth was Donizetti's third portrayal of one of the British Tudor queens in his operas. The first had been of Anne Boleyn, in *Anna Bolena* of 1830, and the second of Mary Queen of Scots in *Maria Stuarda* of 1834. That's interesting to me, as I recently watched Showtime's four-season series *The Tudors*, which features its own portrayals of Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth. (I don't remember Mary Queen of Scots making an

appearance, but then it was hard to keep track of all the characters.) In any case, recording Donizetti's three Tudor queens was one of the great accomplishments of American soprano Beverly Sills in the 1970's. Together with Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland, Sills was one of a number of singers and conductors who led a revival of the *bel canto* repertoire and singing style at around that time, and it's the recording of *Roberto Devereux* starring Sills as Queen Elizabeth that's my choice for this opera. Now *Roberto Devereux* is one of Donizetti's most popular operas, so there are at least a few other excellent recordings of it. Edita Gruberová has also recorded a fine Elizabeth. The Opera Rara recording of *Devereux*, while not featuring any superstars in the cast, is a reading that balances very good performances of all the roles with outstanding tempos and conducting. On the recording with Montserrat Caballé as Elizabeth, José Carreras gives us the best performance of Devereux's character on record. But still, even if it's called *Roberto Devereux* this is really Queen Elizabeth's opera, and for me the most enjoyable rendition of it is Sills', as she steals the show. *Devereux* contrasts two sides of this fictional Elizabeth: ruthless political figure on the one hand and vulnerable, forlorn romantic on the other. So it's the most dramatically complex and vocally challenging of Donizetti's three Tudor queens and it's perhaps Beverly Sills' greatest accomplishment. *Devereux's* Queen Elizabeth is one of the most complex and difficult of all *bel canto* soprano roles, in fact; Sills said that singing *Roberto Devereux* took ten years off her career.

Roberto Devereux would turn out to be Donizetti's last important achievement. His career went into decline immediately afterwards, for several reasons. First of all, he met with three major professional frustrations that year. For some time he'd been finding state censorship of his operas to be more and more of an obstacle to his work, and as he began his third and final opera of 1837 – *Maria de Rudenz*, with its violent plot – that censorship became particularly aggravating for him. Second, he was passed over for the directorship of the Naples Conservatory in '37, in large part because he came from Austrian-dominated northern Italy; despite having lived at Naples for sixteen years, Donizetti was still considered a northerner and an outsider by the locals. As I said at the start of the program, the Naples Conservatory chose Saverio Mercadante instead, making it the second time Mercadante had been chosen over Donizetti for an important job. Third, Donizetti continued to be frustrated in his goal of following the success of both Rossini and Bellini in producing an opera at the Paris Opéra. As we've seen it usually took Donizetti less than a month to compose an opera, but he had spent five months of 1836 composing *L'assedio di Calais*, painstakingly tailoring it to suit French tastes. Even so he was unable to arrange for a production in Paris. More than any of these professional frustrations, though, 1837 brought Donizetti the great catastrophe of his life: while he was composing *Roberto Devereux* his wife Virginia, only 29 years old, died after a stillbirth. Donizetti would never recover from his grief over losing her, and would never again manage to compose music that equaled the great achievements of his past. Virginia's death began a personal decline for the composer, as well. Six years later, by

1843, Donizetti had begun to show symptoms of bipolar disorder. In 1845 he would be committed to an asylum, where he lived out the last few years of his life.

Even so, he kept working after Virginia's death, completing his third opera of 1837, *Maria de Rudenz*, by early December of that year. The story is the most extreme, shocking subject matter Donizetti ever set to music, and at the premiere it was a flop and scandal for the composer. At its first production it was given only two or three performances and then closed down, largely due to its violent story, which as I've said drew aggressive resistance from the state censors. The composer himself didn't like what he'd created, and didn't return to lead the orchestra from the harpsichord after opening night. None of the theaters in Venice would ever again hire Donizetti to compose an opera for them, though *Maria de Rudenz* did find a warmer reception in Rome, and outside of Italy. As for the plot, it's so over the top, so hard to believe, and so complicated, I won't attempt to fully summarize it here. But if you'd like to sample some operatic death scenes, *Maria de Rudenz* is full of them. Maria dies no less than three separate times, and at the end, five other characters go with her, leaving just a single lead role standing.

Here's an abridged summary of story, though. At the start of the opera, Corrado was engaged to Maria. But he had started to think she was unfaithful to him, so he abandoned her in the catacombs of Rome and left her for dead, assuming she'd never find her way out of the maze of underground tunnels. Maria does find her way out, though. She finds Corrado again and tries to blackmail him, to take revenge on him by breaking up his engagement to another woman. So he kills her again, stabbing her this time, but once again Maria hasn't really died, and she comes back again in Act Three disguised as a ghost, still trying to spoil Corrado's wedding. This time she does spoil it, by killing his bride. Somehow, though, even though he's just watched Maria kill his bride on their wedding day, Corrado's heart warms to Maria and he begins to understand just how much she really loves him. It's all too late, though, because Maria then pulls the bandage away from the wound where Corrado had stabbed her, and falls down and bleeds to death. This time she's really dead. Also, along the way several other major characters have died, so Corrado is the only lead left standing. For the full, complicated story, though – and you'll have to read through it two or three times before you'll be able to keep track of everything – you'll have to consult the libretto.

There are two recordings of *Maria de Rudenz* available, and it's the Opera Rara label's studio recording that I recommend. It's a polished, stately reading that stars Nelly Miricioiu as Maria, backed by the Philharmonia Orchestra under David Parry. There's a strong case to be made for the other recording, of a live performance, once again at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. The roles of Maria and Enrico are better sung on the La Fenice record, by Katia Ricciarelli and tenor Leo Nucci. The La Fenice production has the energy of a live performance, which the Opera Rara studio recording can't quite match. But the La Fenice production is poorly recorded where Opera Rara's is captured in first-rate studio sound. You don't get a libretto or translation with La

Fenice, so Opera Rara's album is definitely preferable. The La Fenice performance is worth hearing for the singing of Ricciarelli and Nucci, though, and you can buy the full opera on two CDs or a single highlights disc.

Telling the history of *Maria de Rudenz* has forced me to spend a lot of time putting the opera down, since, like I say, it was a scandal and flop at its premiere. So I want to emphasize that I like the opera. I think it only just falls short of *Roberto Devereux*, and mostly for dramatic reasons. It was the violent story that set people against the opera in its day, and not, to my ears, any deficiency in the music – though it should be recognized that critics at the premiere wrote of uninspired, formulaic composing and poor orchestration. But I suspect they were motivated by objections to the plot to criticize the music. The opera is well received by critics today. Considering the extent to which Hollywood has desensitized all of us to violence, no one today should have any trouble looking past all the make-believe death scenes and enjoying the music. Act One of *Maria de Rudenz* stood out to me, in particular. It's a distinctive and attractive composition, making extensive use of minor keys with a funereal atmosphere much like the minor key sections of Donizetti's *Messa di Gloria* of 1837. And since Maria doesn't come back from the dead for the first time until the end of Act One, the music is dominated by fine singing from the men, especially Enrico and Corrado.