

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.

doi:10.1093/oq/kbio54

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

wanted to hear this opera complete on records. Today you can find shelves of recordings of the work (both live and studio) at Tower Records and on the Internet.

To be fair, there are good and bad points about this. On one hand it is good that *Norma*, once an elusive revival piece, is now much more accessible. On the other hand, because of many ill-advised performances, the title role has lost much of its mystery and allure. Once considered the pinnacle of operatic achievement and dared by only the most consummate of sopranos, *Norma* is now sung by just about anyone who can manage the notes. Almost every Fach of the female voice is represented: dramatic sopranos, spinto sopranos, heavy “coloratura” sopranos, even mezzo-sopranos. Although one might initially applaud such daring, many singers should have left well enough alone. That being said, it remains a fact that, as with any challenging role, only a handful of artists’ voices fit *Norma* in all the right places. During the 1960s the list was quite short, but it did include Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé, and the heroine of this set, Leyla Gencer.

Most readers of *The Opera Quarterly* are familiar with the career, if not the voice, of this feisty Turkish soprano. Born in Istanbul in 1928, the daughter of a Catholic mother and a Muslim father, she studied with the Italian soprano Giannina Arangi-Lombardi and the baritone Apollo Granforte. She made her debut in Turkey in 1950 as Santuzza and quickly established herself as a reliable, passionate singer. By the late 1950s she was specializing in the bel canto repertory, and by the end of her stage career (the late 1970s) Gencer had become regarded as the premier Donizetti interpreter. Although she was shamefully neglected by commercial recording companies, her talent was important enough that she took part in many of the most important Italian ottocento operatic revivals during the twentieth century.

A dynamic performer, Gencer knew what audiences liked. She was captured in so many pirated live performances in the 1950s and 1960s that she was nicknamed “the Queen of the Pirates.” She was, in fact, a perfect singer for the then burgeoning industry of pirated opera recordings. For buyers her uninhibited dramaticism was, aurally, extremely satisfying, and this did much to spread her popularity. Not surprisingly, Gencer’s pirate catalogue contains some of the most vivid performances ever captured by a microphone. Because of copyright expirations and changes, most of these once coveted recordings are easily available today: you can go into almost any Tower Records store and find at least twenty Gencer recordings.

Gencer was a very clever singer. By that I mean that once she realized her true artistic temperament lay with the more dramatic roles within the bel canto realm, she refashioned her essentially lyric-coloratura instrument into a dramatic coloratura. Pedagogically, this is a dangerous thing to do. In Gencer’s case she was lucky, and it worked.

There was, of course, a price to be paid. Because of the extra pressure she put on her instrument, the registers segregated, and an inevitable coarseness often invaded her singing. Not deterred, Gencer simply incorporated such deficiencies into her interpretations. Although she had a serviceable high E-flat, usually she did not venture above high D. (In *Norma* it was Gencer's habit to conclude the final act 2 trio with an interpolated high D, though the score does not rise above high C.) Considering how she pushed and pulled at her voice, it is surprising that her pianissimos were so elegant. Indeed Gencer's high pianissimo singing reminds me of the diaphanous, wispy high notes heard in Amelita Galli-Curci's later recordings.

Like most divas, Gencer evokes strong reactions in her listeners. One either likes or dislikes her work but rarely is unmoved. Much of this has to do with the distinct quality of her voice. When young (in the 1950s), the voice was a soft-grained lyric coloratura with a gentle, sweet timbre. As she began to mature as an artist, Gencer molded her voice into a more dramatic instrument. By the time of her prime (around 1969), this had created some incongruities within her timbre: a dark, mezzolike lower register with a forceful chest extension and an often unwieldy top register (when singing *forte*) contrasted by floated pianissimos that retained an attractive vulnerability and were some of the most haunting sounds one could hear. Because of her mauling of her instrument, the tricky upper passaggio area (F and G at the top of the staff) always gave her problems.

Myto has always been a champion of Gencer's performances, and now the label offers its second Gencer *Norma*. (The previous one originated from 1966 in Lausanne—MCD 981.177.) In this case, Myto has also provided fans with the rare opportunity to compare performances of the same opera within the same CD release. After the complete La Scala performance, the listener is offered about an hour and a half of excerpts from three other performances. I love this kind of release because it provides the opportunity to learn so much about a singer. One quibble, however: I realize that Myto was trying to be as organized as possible when presenting the music from these four performances, but I would have preferred a slightly different way of handling the layout. First we are given the complete performance from Milan on 13 January 1965. This takes all of the first CD and part of the second; next are selections (carried over onto the third CD) from performances in Buenos Aires (18 July 1964), Verona (24 July 1965), and Naples (30 January 1965). What is even more confusing is that everything looks the same in Myto's printed layout of the track listing.

