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
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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/S1479409800003724 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the theatrical grandeur needed for an opera, so rack your brains and try to find something which will make a bit of a splash'.[2]

Did Piave ever manage to find that elusive 'something'? Not really, has been the answer of most Verdi scholars, who have tended to side with the composer about what Julian Budden terms the opera's 'prevailing gloom'.[3] There is more of interest in this opera, though, than Verdi's retrospective criticism would have us believe, not least his experimental (and unique) use of identifying motifs for each of the principal characters – the Doge, Francesco Foscari; his son, Jacopo; the latter's wife, Lucrezia; and the Council of Ten. Unlike a well-known composer and contemporary from across the Alps, Verdi made no attempt to develop these motifs during the opera, which results in a rigid, 'calling card' system of the type that has attracted famous criticism from composers and musicologists alike. Such polemical debates aside, Verdi's motifs are at the very least symptomatic of his increasingly bold exploration of the relationship between musical and dramatic expression, while – and perhaps more interestingly – the hyper-static results of the experiment may themselves be rendered a virtue of the opera.

Indeed, in this 1988 production of *I due Foscari* from La Scala, conducted with old-school authority by the late Gianandrea Gavazzeni, stasis is the name of the game. The parallel has often been drawn between the soprano-baritone duet that ends Act I and that in *La traviata* Act II, with the latter's moving portrayal of Violetta's psychological development tending to come off a great deal better. In a sense there is, of course, no comparison: Lucrezia and Francesco Foscari's positions remain the same at the end of the duet (and indeed of the opera) as they were at its start. But the performances of Linda Roark-Strummer and in particular Renato Bruson make a compelling case for positions in which they are trapped: Roark-Strummer's Lucrezia has something of the Iron Lady about her, anger and frustration fuelling her repeatedly failed attempts to save her husband. Not always beautiful, her vocal performance nonetheless conveys very well the unusually robust nature of the character, despite her inability to transcend the essential immobility of the plot. Bruson is at least as good as the Doge trapped between his familial and political duties – in turn majestic (if elderly), vulnerable and despairing, but consistently sensitive in both his musical and dramatic reading of the part. Indeed, when the curtain rises on Pier Luigi Pizzi's striking set designs for Act I, it is the Doge whom we see first, standing alone with his back to the audience, contemplating the enormous flight of stairs to his throne in the Hall of the Ducal Palace. His repeated ascent and descent of those stairs during the opera is executed with octogenarian panache, pitting him to moving effect against the very spaces that the Council of Ten inhabit.

Here, as elsewhere in the production, the use of space on stage is imaginative – and as tied into the stasis of the opera as the characters themselves – in what is presumably a legacy of the fact that Pizzi was not only the set and costume designer but also the stage director. Rather than following the contrasting settings specified in the libretto (which include a hall of the Doge's Palace, Jacopo's cell, the square of St Mark's and the Doge's private rooms), the scenery here is hard steel grey and ultra-minimalist throughout. The only concessions to evocation of Venice (usually seized on as respite from the gloom) come at the start of Act III with a mysterious, blood-coloured sun projected onto the backdrop, and the inevitable gondoliers, rowing in procession across the stage during the barcarolle. Yet even

[2] Letter from Verdi to Piave, quoted in ibid., 177.
[3] Ibid., 195.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800003724 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the gondoliers cannot escape monotony: each is dressed in one of a handful of colours appearing in sequence over and over again. And despite the reference to the 'happy crowd' at this point in the DVD's liner-note synopsis, the chorus make no attempt to smile, while the Council's masks capitalize fully on the grotesque and macabre aspects of the carnival tradition. This may be local colour; but not as we know it. Such an interpretation works very well for an opera that long pre-dates the more successful (and sophisticated) use of colour in Verdi's later operas. Here, the contrived incursion of Venetian music and festivities is presented visually as just that – its effects more nightmarish than escapist.

Against this uncompromising scenic background only the deep blue of Lucrezia's dress (and her equally severe eye-shadow), the red of the Council of Ten's robes, and the gold of the Doge's costume stand out. Jacopo, in his monochrome prisoner's outfit, is in danger of fading into the background: perhaps a fitting visual tribute to the ultimate passivity of the role. All of which renders the casting of Alberto Cupido as the Doge's doomed son a rather odd decision. His rich, expansive tenor simply sounds too heroic: coupled with all too frequent 'three tenors' arm gestures, he suggests a man ready to jump overboard and swim home to save the day rather than die of grief on board the ship carrying him to exile. He is vocally best in the more conventionally energized passages such as the bravado leaps of 'Nel tuo paterno amplesso' in the Act II trio.

The main problem with this DVD, though, and with recordings of staged opera productions in general, is that, as the cliché goes, the camera never lies. We see singers sweating heavily under the lights with vocal strain (Cupido is at least saved by Lucrezia's observation of his cold sweat in the prison scene), their mouths opening to reach high notes in a way that is rarely flattering. These sights are mostly unavoidable unless one enters the realm of the true opera film, in which the singer and actor need not necessarily be the same person and, even in cases in which they are, the soundtrack will almost certainly be recorded separately. What is entirely avoidable, however, and what lets down an otherwise intelligent and striking production of *Foscari*, is the camera work generally: the large quota of arms and other amputated body parts accidentally lost or strangely discovered within the frame of so many shots; the pointless flitting from one shot to another; the zooming in or out without any apparent logic; and, worst of all, the frequent recourse to views of the orchestra pit, which serves only to interrupt the atmosphere created on stage.

There was a time in the 1980s when many of La Scala's productions were broadcast live by the RAI directly from the theatre; it is not made clear in the liner notes whether this film was actually broadcast live, or simply recorded as 'live' for later transmission. Given the often haphazard filming, I would suggest that it may well have been a live broadcast. One can safely assume, though, that whatever the precise circumstances of the filming, a major reason behind both the original recording and its more recent release on DVD is that there is a market for the idea, if not the reality, of a 'live' La Scala performance that is nonetheless viewable at a distance of both space and time from the filmed event. What is then ironic is that, watching over 20 years later, the visual effect of liveness – that holy grail in our age of 'Live from the Met' broadcasts and high-definition televisions – is what risks coming between this valuable 1988 performance and enjoyment of it in the twenty-first century.

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