

harsh upper register, the “sucked-out” middle is still quite problematic. Callas’s voice is often nearly unrecognizable, the recording suppressing the plush of her middle register, which, even in her darkest days, never deserted her. It is even more obvious when comparing the more natural, balanced 1980 EMI LP (Angel ZBX-3910, HMV RLS-757) and 1987 EMI CD (7 49187) versions—though *not* EMI’s horrible, ruined 1997 “Callas Edition” remastering. EMI’s source was a tape copied directly from the original for tenor Alfredo Kraus right after the performance, without any EQ errors. Evidently, Kraus first gave it to recording producer Ed Rosen, who issued it on LP in the 1970s and later sold it to EMI. Although the Kraus source has the reduced upper-frequency clarity and dynamic range typical of old analog tape copies, it is preferable. Sadly, the 1987 EMI CD set is out of print and hard to find; one should still seek it out if possible, but if one had to choose between the currently available options, I suppose the RDP-Richter(/Pearl) version would be preferable to EMI’s 1997 disaster.

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Robert E. Seletsky

Giulia e Sesto Pompeo. Carlo Soliva

<i>Fulvia:</i> Francesca Pedaci	Coro della Radio Svizzera
<i>Giulia:</i> Elisabetta Scano	Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana
<i>Ottavio:</i> Carlo Vincenzo Allemano	Angelo Campori, conductor
<i>Sesto Pompeo:</i> Patricia Spence	Live recording, Lugano, 17 October 1998
<i>Aufido:</i> Carlo Bosi	CPO 999 825-2 (2 CDs)
<i>Marc’ Antonio:</i> Donato Di Stefano	

Here’s a pleasant surprise. Carlo Soliva (1791–1853) is truly a forgotten composer; when was the last time one of his operas was revived in a staged performance? Not unlike Mascagni, Soliva enjoyed an early success that he was unable to duplicate. His *La testa di bronzo* (first performed at La Scala in 1816) earned the praise of Stendhal and was performed in Naples, Venice, and Dresden. None of Soliva’s subsequent operas created quite as much initial excitement or displayed any real staying power in the repertory. The conventional wisdom about Soliva is that he found the competition of Rossini overwhelming. But this explanation is probably too facile; other composers of the era, faced with the success of Rossini’s operas, kept right on working. Although Soliva lived until 1853, he abandoned opera in the mid-1820s—ironically, only a few years before Rossini himself retired from the operatic stage, after *Guillaume Tell* (1829).

It was enterprising of Radio Svizzera to revive not *La testa di bronzo*, which would have been the obvious choice, but *Giulia e Sesto Pompeo* (1818). Here is a full-fledged opera seria, competing directly with similar works by Rossini, that exudes mature confidence.

The performance makes use of a new critical edition of the score. CPO admits (booklet, p. 4) that a brief scene for the chorus in act 1, beginning with the words “Tacciano i venti,” is missing: “The original scene is no longer extant. Here it has been recorded in ‘symbolic form’ with a declaimed chorus based on Daniel Steibelt’s (1765–1823) piano piece ‘L’orage.’” What CPO means by the phrase “recorded in ‘symbolic form’” is anybody’s guess. Nor is it at all clear why music by Steibelt was adapted to fill the gap, rather than some piece chosen from one of Soliva’s other operas. What is heard on the recording is an orchestral prelude with a prominent fortepiano part, depicting the storm, followed by the chorus—which is definitely sung, not “declaimed.” (CPO does not tell us who was responsible for the adaptation, including the orchestration.) The entire sequence lasts two and a half minutes and is quite effective. If we hadn’t been told, we might never have suspected that we were not listening to anything but pure Soliva. Nothing is said about cuts. Act 1 runs for seventy-five minutes in this performance, which is entirely plausible; but act 2, at a mere forty-seven minutes, seems a bit short for an opera seria of this vintage. Certainly some of the recitatives throughout the performance are concise to the point of terseness.

