

ROSSINI: Semiramide (excerpts). Montserrat Caballé, sop. (Semiramide); Marilyn Horne, alto (Arsace); Samuel Ramey, bass (Assur); Aix-en-Provence Festival Chorus and Scottish Chamber Orchestra conducted by Jesús López-Cobos. Legato Classics LCD-112 (one compact disc)

Legato Classics, Lyric Distribution's CD successor to the old ERR and Historical Recording Enterprises LP lines, has partially resurfaced the same festival performance of Semiramide that had appeared complete on HRE 343 (three LPs). The Aix-en-Provence production, whatever its visual oddities might have been, was one of the greatest bel canto triumphs of this decade. A recording of it, whole or in such extended excerpts as the present CD allows, more than deserves attention in a publication serving readers with ARSC's seasoned collectors' predilections. By concentrating here on the work of Caballé, Horne, and Ramey, and in suppressing Francisco Araiza's aspirated singing as Idreno, the CD program gives an impression of unalloyed vocal splendor at full tilt that is greater than on the LP issue of the complete performance. Even Caballé and Horne, by the way, aspirate just slightly at times while coping with the fiery tracery of Rossini's writing; however, the sheer virtuosity and verve of these ladies' (and of Ramey's) coloratura, especially at their legato best, and their ability to sustain phrasing of elegance and poise at more lyrical moments, impress awesomely.

Lopez-Cobos, for once, does not let things down with his tendency to go limp. He keeps things moving along briskly, and the orchestra performs quite acceptably, even if the conductor failed on this August 23, 1980 outing to draw from his musicians the kind of razor-sharp precision and vitality that distinguish Rossini orchestral playing at its best. To assess adequately Lopez-Cobos' work, even more than that of the singers, one should seek out and consider the complete performance, especially since it complements and rivals the studio rendition under Richard Bonyng's direction, with Sutherland, Horne, and Rouleau in the corresponding roles (London OSA-1383). At the moment, Legato Classics' CD is the only way to sample Semiramide this extensively, since even the London/Decca recording has gone out-of-print.

Legato Classics' rapidly growing catalog, in this critic's experience, has succeeded admirably in upgrading standards from the unevenness (and occasional shoddiness) of the old ERR and HRE lines. The firm has risen to the challenge of digitalization, which on this mastering has not entirely purged the original tape hiss, but has resulted in sound (already decent enough on LP) of the vibrancy and brightness that Rossini's music requires.

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