

Bellini

I Capuleti e i Montecchi.

Nicole Cabell (soprano) Giulietta; **Joyce DiDonato** (mezzo) Romeo; **Saimir Pirgu** (tenor) Tebaldo; **Eric Owens** (bass-baritone) Capellio; **Ao Li** (bass-baritone) Lorenzo; **San Francisco Opera Chorus and Orchestra/Riccardo Frizza.**

EuroArts 2059668/also available on **Blu-ray 2059664** (2 hours 15 minutes). Bonuses include interviews with Nicole Cabell and Joyce DiDonato (16 minutes). Subtitles in English/French/German/Italian. *Website* www.euroarts.com. NTSC. 16:9. Region 0. PCM Stereo. Dolby Digital 5.1. DTS 5.1 *Stage Director* Vincent Boussard. *DVD Director* Frank Zamacona. *DVD Producers* Jessica Koplos, Matthew Shilvock. *Engineer* Uwe Willenbacher. *Date* Live performance at San Francisco Opera in October 2012.

Comparison:

Ciofi, Polito, Sacchi, Formaggia, Amodio, Slovakian Ch, Bratislava, Italian International Orch/Acocella (Dynamic) 33504 (2005, rev. Oct 2006)

There have been several fine audio-only performances of this, Bellini's Romeo and Juliet story, with casts that include Elina Garanča and Anna Netrebko, Vessalina Kasarova and Eva Mei, Agnes Baltsa and Edita Gruberová, Janet Baker and Beverly Sills, and Jennifer Larmore and Hei-Kyung Hong. Before the one under consideration here, I had seen only one video version, however, from the Martina Franca Festival starring Patrizia Ciofi and Clara Polito. Highly polished singing from Ciofi did not make up for the casting of a soprano Romeo, and the production itself was rather a mess. (Another video, which I have not seen, came from a live performance in Ravenna in November 2005; it featured Valentina Farcas and Paola Farcas, conducted by Pietro Mianiti – Kicco KCOU9012.) In other words, the DVD field was wide open for this set, taped lived in San Francisco in October 2012.

I dare say that were this audio only, it might be a front runner, so fine is the singing of the two principals and so idiomatic and exciting the conducting. And by default it is the best video, despite the fact that director Vincent Boussard's and Vincent Lemaire's sets with costumes by no less than Christian Lacroix do everything they can to alienate the audience. One senses instant trouble from the opening curtain: hanging from the ceiling, and at first mistaken for stage lighting, are dozens of saddles; nowhere to be seen or sensed are horses. Everyone is in identical (more or less) black/grey trousers, coats and jauntily tied cravats/scarves, circa the mid-nineteenth century heaven-knows-where, all wearing stove-pipe top hats as well. The playing area is wide but shallow; the walls are lacquered, unadorned red or black, with occasional



abstract formations showing up. Romeo enters, similarly dressed (I believe his top hat is even higher than most, and his shirt is whiter); the Capulets walk offstage while he is singing and return a few moments later.

One can tolerate the silliness and abstraction until Scene 2, in Giulietta's bedroom. Wearing a sort of flouncy evening gown that she grips to her white bodice, it falls off when her grip loosens: I wonder why. But wait: her room is a continuation of the lacquered walls, only now they are a bright, shiny golden colour, and so is the reflecting floor, so one can't tell where walls end and floor begins. But wait: the only prop in the room is a white, porcelain sink, which Giulietta climbs into in order to sing her opening aria; Romeo enters for their duet and the pair sings mostly without approaching one another, what with Giulietta literally climbing the walls and all. So, we begin to understand – Giulietta is crazy, imprisoned both in her mind and by her family, and Romeo can't quite get to her. Not good enough for such ugliness, I must admit. Later, the wedding scene features bleachers (in a picture frame) upon which sit the guests, the (non-singing) women in ugly, over-decorated, multi-coloured crinoline dresses, each with a flower in her mouth. Romeo turns out to be one of them – he drops his dress and spits out his flower before beginning to sing.

However, just listen to the pair of lovers. Nicole Cabell, acting up a storm and giving meaning to every word, sings ravishly and sadly as Giulietta, spinning out Bellini's long lines, with a voice somewhat grander than one normally hears in this music. This does not allow for great feats of added coloratura, but we get the notes as written, with some embellishments, and a gorgeous trill to boot, all delivered in luxurious tone. And, of course, all of this while holding her dress up, balancing herself on a sink, or singing to the back wall.

Romeo may be Joyce DiDonato's greatest role – greatest among many greats – her figure, range and exclamatory style being ideal for the impetuous youth. She strides onto the set as if she owns it, and indeed, she does, pouring out reams of handsome mezzo sound in perfect legato and diction and with thrilling decoration, always at the service of the text and character. One can ignore a certain wiry tremolo on sustained notes about G. Her duets with Cabell touch the heart, in unison, in thirds, in counterpoint. This is some of Bellini's saddest music, from a catalogue of ineffably sad music, and it speaks directly to the emotions – 'weep, shudder, die', indeed.

Tenor Saimir Pirgu's Tebaldo is delivered with earnestness, passion and a few

