



VINCENZO BELLINI, *Bianca e Gernando*, Virtuosi Brunensis, Camerata Bach Choir Poznań, direttore d'orchestra Antonino Fogliani, 2 CD Naxos 8.660417-18, 2017.

How wonderful to encounter this world-premiere Bellini recording, and that the performance is also quite fine (and sometimes astounding)! The recording is based on editorial work by Reto Müller and Florian Bauer and derives from two concert performances in July 2016 at the 'Rossini in Wildbad' Festival (in Germany's Black Forest). The work proves to be strong indeed, thanks in part to the general excellence of the conductor, singers, and instrumentalists.

The 'G' in the opera's title, as Bellini connoisseurs will know, is not a typo. As for opera lovers, more generally, some of them may be aware of *Bianca e Fernando*. The latter is the opera's second version (by Bellini himself), which had its premiere in 1829. *Bianca e Gernando*, the first version, had reached the stage in 1826. The hero's name, originally intended to be Fernando, was changed to Gernando in order to avoid any possible unwanted comparisons with Fernando I, who had been King of the Two Sicilies until his death in 1825. For the second version, the more usual form of the name, with an 'F', was restored.

*Bianca e Gernando* was Bellini's first professionally staged opera, coming a year after his remarkable *Adelson e Salvini*, which the 23-year-old composer wrote for performance by students of the Naples Conservatory during his graduation year.<sup>1</sup>

When writing his first operas, Bellini was already a very skillful composer. His *Il pirata* would come one year after *Bianca e Gernando*, and he would write another six operas before his death in 1835, shortly before he would have turned 34.

The three main roles in *Bianca e Gernando* are vocally very demanding, befitting the remarkable singers available to the youngish composer. For example, the main tenor role (Gernando) was written for the renowned Giovanni David (or Davide) and was adapted, three years later (now renamed Fernando), for the perhaps even more spectacular Giovanni Battista Rubini.

Not surprisingly, there are notable Rossinian moments in the work: Rossini was still in full career at this point. One lively movement for Bianca seems indebted to Rossini's hit-tune «Di tanti palpiti» from *Tancredi*. The cabaletta for Gernando's opening aria resembles



<sup>1</sup> See my enthusiastic review of *Adelson e Salvini* in the September/October 2017 issue of «American Record Guide». The review is now also available online at three sites: the *Boston Musical Intelligencer*: <https://www.classical-scene.com/2017/12/05/holiday-opera-cd/>; *New York Arts*: <http://newyorkarts.net/2018/02/master-already-23-vincenzo-bellinis-adelson-e-salvini-now-superbly-recorded/>; and *Berkshire Review for the Arts*: <http://berkshirereview.net/a-master-already-at-23-vincenzo-bellinis-adelson-e-salvini-now-superbly-recorded/>.

somewhat a cabaletta that Rossini composed for *Il viaggio a Reims* and used again in *Le Comte Ory*. And, perhaps more surprisingly, the bolero-like rhythm of that cabaletta looks ahead to such things as Manrico's «Di quella pira», in Verdi's *Il trovatore*.

Most welcome of all are four highly characteristic Bellinian sweet-sad melodies in slowish rhythm. They are so strong, and so different from each other, that no listener will wish any of them away. The enchanting Act II *romanza* for the heroine, Bianca, and her lady-in-waiting, Eloisa, is built on one of these melancholy tunes. The two voices alternate and combine in unexpected ways as the number goes along. I have found myself returning to this number several times in order to appreciate its subtle beauties.

The orchestra is used adroitly and with much variety: for example, in extended solos for one or another string or wind instrument, and in moody full-orchestra passages to set a scene, notably when we finally encounter Gernando's father, in his prison with its bed of stone.

The plot contains many conventional elements, but combines them in fresh and even unusual ways. Duke Carlo of Agrigento has been deposed and is thought dead. His son Gernando comes in disguise (and with an army of soldiers), intending to wreak revenge. He is welcomed by his father's loyal retainers. The usurper, Filippo, fears that Gernando might return and is set on marrying Gernando's sister Bianca – a widow with a baby son – in order to establish his legitimacy. 'Adolfo', i.e., the disguised Gernando, shows him (forged) proof that Gernando died on the battlefield. Bianca (appearing late in Act I) agrees to marry Filippo but is puzzled that 'Adolfo' so resembles her supposedly dead brother.

