

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

A sampling of operas and opera highlights

"Luisa Miller," by Giuseppe Verdi, conducted by James Levine, Sony S2K 48073

"Don Pasquale," by Gaetano Donizetti, conducted by Riccardo Muti, EMI 54490

"Die Zauberflöte," by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, conducted by Roger Norrington, EMI 54492

Just because it is important to familiarize today's audience with "Luisa Miller," Verdi's great setting of Friedrich Schiller's play *Kabale und Liebe*, the Metropolitan Opera's new Sony release is disappointing. Except for fine singing by tenor Plácido Domingo, the voices and pace are forced.

Even after the wide alterations to Schiller's play made by Verdi's librettist Salvatore Cammarano, the core point of the opera is the same: love (*Liebe*) is impossible in a society run by the manipulations (*Kabale*, literally, cabals) of the oligarchy. Schiller's complex characters are reduced to those of the peasant girl Luisa, her father, the local count and his henchman Wurm, who lusts for Luisa, and Luisa's beloved, who is the count's son Rodolfo in disguise.

The opera, however, is no mere dramatic "passion" of tragic love, but remains a very political comment on society. Luisa and Rodolfo cannot be permitted their simple love, because the count has another bride for his son. Wurm, the venal archetype of those who run monarchical societies, invents the horrible intrigue of imprisoning Luisa's father, and forcing her to betray Rodolfo to save her father's life. Rodolfo, a romantic fool, cannot rise above his own passions to figure this out, and so, Luisa dies at his hand.

Thus it is essential to show the *emotional differences* between Luisa,

in particular, and the various characters from the oligarchical court. Luisa herself must also change and develop, as with so many Verdi heroines, from innocent happiness, to passionate distraction, and finally to a moral strength the others lack.

The problem is that soprano Aprile Mollo, as Luisa, sings as though her voice were a laser in the old Soviet Army's anti-missile system. The instrument is a fine one and she has total control over it, as can be seen when she chooses to take a lovely pianissimo. Her judgment, however, is ice cold. She chooses to pierce the ear, start to finish, without noticeable development.

Comic masterpiece

Riccardo Muti is one of today's best Donizetti conductors, and EMI's new one-disc highlights of Donizetti's comic masterpiece "Don Pasquale" is a good introduction to the genre. Soprano Mirella Freni as Norina, baritone Leo Nucci as Doctor Malatesta, and tenor Gösta Winbergh as Norina's beau Ernesto all sing gloriously and have an audibly grand old time with the humor.

The plot is almost superfluous, but suffice to say that old uncle Don Pasquale marries Norina to disinherit his nephew Ernesto, and she tortures him until he agrees to let her marry the nephew. Norina, as usual with Donizetti ladies, is above it all, and makes fun of everyone, including Ernesto. Freni is mistress of the nuance of voice required to show Norina's dozen personalities, behind all of which, as she says, "is a good heart."

My only complaint is that the disc misses Norina's uproarious duet with her pal Malatesta, in which she reveals how she will use a woman's million moods to confuse everyone. The

solution is to go ahead and purchase the full opera.

Right pitch, wrong tempo

EMI's new highlights of Roger Norrington's spirited 1991 original instruments "Die Zauberflöte" ("The Magic Flute") at Mozart's pitch of A=430 (C=256) is the one to hear—if you believe that Mozart took everything roughly at twice the tempo used by Furtwängler.

"We know that the performances, which began at 7 o'clock, must have moved at a very fair pace, for on two occasions Mozart had walked the mile home from the theater . . . by 10:30 p.m.," the liner notes say. This led Norrington to conclude that, with dialogue, scene changes, and encores, the music must fit in "around one-and-three-quarter hours in a zestful performance. . . . Despite the solemnity of some temple scenes, 'Die Zauberflöte' was conceived as a swiftly moving drama."

I don't believe it. The school of "absolute tempo" is silly. If we can't hear all the music, why make the trains run on time?

Still, for those who wish to explore the possibility that Mozart zipped this fast, Roger Norrington is brilliant within these impossible constraints. The singing is excellent, with beautiful phrasing even at this incredible clip, and the separation of the different orchestral voices and the phrasing of instrumental transitions and inner voices is often a revelation.

But in the end, it is hard to accept Tamino and Pamina's arias at "Andante con moto." Anyone who heard this version of "Die Zauberflöte" as their introduction to the opera, would miss its profundity.