Despite minor shortcomings, this DVD of *La gazzetta* would make a worthy addition to an academic or personal library. In addition to the production, the DVD also includes an interview with Fo, and the menu background displays Fo's colourful design sketches. While this is not a widely produced opera, Fo's staging is an example of how an interesting production can make opera accessible to diverse audiences. Engaging and clear, the production would be an excellent addition to an undergraduate-level syllabus; insightful and dramaturgically informed, it would similarly stimulate graduate-level seminar discussions. It is also of interest to artists working in the opera profession, not only because of the high musical and dramatic standards it reflects but also because it is a thought-provoking example of how to approach producing an incomplete work.

Jennifer Williams
Cornell University

Rossini

La pietra del paragone

Laura Brioli (Aspasia) *sop*, Marie-Ange Todorovich (Clarice) *mezzo*,
Raúl Giménez (Giocondo) *ten*, Marco Vinco (Asdrubale) *bass*,
Paolo Bordogna (Pacuvio) *bar*, Pietro Spagnoli (Macrobio) *bass*,
Patrizia Biccirè (Fulvia) *sop*, Tomeu Bibiloni (Fabrizio) *ten*

Chorus and Orchestra of the Teatro Real, Madrid
Alberto Zedda *cond*

Pier Luigi Pizzi *Stage Director*

Opus Arte OA 0987 D (2 DVDs: LPCM stereo: 187 minutes)

Sung in Italian with subtitles in English, French, German and Spanish.

On 29 February 1812, Gioachino Rossini turned 20. For an up-and-coming young composer, his achievements were nothing short of impressive. His one-act *farse*, *La cambiale di matrimonio* and *La scala di seta* had been performed successfully at the Teatro San Moisé, and his *dramma giocoso*, *L'equivoco stravagante*, had been produced in Bologna. Soon after that important birthday, however, his compositional activity was to become far more intense. Before his 21st birthday, six more operas by Rossini hit the stage, including three additional *farse* for the San Moisé, *Ciro in Babilonia* for Ferrara, and the *opera seria Tancredi*, which triumphed at Venice's La Fenice on 6 February 1813.[1] Amidst this feverish activity, the young Rossini had to find the time to fulfil his first commission for La Scala – *La pietra del paragone*, a *melodramma giocoso* in two acts to a libretto by Luigi Romanelli, premiered to great acclaim on 26 September 1812.

[1] To these one might add *Demetrio e Polibio*, composed in 1809 but premiered at the Teatro Valle in Rome in May 1812.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003712 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Since 2002, *La pietra del paragone* has been available (unfortunately for rental only) in a critical edition prepared by Patricia B. Brauner and Anders Wiklund, which has been used for several important productions across Europe.[2] For the sheer delectation of Rossini aficionados, two of these recent productions are now available on DVD. One is a version staged in 2007 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris by video artist Pierrick Sorin, a hyper-technological production with several levels of visual complexity that exploit the allure of detachment from 'live' contact between performers and audience.[3] Another, also dating from 2007, is the DVD under consideration, which presents a quintessentially theatrical production directed by Pier Luigi Pizzi and conducted by Alberto Zedda, filmed during the course of live performances at the Teatro Real in Madrid.