Soliva is known to have admired Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*, and *Giulia e Sesto Pompeo* almost seems to have been modeled upon the Mozart work. Both operas feature a decidedly inept conspirator named Sesto, who is ultimately pardoned by his intended victim. There are musical similarities as well. Soliva’s Fulvia, who is one angry woman, reminds the listener of Mozart’s Vitellia more than once. And compare Mozart’s “Ah, grazie si rendano al sommo fattor” (in act 2 of *Tito*) with Soliva’s “Dalle cimberie grotte uscì cupa la notte” (the number that begins act 2 of *Giulia e Sesto Pompeo*): the resemblance in musical layout and mood is surely too close to be entirely coincidental.

The libretto, by Benedetto Perotti, is a bit of a mess, but at least it is messy in an interesting way. Four of the characters are based on historical figures: Octavian, Mark Antony, Sextus Pompeius, and Mark Antony’s wife, Fulvia. Octavian and Mark Antony, together with Lepidus, formed the Second Triumvirate (the libretto refers to them as “i Triumviri,” even though—since Lepidus is not mentioned—there seem to be only two of them). Sextus Pompeius, the son of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (also known as Pompey the Great), was their enemy. (This is the same Sextus who appears as a character in Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* and in Lucan’s epic *Pharsalia* or *The Civil War*.) The libretto mentions other historical characters (Julius Caesar, Brutus, and Cato) and historical events (the battles of Pharsalus and Pisauro). But the chronology is hopelessly muddled. If we insist on trying to pin down the opera’s action to a specific date, the year 39 B.C. is as good as any: in that year Octavian and Mark Antony made peace—temporarily, as it turned out—with Sextus in the Pact of Misenum. The more familiar you are with Roman history, the more confusing (and improbable) the libretto is likely to be;

the best course is probably to forget about the historical facts and accept the libretto as a colorful piece of invention, set in an imaginary antiquity.

In the opera, Ottavio and Marc' Antonio are conducting a mopping-up operation after defeating Sesto and his army. Marc' Antonio intends to divorce his wife, Fulvia, and marry Ottavio's sister, Ottavia (who does not appear in the opera). Ottavio has marital plans of his own: he wants to marry Giulia, who is his prisoner.¹

Fulvia—quite a tough lady—violently resists her husband's efforts to repudiate her. Giulia, who is love with Sesto, also resists Ottavio's plans, although more passively. Meanwhile, Sesto and some of his soldiers manage to infiltrate the camp of Ottavio and Marc' Antonio in disguise and move about there quite freely (suggesting that the vaunted Roman military discipline is not all it is cracked up to be). A false report that Sesto and all of his men have been killed buys Sesto some time. Sesto, Fulvia, and a turncoat named Aufido plot to murder Ottavio (and, it is implied, Marc' Antonio as well).

Act 2 begins with a striking “night scene.” The conspirators have arranged to have the torches throughout the camp suddenly extinguished, so that they can rush into Ottavio's tent and kill him under the cover of darkness. Sesto thinks he has run through Ottavio with his sword; but in fact, in the darkness and confusion, he has killed Aufido instead. (This must be the pregunpowder equivalent of “friendly fire.”) Sesto is captured, voluntarily reveals his true identity, and is threatened with the usual dire consequences.

At this point in the action, there is finally a confrontation between Fulvia and her husband, basically an excuse for a fire-breathing aria in which Fulvia hurls insults and reproaches at Marc' Antonio but—in an aside—admits to herself that she still loves him. Next comes a duet between Ottavio and Giulia. Predictably, Ottavio offers to spare Sesto's life if Giulia will agree to marry him. She refuses, preferring to die with Sesto. Ottavio is so impressed by her courage that he pardons Sesto and commands that Giulia and Sesto be wed. Since Marc' Antonio and Fulvia join in the final jubilation, we must assume that they have resolved their marital difficulties, at least temporarily. (No one sheds a tear for Aufido or is tactless enough to remind Sesto that he killed his co-conspirator in cold blood. The implication seems to be that Aufido got what he deserved. A comprimario's lot is not always a happy one.)