The sound is not bad in the central Milan performance, but it varies during the others. (I found the Naples performance too dark for my taste—I like to be able to hear the bite of a singer's natural timbre.) Generally, the sound is perfectly acceptable. There are occasional glitches throughout, but nothing that distracts from the

performances. Indeed, I assume that anyone who would buy such a recording would be familiar enough with these types of problems that they probably will not even register.

It would not be practical to attempt in-depth analyses of the performances offered here. Norma was one of Gencer's great roles; she had an excellent instinct for Bellini's music, as well as a sense of drama that enabled her to illuminate the character's public and private emotional struggles. Suffice it to say that all the trademark Gencer effects are present. I confess that I have always considered Leyla Gencer to be a sort of bel canto Magda Olivero. Both singers had distinctive voices and an uncanny ability to grab high pianissimos out of thin air, spinning them with great beauty. Both could also utter some unbelievably ugly sounds to support their theatrical interpretations. Different voices, of course—but both artists were extremely savvy in expressive vocalism, had strong musical temperaments, and took the same kind of vocal chances. Both sang with an almost animal savagery that can be aurally riveting. With both Gencer and Olivero there are always moments where they sound as if in extremis. But don't let that fool you. Both singers knew exactly what they were doing. That was their art.

A passage early in the Milan performance shows just how clever Gencer was and what lies in store for the listener: at the end of Norma's opening recitative "Sediziose voci," on the word "mieta," she thrusts up to a pianissimo high A that she endlessly suspends, creating one of her most telling effects. It is in the approach to the high A-flat that her secret lies: Gencer prefaces the soft high note with a tremendous thrust—rather like a feint in boxing. Because of her approach, the listener thinks it will be a loud high note; the soprano, however, shocks the listener by doing the exact opposite. It is a brilliant device that, in the hands of such a creative singer as Gencer, works powerfully on a number of levels: it is a striking interpretive choice; it highlights the beauty of Gencer's soft singing; it lends a certain elegance to the note itself; and, most interestingly, it provides intimacy to the phrase. This was a favorite trick of Gencer's, one she often used.

There are other examples of trademark Gencer vocalism here as well, including guttural, choked glottal stops and chested dramatic singing. There are also some suspect pitches, occasional misjudgments of placement, and flat singing. The area between F at the top of the staff and high B-flat often posed problems for the soprano when attempting to keep a *forte* tone focused and attractive. A couple of moments during the Milan performance fall short of perfection—the finish of the first Norma/Adalgisa duet, "Oh! rimembranza!" finds the singers finishing almost a half-step flat. Similar pitch problems occur during the famous "Mira, o Norma" duet, suggesting that the problem may have lain at the feet of Giulietta Simionato (unusual for that excellent singer).

As one might expect, the outstanding moments of Gencer's performance include two of the most difficult passages: "Qual cor tradisti" and "Deh! non volerli

vittime,” both from the last act. These are moments where she can (and does) offer some of her special thrusted pianissimos. This section also finds Gencer adroitly emphasizing the different colors of her sound by digging deep into a raw chest register and then, within a split second, moving into a heady register. Although on the written page that hardly sounds moving, when experienced it can have a devastating emotional impact on the listener. Another such moment can be found in the bridge between “Deh! con te” and “Mira, o Norma” (CD 2, track 8). During this section Gencer utters certain sounds that are peculiarly hers and that add much to the intensity of the moment, fleshing out the mental portrait of Norma she is so carefully creating for the listener. As with similarly gifted singers—Callas, Behrens, Mödl, Rysanek—certain phrases that Gencer sings become indelible in one’s memory.

Most important, Gencer provides the character with a vivid face. And when it comes to listening to opera without the benefit of stage, costumes, or the rest of the package, such “aural faces” become extremely important. It is through such creativity that a listener becomes completely swept away by a singer’s interpretation. During a time when Callas, Sutherland, and Caballé were all imposing their own personal stamps on this role, it is to Gencer’s credit that she manages to do the same without encroaching on the interpretations of the others. It is all her own. This is why so many of Gencer’s live performances remain popular, even though they took place over forty years ago.

I do not mean to be dismissive when I do not dwell on her colleagues in this review, for they are excellent, and their contributions to the success of the performances are considerable. Prevedi provides an often suave Pollione. Giulietta Simionato and Fiorenza Cossotto, the Adalgisas, both have their moments. With them it comes down to a matter of personal preference for vocal sound—either the round, vibrant voice of Simionato or the more steely bite of Cossotto. Personally, despite her occasional pitch problems, I favor the more sympathetic timbre of Simionato. Zaccaria is a dependable, if woolly, Oroveso. No less important is the leadership of Gianandrea Gavazzeni, who provides strong support for one of his preferred sopranos. No matter what, however, this is Gencer’s show, and a grand show it is.

Is this a *Norma* you should buy? Not if it is your first recording of the opera. As with many Myto releases, there are brief notes and a track listing but no libretto. This *Norma* is meant to supplement your library. If you are a fan of *Norma* or of Leyla Gencer, it should definitely be on your shelves.