In the second and final act, Filippo reveals to 'Adolfo' that Duke Carlo is in fact not dead but locked up in a vault. 'Adolfo' strategically promises to Filippo that he will murder Carlo. Bianca, in the *romanza* that I so love, begs the spirit of her supposedly dead father to forgive her for agreeing to marry Filippo. (She intends to accept this horrendous fate as a way of protecting her young child.)

'Adolfo' enters and, in a first-rate multi-sectional duet with Bianca, gradually reveals that he is her brother Gernando. The next scene is for their father, alone in his chilly room. His two children make their way to his hidden prison. The music here is at once ominous and indicative of their determined searching. To their startled father they explain everything. The usurper appears and, now knowing the truth, tries to kill Gernando, but Bianca bravely interposes herself between Filippo's sword and her brother. Filippo drops the sword, Gernando's soldiers arrest him, and the rightful family is restored to power.

The libretto's most unusual feature, clearly, is that the soprano and tenor are not a romantic couple heading for marriage. I imagine that this rather special dramatic premise, combined with the high quality of Bellini's music, could help the work hold the stage today.

That is, if the performers are as gifted and appropriate as the ones on this Naxos recording. None of their names was familiar to me. So I was delighted to discover the Russian high tenor Maxim Mironov. His tone is consistently firm, his pitch true. He handles florid passages with ease, and always sounds engaged in the drama. My one request would be that he use more often the soft singing of which he shows himself capable in his Act I aria. He ends the aria with an unwritten high B-flat (i.e., the note just a whole-step below a tenor's 'high C'), which he holds, loudly and securely, for 12 seconds, to cheers from the audience. I found that this broke, briefly, the spell of the opera, and was inappropriate to its tone of Bellinian gracefulness and mood-painting.

Silvia Della Benetta handles Bianca's difficult part with aplomb, suiting her tone to a variety of situations. These include a stentorian announcement to her rightful subjects (in the Act I finale), that heartbreaking *romanza* in which she prays to the spirit of her father, and a piteous cry when she overhears her father Carlo cursing her for agreeing to marry Filippo.

Vittorio Prato, a light bass who can articulate florid passages clearly, if huffily, does just fine as the usurper. A singer with a fuller low register would have better conveyed the character's menace. Luca Dall'Amico's voice is somewhat unsteady, but this seems excusable for the weakened, imprisoned duke (whom we finally meet at the end of the opera). The other secondary roles are well handled.

Tempi, throughout, feel appropriate, and orchestra and chorus are as spiffy here as in two Rossini operas that I reviewed from stage performances at the same Rossini in Wildbad Festival: *Adelaide di Borgogna* and *Sigismondo* («American Record Guide», November/December 2017). This opera was recorded in concert, not staged. Perhaps as a result, the microphones capture everything in near-perfect balance. Applause (understandably enthusiastic) has been edited down to a minimum.

Excellent essay and synopsis (with indications of track numbers) in English and German. The track list helpfully lists the characters in order of their vocal appearance. The libretto (Italian-only) can be downloaded, and is ultra-complete, showing lines that either Bellini chose not to set or are not performed here (I am guessing because no explanation is given).

The 1829 revision, *Bianca e Fernando*, has, among other things, an extra aria for Bianca near the end of the opera. According to Charles H. Parsons («American Record Guide», January/February 1994), the available recording of that version is cut in places but highly proficient. It features Young Ok Shin and Gregory Kunde. I strongly urge any lover of Italian opera to get to know this opera in either of its two distinct versions.

RALPH P. LOCKE

### Scheda riassuntiva

Bianca	Silvia Dalla Benetta
Gernando	Maxim Mironov
Carlo	Luca Dall'Amico
Filippo	Vittorio Prato
Clemente	Zong Shi
Viscardo	Marina Viotti
Uggero	Gheorghe Vlad
Eloisa	Mar Campo
Orchestra e coro	Virtuosi Brunensis, Camerata Bach Choir, Poznań
Maestro del coro	Ania Michalak
Direttore d'orchestra	Antonino Fogliani
Supporto e sigla	2 CD Naxos 8.660417-18
Anno	2017
Registrazione	2016