This rather offbeat plot inspires some unconventional musical choices. Because Marc' Antonio is a comprimario role, while Fulvia is a prima donna, Fulvia sings a big confrontation duet not with her husband, as one might expect, but with Ottavio. For that matter, although the two soprano roles are of equal importance, Fulvia and Giulia do not have a duet. (Technically, one supposes, Giulia is—in the somewhat illogical terminology of the *primo ottocento*—the prima donna assoluta, if only because hers is the title role, while Fulvia is the prima donna seconda; but the composer seems to have been careful to give both roles the same amount of solo and

ensemble music.) Sesto, a part written for a female mezzo-soprano (by 1818 the castratos were a dying breed), does have a duet with Giulia, with the predictable amount of suave singing in thirds, as well as a quite dramatic trio with her and Ottavio in act 2, after the failure of the assassination attempt.

Near the end of act 1, the false report of Sesto's death leads to a bouncy sextet with chorus ("De' rei tiranni in petto"), straight out of opera buffa, in which each of the characters expresses relief (for his or her individual reason). Ottavio and Marc' Antonio then exit, taking with them their men (i.e., part of the chorus). Giulia, Fulvia, Sesto, and Aufido remain onstage with Sesto's disguised supporters (i.e., the remainder of the chorus), and the act ends with these forces joining in a grandly written oath of vengeance. The stylistic incongruity ought to bother us, but somehow Soliva brings it off.

Throughout the opera, Soliva's music is expertly crafted and often attractively melodious. Although he writes well for the orchestra—his instrumentation, by the standards of his time and place, is rich and warm, rather than thin and noisy—he is, in some respects, still recognizably an Italian opera composer of the period: in act 2, for example, the highly dramatic cries of the chorus of soldiers, demanding that Sesto be put to death ("Vieni, e vedremo in faccio a morte quel volto altero impallidir") are topped off by the inevitable chirping piccolo.

One surprise is the comparative austerity of the vocal writing: definitely taking Mozart as its basic model, it also aspires to a neo-Gluckian severity much of the time. Although the four leading roles (Giulia, Fulvia, Sesto, and Ottavio) are by no means undemanding, Soliva does not seem much interested in florid vocal display. The bars upon bars of dense coloratura that we associate with other opera composers of the period (not just Rossini, but Mayr, Mercadante, Pacini, et al.) are absent from this score. Although there was presumably nothing to stop singers from embellishing the music at will in productions mounted without the composer's direct involvement, one suspects that to some extent Soliva's operas may not have been thought of as "singers' operas," and that this may have contributed to their relative lack of success.

Conductor Angelo Campori has a good sense of the opera's essential dignity, but he generates plenty of excitement whenever the music rouses itself. Orchestra and chorus are both first-rate; the solo clarinetist, who gets quite a workout in this score, must be singled out for special praise. The recitatives are accompanied by a delightfully mellow-toned fortepiano, played by the chorus master, Diego Fasolis. (He is also heard, of course, in the Steibelt piece previously mentioned.)

The cast is excellent. Francesca Pedaci brings temperament and firm, ringing tones to Fulvia's generally forceful music. By contrast, Elisabetta Scano's Giulia is meltingly feminine, although no pushover when put to the test. One hesitates to praise Scano for singing with truly instrumental accuracy, because that might

imply that there is something mechanical about her vocalism, but her intonation is so reliable that the accuracy of pitch is a pleasure in itself.

Patricia Spence has a warm, soft-textured mezzo that makes the male impersonation plausible: this Sesto, though an experienced soldier, is probably supposed to be a relatively young man. Certainly much of his music evokes the lover rather than the warrior. Ottavio, who is ostensibly the Bad Guy for most of the opera's action, is also given a lot of ingratiating music. Carlo Vincenzo Allemano possesses a suave lyric tenor and creates a character who is sympathetic enough to make the final act of forgiveness reasonably convincing.

Carlo Bosi and Donato Di Stefano complete the cast satisfactorily, but here we run into a slight problem. CPO's cast list, both in the booklet and on the back of the box, says that Aufido is sung by Bosi, who is billed as a bass, and Marc' Antonio by Di Stefano, who is billed as a tenor. But listening to the performance, one quickly realizes that Aufido is a tenor, while Marc' Antonio is a bass. I have been able to confirm (via the Internet) that Signor Bosi is in fact a tenor and Signor Di Stefano a bass; so it is the two singers' vocal categories that the cast list has wrong, not their assigned roles. Both gentlemen sing well, which is the important thing.

