

## AN HOMAGE TO GIUDITTA PASTA

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Gioacchino Rossini

<i>Otello</i>	Assisa a piè d'un salice	Susanna Poretsky
<i>Tancredi</i>	Di tanti palpiti	Delores Ziegler
	Lasciami! Non t'ascolto	Sally Wolf & D. Ziegler
<i>Elisabetta</i>	Quant'è grato all'alma mia	Carla Wood
<i>Semiramide</i>	Bel raggio lusinghier	Olga Makarina
<i>Il viaggio a Reims</i>	Arpa gentil	Catherine Croall

Gaetano Donizetti

<i>Anna Bolena</i>	Al dolce guidami	Ji-Yeun Cho Lee
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Vincenzo Bellini

<i>La Sonnambula</i>	Ah! Non credea mirarti...	Olga Makarina
<i>Norma</i>	Casta Diva	Sally Wolf
<i>Beatrice di Tenda</i>	Ma la sola, ohimè, son io	Patricia Johnson

Eve Queler & Steven Blier, piano.

The idea was excellent. To pay homage to Giuditta Pasta, one of the most legendary singers of all times, muse and inspiration to many great composers, in the bicentenary of her birth. A well-deserving idea, all the more that it was born under the aegis of Eve Queler, a conductor who, like few others in America and elsewhere, had devoted herself to performing the repertoire of the Early Italian Ottocento, offering, during her twenty-five years of activity with her Opera Orchestra of New York, a remarkable number of operas that saw our Giuditta Pasta triumphing on the stage of all Europe. During an interview she gave me a couple of years ago, in reply to my perplexities concerning the absence in her curriculum of works by Pacini, Mercadante, and other so called "minor" composers, Queler answered that she did not feel like betting on less known names, mostly fearing a box office fiasco. Even if we grant for the sake of argument that Queler's doubts with regard to the audience appeal of a "minor" composer, a concert of arias accompanied by the piano is an altogether different matter.

This concert, too, totally relied on the famous composers, featuring a number of arias by the Triumvirate Rossini/Donizetti/Bellini, which the great Pasta had in her repertoire. And they basically were arias either belonging to immortal operas which more or less were never dropped from the standard repertoire (*Norma*, *La Sonnambula*, *Semiramide*, *Tancredi*), or widely rehabilitated by the Belcanto Renaissance of the last decades, and officially recorded by major recording companies (*Otello*, *Elisabetta*, *Il viaggio a Reims*, *Anna Bolena*, *Beatrice di Tenda*). And so the opportunity was lost to get the audience acquainted with absolute rarities, operas which Giuditta Pasta brought to success throughout all Europe and which she always favored, such as, for example, Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo*, or some works by Paer (who would have particularly deserved such an honor in as much as he was Pasta's voice teacher) like *Il principe di Taranto*, *Giselda o Agnese*, not to mention the soprano's favorite "aria di baule", Portogallo's *Frenar vorrei le lagrime*, which la

Signora Pasta nonchalantly loved to insert in other operas. A far more captivating and interesting concert would have resulted.

This preamble concluded, let us review the performance itself. To evoke Pasta's splendors, one of the most paradigmatic vocal phenomena in all history, would be no easy task for anyone. Given that her phenomenal extension (from a low A to a C# or a D in alt, according to Stendhal - but Bellini wrote a E flat for her in *La Sonnambula*) allowed her to tackle roles by an extremely diversified tessitura, considering that probably the only modern singer capable to sing (almost) the whole Pasta repertoire passed away twenty years ago, and that Pasta herself did not disdain recurring to transpositions, Eve Queler divided the several arias among sopranos and mezzosopranos. Susanna Poretsky, a Russian-Israeli mezzosoprano, revealed a warm and pleasing timbre in Desdemona's aria from Rossini's *Otello*, embellished with variations written by Rossini and partially by Pasta's abhorred rival (what an insult!) Maria Malibran. Delores Ziegler's mezzosoprano is way too light and lacking the necessary tonnage needed for Tancredi's abyssal contralto tessitura. Her partner in the second act duet from *Tancredi* was the Europe-based American soprano Sally Wolf, much more at her ease than her partner. This duet was also made interesting by the presence of variations the Swan from *Pesaro* expressly wrote for Pasta. Carla Wood, an American mezzosoprano, flaunted a penetrating voice and a certain propensity towards the coloratura singing in the aria from Rossini's *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*. The fact that either Desdemona and Elisabetta were successfully entrusted to two mezzosopranos corroborates our firm belief that the Colbran roles are better suited to high mezzosopranos than lyric (and, even worse, light coloratura) sopranos. Unfortunately, without wishing to rob Olga Makarina, a good-schooled soprano with a very high top, of her merit, the mistake was made to assign Semiramide, the warrior queen, to a stratospheric light soprano, in the wake of the nightingale Semiramides of the turn of the century. Obviously Makarina, facing an essentially central tessitura, took her revenge interpolating a myriad of extremely high-lying variations, culminating in a E natural in alt at the end of the cabaletta (another practice, as even the walls by now know, to be avoided like the plague). The Scottish soprano Catherine Croall, fresh from the Juilliard School, is an "important" voice; her legato, the predominant feature in Corinna's *Improvviso* from Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*, is undoubtedly perfectible, but this singer is nevertheless a quite promising element. The young Korean Ji-Yeun Cho-Lee displayed a pleasant *lirico puro* soprano, gifted with winsome pianissimos. It is a pity that she didn't test herself against the dreadful cabaletta *Coppia iniqua*. Olga Makarina gave further proof her fine technique in an accurate and diligent performance of Amina's final scene. Until this moment, the program proceeded chronologically, respecting the order in which Giuditta Pasta added the several roles to her repertoire. However, wishing to conclude the concert with the "show-stopper," at the last moment it was decided to invert the last two excerpts. Patricia Johnson, a light coloratura soprano, does not have the vocal weight Beatrice di Tenda calls for, but she sang with taste and correctness. We are not sure we would like to hear Sally Wolf in a complete performance of *Norma*, given that also in her case her instrument is just too light. As most of her abovementioned colleagues, also the American soprano gave an acceptable, albeit hardly exhilarating performance.

Nicola Lischi