In this production originally conceived for the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, Pier Luigi Pizzi, a consummate opera director with vast experience staging Rossini's operas, reinvents Count Asdrubale's country house as a sleek villa from the 1970s decorated in a contemporary style. In the video interview included in the DVD, Pizzi candidly reveals the autobiographical dimension of such setting; the two-level house depicted onstage is not unlike the director's own villa in Castel Gandolfo, on the hills near Rome. Even some of the furnishings (dining chairs, umbrellas, and more) used onstage are taken from the director's own home. Pizzi's autobiographical take on this opera is quite convincing. More than just revealing the director's personal affinity with this early Rossini opera, it succeeds in showing that *La pietra del paragone* is filled not only with countless delights from the lost world of early-nineteenth-century comedy and opera buffa, but with timeless characters who effortlessly survive the test of time, enjoying the casual elegance and the aimless 'dolce vita' of a well-to-do villa in the Roman countryside. Accordingly, Pizzi prompted cast members to convey the laid-back atmosphere with their gestures and demeanour, playing games of tennis, taking advantage of the swimming pool, enjoying food and beverages, and promenading the garden in a variety of summery outfits, bathrobes and bathing suits. As Rossini's score unfolds, some play tennis, others engage in telephone conversations, play pick-up-sticks, or steal Alberto Zedda's baton and conduct a few bars of music. Meanwhile, choral interventions are assigned to servants and gardeners, who go about their chores while casually delivering their lines. Everything indicates that in *La pietra del paragone* there is a great deal of action, but not much in the way of drama. Even the conventional excitement of the Act I finale relies more on the sheer humour of Asdrubale's comically ungrammatical utterances and on the exposure of his guests' opportunism than on actual dramatic tension.

While Pizzi's production unhesitatingly takes centre stage, Alberto Zedda's musical direction is light-touched, discreet and understated. Under Zedda, the Orchestra of the Teatro Real accompanies well throughout, and showcases the wonders of Rossinian orchestral inventiveness soberly but for the most part effectively. The overture (which Rossini reused in *Tancredi* only a few months later) is well executed, and the choruses and ensembles are skilfully concerted. There are occasional perceptible technical glitches, however, particularly in the strings. The faster passages in the storm in Act II, for example, could use greater clarity.

[2] Venues include the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro (2002), Läckö Castle in Lidköping, Sweden (2006), the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris (2007) and the Teatro Real in Madrid (2007).

[3] Naïve V5089 (2 DVDs).

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In this opera, where many of the characters spend a great deal of time onstage together and the amount of interaction is substantial, one needs a cast prepared and willing to function well as a team. Pizzi and Zedda must feel themselves fortunate to have found a group of artists who provide exactly the kind of teamwork that is needed to make *La pietra del paragone* work so well as a whole. It certainly helps that most of the singers in this production had performed the opera together in Pesaro in 2002, and had therefore had a prior opportunity to develop their interactivity vocally and physically. Indeed, the greatest asset of this cast is not the presence of one or more outstanding artists, but a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is not to say that there is not much to appreciate in individual performances: to be sure, Marco Vinco is a thoroughly convincing Conte Asdrubale. Confident and athletic onstage, highly amusing in the disguise at the end of Act I, he handles the numerous challenges of his role with a strong vocal presence, technical command and excellent diction (the latter a welcome trait that characterizes most of the singers in this production). His aria at the end of Act II is finely executed, seductive and genuinely moving. At his side, Marie-Ange Todorovich is similarly successful as Clarice, a role Rossini composed for Maria Marcolini, the brilliant contralto who was to create the protagonist of *L'italiana in Algeri* the following year. Dramatically and vocally one can see how much Rossini relied on the abilities of this performer, and Todorovich rises to the occasion bringing to her role a warm tone, polished coloratura, and an excellent balance between comic verve and a mildly sentimental vein. The duet with Asdrubale in Act I, amusing but also filled with genuine pathos, is one of the gems in this recording. Raúl Gimenez, a consummate Rossinian tenor, takes up the role of Cavalier Giocondo, whose character foreshadows the effusive lyricism of Donizetti's comic tenors. Gimenez's voice is past its prime, and aspirations and unevenness of tone are heard frequently in Act I. Still, he capitalizes effectively on his experience, and makes up for his vocal weaknesses with elegant phrasing and a poised onstage presence. His recitatives are particularly effective throughout the opera, and the extended aria 'Quell'alme pupille' in Act II is rendered with intimacy and elegance. Paolo Bordogna is an amusing and appropriately pedantic Pacuvio, the poetaster who obsesses himself and all present with his vacuous poem 'Ombretta sdegnosa del Missipipì'. When he finally corners Donna Fulvia and delivers the verses in their entirety in one of Rossini's most brilliant nonsense arias, he is utterly successful, the final, seemingly accidental splash into the small swimming pool comically nullifying his vainglorious poetic efforts. The other comic bass is Pietro Spagnoli, who is vocally uneven, with frequent coarse sonorities in his middle register, but portrays a plausibly boastful character, and contributes his fair share to the hilarious Act II terzetto with Giocondo and Asdrubale. The cast is adequately complemented by the *seconde parti*, Laura Brioli (Aspasia), Patrizia Biccirè (Fulvia) and Tomeu Bibiloni (Fabrizio).

The sound and, even more, the video quality of this DVD release are consistently excellent, and make for an extremely enjoyable listening and viewing experience. From my low-tech perspective, I can only wonder why Opus Arte decided to release this feature on two discs. If sound and video quality have to do with it, then the decision would be thoroughly forgivable. If not, having to switch discs at the end of Act I provides no advantages as far as I can tell. The subtitles in several languages (including English) are effective overall. I have examined the English translation, which is functional, albeit unnecessarily free in numerous instances (an aspect of opera subtitles as widespread as it is regrettable and –

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from my viewpoint – incomprehensible). The welcome extras include a synopsis and interviews with Alberto Zedda and Pierluigi Pizzi, who illustrate some of the salient aspects of Rossini's opera and its production in Madrid. All in all, I am delighted to own a copy of this recording. As much as I am intrigued, and even amused, by the technical virtuosity of Pierrick Sorin's Châtelet production, I am glad incurable traditionalists like myself have the opportunity to experience a video-recording that delivers what I consider the essence of this early Rossini gem: a work filled with musical treasures, utterly amusing, whose full potential is ideally realized on the aging but sturdy wooden planks of a stage.

Francesco Izzo
University of Southampton

Verdi

I due Foscari

Renato Bruson (Francesco Foscari) *bar*, Alberto Cupido (Jacopo Foscari) *ten*, Linda Roark-Strummer (Lucrezia Contarini) *sop*, Luigi Roni (Jacopo Loredano) *bass*, Renato Cazzaniga (Barbarigo) *ten*, Monica Tagliasacchi (Pisana) *mezzo*, Aldo Bottion (Fante) *ten*, Aldo Bramante (Doge's servant) *bass*

Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro alla Scala
Gianandrea Gavazzeni *cond*

Opus Arte OALS3007 D (Dolby digital stereo: 115 minutes)

Sung in Italian with English subtitles

On 22 July 1848, Giuseppe Verdi wrote to his faithful librettist Francesco Maria Piave with a warning: 'In subjects that are naturally gloomy, you end up if you're not careful with a deadly bore – as for instance with *I due Foscari*, which has too unvarying a colour from beginning to end.'[1] Coming from a man who lost interest in many of his past works, such a comment should certainly be read with caution; but in the case of *I due Foscari* Verdi may have had a point. Commissioned after the wild success of *Ernani* in Venice in March 1844, *Foscari* was the second operatic outing of the Verdi-Piave duo and was premiered in Rome's Teatro Argentina on 3 November 1844: less warmly received than its predecessor, but probably not the *mezzo-fiasco* proclaimed by Verdi. The subject, based on Byron's play *The Two Foscari*, was in fact the back-up option – the first choice, Giuseppe Revere's 1839 play *Lorenzino de' Medici*, having been rejected by the Roman censors. And, although Verdi praised Byron for being 'delicate and full of pathos', he seemed to foresee dramatic difficulties with the subject even at a very early stage, writing to Piave that 'the play does not quite have

[1] Letter from Verdi to Piave (22 July 1848), in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi I* (Milano: Ricordi, 1959): 751–2, and quoted in Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: From Oberto to Rigoletto* (rev. ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 179.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003712 Published online by Cambridge University Press