This is another one of those live recordings (presumably of a concert performance) that could be mistaken for a studio job. There is no applause (not even at the end of the opera, where many live recordings dutifully retain it), and the only noticeable extramusical noises are a few page turns. The sound is full and impactive, with the voices well forward; at the end of the overture, the cymbals and bass drum deliver quite a punch.

The booklet includes an acceptable essay about the composer and the work, as well as some information about the performers, including photos. The libretto is provided in Italian, English, and German. But CPO, like so many recording labels, needs to hire an editor and a proofreader. The English translation of the libretto is credited to "ar.pege-translations (Brussels)." Was it done with some sort of computer software? In addition to the usual quota of obvious typographical errors, the translation contains at least one howler and one questionable choice. "Il fragor dell' armi"—"the clash of arms" (i.e., of weapons)—is everyday operatic language, amounting to a cliché. Here it is translated as "the stink of arms"—apparently because somebody assumed that the Italian noun *fragor* must be related to the English word *fragrance*. In another episode, Fulvia denounces her husband: "Mostro! Di sangue hai l'anima, e di vil fango il cor." This is rendered as "Your soul is a bloodthirsty monster, and your cowardly heart is full of excrement." Well, *fango* can admittedly mean all sorts of unpleasant things, including *mud* and *filth*, but "a heart full of excrement" sounds like something a Symbolist poet might have written in the 1890s. Would an aristocratic Roman lady in an opera of the bel canto era, no matter how provoked, use such language? (Interestingly, the German

translation picks up both of these readings from the English, employing *Gestank* for *fragor*, and *Kot* for *fango*.)

While I am carping, I will point out that the cover photo (on both the box and the booklet) of a moss-smothered classical column looks appropriate—until one notices that the column in question has a Christian cross carved in relief upon it. This libretto’s chronology may play fast and loose with historical events, but the action definitely takes place in the pre-Christian era.

In short, this is an enjoyable release, and one that reminds us that there could be considerable variety in the world of early nineteenth-century opera.

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Roland Graeme

NOTE

1. It is not at all clear exactly who the Giulia of the opera is. The cast list describes her as “the banished L. Cesare’s daughter.” By “L. Cesare,” are we to understand “Lucius Caesar”? In the opera, Fulvia accuses Ottavio of having sent Giulia’s father into exile, but Giulia herself accuses Ottavio of having *killed* her father. Perhaps the father has died in exile, making Ottavio indirectly responsible. Ottavio, of course, is Julius Caesar’s nephew. The libretto refers, more than once, to him as Julius Caesar’s

“figliuolo”—meaning his adopted son and heir. Since Giulia describes herself as “de’ Cesari il sangue” (i.e., “of the blood of the Caesars”), this makes Ottavio’s love for her seem dangerously close to incest. To add to the confusion, *Julius* Caesar had a daughter named Julia, who was once married to Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus but who died young. No, Julia was not Sextus’s mother; that lady was one Mucia Tertia. Cornelia Metella, who is described as Sextus’s mother in Handel’s opera, was in fact his stepmother.

Norma. Vincenzo Bellini

Norma: Leyla Gencer
Adalgisa: Giulietta Simionato
Pollione: Bruno Prevedi
Oroveso: Nicola Zaccaria
Clotilde: Luciana Piccolo
Flavio: Piero De Palma

Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala
 Gianandrea Gavazzeni, conductor
 Live performance, 13 January 1965
 Myto Records (distributed by Qualiton
 Imports) MCD 034-286 (3 CDs)

There was a time, not too long ago, when the very name of Bellini’s *Norma* made sopranos quake and listeners salivate. Now, however, it seems as if it is just another opera. So what happened? My thought is that this once revered work has fallen victim to the same situation that afflicts the classical recording industry—oversaturation.

The first complete recording of *Norma* did not appear until 1936, when the Italian firm Cetra recorded the work with the then-famous dramatic soprano Gina Cigna and the conductor Vittorio Gui. The next recording did not appear until 1954—the first Callas/Serafin *Norma* released on Angel, the recording that began to alter modern perceptions about Bellini’s work. In 1955 you had two choices if you