

Donizetti

Il Castello di Kenilworth (DVD)

Jessica Pratt, Carmela Remigio, Xabier Anduaga, Stefan Pop; Chorus & Orchestra, Donizetti Opera/Riccardo Frizza; dir. Maria Pilar Pérez Aspa (Bergamo, 2018)

Dynamic DVD: 37834;

Blu-ray: 57834 139 mins



Donizetti's artistic maturity is usually dated to the production of *Anna Bolena* in Milan in 1830. *Il castello di Kenilworth*

(Naples, 1829) – and indeed 28 other operas – precede that masterpiece, though each of the earlier ones turns out, if you encounter one of them, to possess real merits: if not quite literally innate, the composer's understanding of how to write for the stage obviously firmed up very early on. It's certainly apparent here in a piece that while not as consistent as his finest scores, nevertheless maintains a clear dramatic trajectory and includes some genuine highlights; intriguingly for fans of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, there's even an appearance for the glass harmonica. Donizetti revised the piece for a subsequent Neapolitan production, but it is the first version which is recorded here – apparently for the first time.

The plot ultimately derives from Scott's novel *Kenilworth* (1821), in which Elizabeth I discovers that her favourite Leicester hides a secret wife away at Kenilworth Castle – but unlike the book the opera has a happy ending. From a visual point of view, this period production from the 2018 Donizetti Opera Festival in his native Bergamo is rudimentary, with limited acting from some of the principals, who nevertheless sing with technical confidence and an appreciable sense of style.

Jessica Pratt's Elizabeth takes a while to hit form, while as her rival Amelia Carmela Remigio is both physically and vocally expressive, offering liquid tone. As the two-timing Earl of Leicester, tenor Xabier Anduaga exhibits expert singing, though he's a rather basic actor. The villainous Warney receives a more emphatic interpretation from tenor Stefan Pop, while despite his slightly wavery tone Dario Russo proves capable as Warney's servant Lambourne.



Two as one:
Kelly Markgraf
and Sasha Cooke
portray Hannah

Conductor Riccardo Frizza knows exactly how such pieces go and holds the performance together with skill. *George Hall*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

PICTURE & SOUND ★★★★★

Kaminsky

As One

Sasha Cooke, Kelly Markgraf; Fry Street Quartet/Steven Osgood
Bright Shiny Things BSTC-0127
72:06 mins



Cross-dressing is familiar on the operatic stage – where trouser roles remain features

of a tradition that once lionised *castrati* singers. Yet to date, actual transgender characters are rare, and their stories rarer still. *As One* is a 2014 chamber opera by composer Laura Kaminsky and co-librettists Mark Campbell and Kimberly Reed that gives important – and, with a recent marked rise in anti-trans hostility, timely – voice to transgender experience.

Hannah before (baritone, Kelly Markgraf) and Hannah after (mezzo, Sasha Cooke) comprise the dual-single character whose journey was inspired by Reed's real-life adolescence. Navigating her identity as a trans woman, she encounters societal ignorance and violence; learning she is not alone proves double-edged, yet offers hope for freedom and happiness.

It's an affecting piece, performed with candour, sensitivity and humour under music director Steven Osgood. The post-minimalist score is propulsive and intimately direct, with a string quartet – here the Fry Street Quartet – in supportive, illustrative guise. There's subtlety, too, within a libretto which is delivered in *arioso* lines with a poignant nod to traditions of queer nature writing: nature, we are reminded, 'doesn't work/ In metaphors/ Like leaking boats,/ Or bitter fruit./ It just is.' *Steph Power*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

RECORDING ★★★★★

Korngold • J Strauss II

Eine Nacht in Venedig

Lothar Odinius, Ivan Orescanin, Götz Zemann, Elisabeth Pratscher, Elena Pusztá; Graz Opera Chorus; Graz Philharmonic/Marius Burkert
CPO 555235-2 78:20 mins



Even after Ernst Marischka and Erich Korngold tidied up the original libretto for *Eine Nacht in Venedig* in 1923, it remains an impossible story of mistaken identities, attempted seductions and upwardly mobile servants all caught up in the Venetian carnival. Yet Strauss gave it some of his best music, even if it's really Vienna not Venice waltzing across the lagoon. Mix Korngold into the music with his silky orchestrations, and it gets

even better as arias are moved about and imported from other Strauss operettas originally to beef up the role of the Duke for Richard Tauber.

Wisely, it's Korngold's version that Graz Oper have opted for, though Lothar Odinius is some sea miles away from Tauber as the Duke of Urbino. But there's a pleasing sense of ensemble in this recording, particularly amongst the men – Ivan Orescanin as the pasta cook Pappacoda and the Duke's barber Caramello. And Elena Pusztá is suitably soubrettish as Annina, who takes the place of the woman the Duke is chasing.

Marius Burkert in the pit keeps the performance afloat and knows exactly when to seduce his audience. The lagoon Waltz in Act III has you on your feet in moments. But why is there no dialogue in this recording, and no libretto in the accompanying booklet? *Christopher Cook*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

RECORDING ★★★★★

Mercadante

Didone abbandonata (DVD)

Viktorija Miškūnaitė, Katrin Wundsam, Carlo Vincenzo Allemano, Pietro Di Bianco, Diego Godoy, Emelie Renard; Accademia Montis Regalis; Coro Maghini/Alessandro De Marchi; dir. Jürgen Flimm (Innsbruck 2018)
Naxos DVD: 2.110630;

Blu-ray: NBD0095V 146 mins



Major opera companies tend to avoid the works of Saverio Mercadante (1795–1870), but he's an important figure alongside

the better-known names of contemporaries such as Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi, and specialist festivals are looking at him more and more. This production represents his first appearance at the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, where in Jürgen Flimm's 2018 production he's given the full period-instrument treatment courtesy of the Accademia Montis Regalis under Alessandro De Marchi.

Mercadante enjoyed a long career, and this is an early work, produced in Turin in 1823. There's some clear influence of Rossini, especially in the overture, which offers alternately punchy and delectable period sounds, though intonation can be a problem and definition is not always sufficiently sharp: