

## CD Reviews

### Giuseppe Verdi, *Il Corsaro*

---

Matheus Pompeu, *ten*, Ilona Mataradze, *sop*, Aleksey Bogdanov, *bar*, Karen Gardeazabal, *sop*, Mateusz Stachura, *bar*, Pawel Cichoński, *ten*  
Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Choir, Europa Galante, Fabio Biondi, cond  
Fryderyk Chopin Institute, NIFCCD 087–088 2021 (2 CDs: 91 minutes), €18

---

It would be an understatement to say that Giuseppe Verdi was busy in the late 1840s. Reflecting upon his own work ethic from his prolific decades of the 1840s and 1850s, the composer famously remarked in 1858, ‘Since *Nabucco*, you may say, I haven’t had one hour of quiet’.<sup>1</sup> It was rare, indeed, that Verdi was not meticulously involved with the preparations for one of his opera’s premières, but such was the case leading up to his little-known 1848 work, *Il corsaro*. The three-act opera is based closely on Lord Byron’s 1814 poem *The Corsair*, and the libretto was written by Verdi’s long-time collaborator, Francesco Maria Piave. The composer had his sights set on Byron’s poem for an opera four years before the work’s première, but following the enduring success of *Nabucco* in 1842, Verdi received a great handful of domestic and international commissions over the course of the 1840s that captured his enthusiasm and focus more intently. These works immediately included *Attila* (1846), *Macbeth* (1847), the London-commissioned *I masnadieri* (1847), and the Paris-commissioned *Jérusalem* (1847). By the time Verdi was able to return to *Il corsaro* in late 1847, he felt pressured to fulfil his obligation to Francesco Lucca, a rival publisher to Ricordi with whom he had an unfinished three-opera contract. Perhaps Verdi just wanted to wipe his hands of the unsavoury business dealings with Lucca, but the composer was uncharacteristically apathetic to his Byronic opera by its completion. In fact, Verdi did not even attend the Trieste première or early performances. The journey of *Il corsaro* continued to be rocky. Early reception was poor, the opera was eclipsed by his surrounding successes, and it quickly disappeared from the stage altogether.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, revivals of the opera have been scarce, as it has been criticized for being musically and dramatically old-fashioned, particularly in comparison to the innovations of *Macbeth*. The opera opens to a chorus of pirates who set the scene: they live in exile on an island in the Aegean Sea. Corrado, the captain of the corsairs, bemoans his circumstances in his opening aria until he receives a message with military intelligence about the Turkish Pasha Seid, who, predictably,

---

<sup>1</sup> Original: ‘Dal *Nabucco* in poi non ho avuto, si può dire, un’ora di quiete’. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio, *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan: Stucchi Ceretti, 1913): 572.

<sup>2</sup> For further context of Verdi’s tumult in the late 1840s, see Julian Budden, *Verdi*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 185–209.

becomes his nemesis as the plot continues. Corrado pays a visit to his lover, Medora, who is Corrado's emotional opposite. Whereas Corrado is stoic and elusive, Medora wears her heart on her sleeve, as weeping accompaniment figures suggest in her opening Romanza.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the two characters is articulated in their duet, which closes Act 1. Medora's line features florid ornamentation and chromaticism, expressing her distress and unease, and Corrado's melodies are contrastingly stable and harmonically steady. Act 2 opens to an exoticist Chorus of Odaliskes who introduce the beautiful Gulnara in their harem. In her formally conventional cavatina, she scorns her captor, the Seid. The remainder of Act 2 features ensemble pieces, chorus numbers, and a *concertato* finale, all very much within the sonic realm of Verdi's choral style in the 1840s. Corrado disguises himself as a Dervish spy to gain access to the harem and save the women inside, and upon revealing his true identity launches into an extended battle scene with the Seid's troops. Corrado is wounded, and along with his band of pirates, is taken to prison to be tortured and executed. The odaliskes, including Gulnara, fall in love with their unsuccessful liberators. Act 3 is full of musical highlights. The vicious, blood-thirsty Seid finally has a full-scale double aria followed by a duet with Gulnara as she pleads for Corrado's release. The duet hints at more dramatically cogent strategies that Verdi more fully implemented in the 1850s, particularly the flexibility of the characters' dialogue over more atmospheric music. The most significant and dramatically successful moment of the opera is the culminating prison scene, an extended duet between Corrado and Gulnara. As Heather Hadlock has described, the scene is remarkable because Gulnara ultimately does not sacrifice herself, but rescues herself and her lover through an untraditional act of violence by murdering the Seid.<sup>4</sup> Gulnara, unlike Medora, is moved by revolutionary action, and thus shows a strong character development arc. We can hear this contrast as well. In the prison scene, Gulnara sings not only in a traditional bel canto style, but at moments with an intense, almost grotesque sustained exclamatory style or in taunting *canto declamato* during moments of confrontation. Throughout the opera, Medora sings in laments, prayers, and contemplative soliloquies. As Hadlock remarks, Gulnara's ferocious and deviant characterization in Act 3 articulates an unusual historical presentation of gender that straddles a gothic Byronic approach and the more explicitly androgynous rendering of Lady Macbeth. The opera's finale is comparatively trite. Hints of Medora's lament pepper the score as all characters are reunited, alluding to her imminent demise of emotional distress. Corrado, overcome by grief, throws himself from a cliff, and Gulnara faints. Despite the cardboard tragedy of this final *concertato*, Act 3 certainly features the most forward-looking moments of dramatic and musical interest in Verdi's writing. Acts I and II comparatively feature lovely, if traditional double arias and duets.

Nevertheless, this opera is valuable for providing us an atypical glimpse of Verdi's work at the cusp of a dramatic shift in his compositional and dramaturgical style. It is important to consider that Verdi lived in Paris for the majority of 1847–49. He was immersed in the experimental melodramatic traditions taking place within the city, and from them he garnered new approaches to the *mise-en-scène*, and in general, approaches to spatial realism that can be more

<sup>3</sup> Melina Esse, "'Chi piange, qual forza m'arresta?': Verdi's Interior Voices', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1–2 (2002): 63–7.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Hadlock, "'The Firmness of a Female Hand' in *The Corsair* and *Il corsaro*", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1–2 (2002): 47–57.

obviously seen in his works dating after 1850.<sup>5</sup> As Melina Esse has remarked, *Il corsaro* does not necessarily mark a linear transition from a melodramatic to an interior approach.<sup>6</sup> Plot details, formalistic choices, and character development all suggest that this opera, if inadvertently, represents a moment of experimentation to play with expressive dualities: of obviousness versus surprise, histrionic versus subtle expression, hiddenness versus transparency.

This recording of *Il corsaro* was made at the Polish National Opera on August 22–24, 2019, and was released in 2021. The recording was produced as a part of the Fifteenth International Chopin and his Europe Festival hosted by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute in Warsaw. The annual festival aims to contextualize Chopin's works within a broader context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European music, featuring concerts of solo piano pieces, chamber music, symphonic works, as well as operas from Polish and international composers as well. According to the Chopin Institute, each year the festival develops a distinctive concept. The 2019 edition featured Chopin's works through prior, contemporary, later nineteenth-century, and current European historical lenses. The institute uses this angle to account for the diverse historical and contemporary repertoires featured, as well as their core goal to produce performances on both historical and modern instruments for the festival.

Readers and listeners familiar with *Europa Galante* and conductor Fabio Biondi will immediately recognize this recording of *Il corsaro* as falling into the former category. In fact, one of the special qualities of this release is just that: it marked the world première of Verdi's opera on period instruments. Biondi is the founder and director of *Europa Galante*, an Italian Baroque ensemble featuring period instruments. While the ensemble has produced an abundance of operatic and orchestral recordings by Vivaldi, Handel, Cavalli, Boccherini, Corelli, and other Baroque giants, they have also produced a handful of Romantic operas in concert for previous Chopin and his Europe festivals, including Bellini's *Norma* (2010) and *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (2016) as well as Verdi's *Macbeth* (2018). Additionally, the ensemble has joined forces with the Chopin Institute to produce two operas, *Halka* and *Flis, The Raftsmen*, by Polish composer and Verdi contemporary, Stanisław Moniuszko. In all, this recording of *Il corsaro* not only signifies a continuation of *Europa Galante*'s recent forays into Romantic-era Italian opera, but also marks the ensemble's continued collaborations with a number of the album's principal vocalists, as well as with Violetta Bielecka, the Chorus Master of the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Choir.

At the outset of the Allegro overture, listeners will encounter in this recording of *Il corsaro* a subtly new orchestral sound from *Europa Galante*. The original score calls for traditional mid-century Italianate orchestration: piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, cimbasso,<sup>7</sup> timpani, bass drum, percussion (including triangle, cymbals, cannon), harp, and strings. *Europa Galante* followed this orchestration, even utilizing a cimbasso – arguably the most unusual instrument in this line-up – from the

<sup>5</sup> Emilio Sala, 'Verdi and the Parisian Boulevard Theatre, 1847–9', trans. Mary Ann Smart, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7/3 (1995): 185–205.

<sup>6</sup> Esse, 'Verdi's Interior Voices', 62–3.

<sup>7</sup> The cimbasso was often indicated in scores as a more general marker to require a musician to play the lowest brass instrument available. The cimbasso itself is a low brass instrument with a range similar to that of a contrabass trombone. Developed from the upright serpent horn, it was used within nineteenth-century Italian opera orchestras. By the 1880s, Verdi used a valve contrabass trombone.

early nineteenth century. For those familiar with Baroque period instruments, this recording presents some of the common timbral and dynamic features from historic instruments. Generally, the ensemble sounds mellow, with less brightness and stridency in comparison to an ensemble featuring modern instruments. For the opera's most tempestuous moments, like the blustery overture, the orchestra lacked slightly in gusto. The strings, in particular, had limits when the score called for particularly bold effects. Their flexibility in nimble, fast, quiet passages, nevertheless, created expressive contrast and tense energy within the overture. The ensemble certainly found their stride as the recording progressed, exuding great power when the score reached pivotal, culminating moments, such as the aforementioned prison scene, the finale of Act 2, and the brief foreboding Allegro at the start of Act 3. The ensemble also shone in more delicate and lyrical moments, such as Medora's weeping Act 1 cavatina, where they exercised great control and flexibility with tapering dynamic effects. The full ensemble's introduction to the Act 2 Chorus of the *Odalisques* was light, enchanting, and well-balanced.

Matheus Pompeu leads in this production in the tenor role of the corsair, Corrado. He is the first principal introduced with his Act 1, Scene 2 recitative and aria, 'Ah, sì, ben dite, guerra' and 'Tutto pareo sorridere'. The recitative showcased his even tone, subtle *portamenti*, and admirable diction. His introduction was perhaps a little overly poetic for a stoic character. Pompeu's aria highlighted both his precise, declamatory singing and lovely shapely phrasing. Pompeu's voice is quite full, and he could have exercised slightly more restraint in the most pianissimo moments of his aria, but that could also be a result of the nature of the recording as a concert performance rather than a staged event. In trumpeting movements, brisk pieces, and ensemble numbers, Pompeu particularly excelled when he could exude the natural power of his voice. As an ensemble singer, he showed enormous range alongside the rich, dark bass of Mateusz Stachura, who played his pirate comrade, Giovanni. Pompeu was a particularly magical counterpart to the equally bold baritone, Aleksey Bogdanov.

Bogdanov played the Pasha Seid, Corrado's archenemy. From his first entrance in Act 2, Scene 4, Bogdanov brought a villainous, regal air to the role. His dark tone projected expertly over the densest moments of orchestration and choral singing. He was matched delightfully well with Pompeu, as evident in the pair's Act 2, Scene 6 duet. Their staccato, ornamented lines, enunciated diction, and luscious, powerful trumpeting tones are a treat for listeners. Bogdanov is a remarkably expressive, yet subtle performer. With a range of added inflection to his role, he brought the Seid to life with haughtiness, brusqueness and viciousness. Pawel Cichoński, who played the tenor page roles of Selimo, Eunuco, and Schiavo, brought moments of lightness in scenes featuring the Seid, creating effective exchanges with great timbral and expressive contrast. The Seid's number of (false) victory at the opening of Act 3 showed Bogdanov's range of skills; the slow movement *Andantino* featured his finessed lyricism and the following *cabaletta* demonstrated his control over his hefty voice. His range of expression carried into his Act 3, Scene 4 duet with Karen Gardeazabal, and he showed his capacity for both irony and cunning all through subtle affective changes in his tone.

Gardeazabal dazzled in the role of Gulnara, the Pasha's favourite concubine. From her cavatina entrance at the beginning of Act 2, the soprano's agile, expressive *bel canto* singing sparkled. She alternated between light, articulate floridity with more impassioned, well-supported powerful singing, both as a soloist and within ensemble numbers. Gardeazabal portrayed Gulnara with effective nuance and range as a character that is as much celebrated for her beauty as her heroic subversiveness. She sang with gentle tenderness to showcase Gulnara's ability to

placate the men around her, while also demonstrating great strength in moments of spite and forthrightness, essential qualities to effectively convey to her character's development in Act 3.

Iлона Mataradze interpreted Gulnara's counterpart, the delicate, melodramatic Medora. Mataradze performed her opening Act 1, Scene 4 cavatina with a pure and powerful voice, which almost seemed an ill-fit for the fragile character. The soprano took a bit too much liberty in utilizing rubato at florid cadences that stylistically called for a lighter interpretation. Her dotted weeping figures and arpeggiations in the Andante Romanza were a bit excessive and had a slightly jolting rather than sobbing quality. At the same time, however, Mataradze's interpretation invites reflection upon historical performance practices. Did the excessiveness of Mataradze's embodiment of Medora fit more truly to the obviousness of melodrama within opera of this time?<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Mataradze's strong voice was a great match with Pompeu, particularly in their Act 1, Scene 5 cabaletta, where her character took on greater anger in the scene. In her Act 3 death scene, she showed vulnerability with her breathless sighs and greater delicacy, an assured highlight of her performance. Mataradze, evidently, excelled when she could perform at emotional extremes.

A review of *Il corsaro* would not be complete without attention to the Act 3 prison scene between Corrado and Gulnara. The scene opened with a sensitive orchestral interpretation of the Largo number's weeping figures. Pompeu's entrance evoked a little too much power for an imprisoned, wounded character, but when his character moved towards angry resignation and scepticism Pompeu was most believable. Gardeazabal showed affective range from reflective *sottovoce* moments, forthright exclamations, to moments of spinning vibrato and spitting declamation to convey her character's feelings of hate. The pair's ensemble work was tight; their rhythmically variant passages and tutti moments linked together consistently.

The Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Choir were quite special in this recording. The male chorus's opening 'Come liberi volano i venti' in Act 1 treated listeners to their beautifully three- and four-part harmonies in a homophonic texture. Their articulation, diction, and phrasing were admirably cohesive through the opera. Their performance in Act 2, Scene 3 as the Chorus of Turks was boisterous and energetic. Like the male chorus, the women's chorus performed with beautiful, balanced harmony and cohesive phrasing. While they showed great dynamic flexibility within the dancing Act 2 Chorus of the Odalisques, their keen attention to the number's staccato articulation was achieved at the slight sacrifice of their clarity of diction.

The material album is no mere recording with liner notes; rather, it resembles a small hardcover book with its supplementary materials approaching an impressive 200 pages. (The two CDs can be found in sleeves near the back cover.) Photographs of the concert performance featuring Biondi, the principal singers, the ensemble, and choirs divide the written materials of the booklet. After a Table of Contents and list of primary performers and ensemble forces, a detailed track list, divided by act, scene, and number follows. An essay by Kamila Stepień-Kutera entitled 'Nymphs Against the Uproar Rude' [sic] ("Nimfy wbrew rykom hołoty") then appears. Stepień-Kutera's piece provides historical context concerning the rocky inception of *Il corsaro* in the 1840s before launching into a brief study of gender and characterization in Byron's original *The Corsair*. She rightly points out that Byron's ending to *The Corsair* is more intriguingly ambiguous than Pavesi's rendition in the libretto. Using Budden's seminal study

<sup>8</sup> Esse, 'Verdi's Interior Voices', 77–8.

as a critical reference point, she surveys the dramatic effectiveness (or ineffectiveness, in some cases) of Piave's versification choices, the use of traditional closed-scene forms, and Verdi's economy of thematic presentation and variation. While she does not introduce any particularly new argument within the essay, she certainly provides readers a wide tool kit of narrative, textual, formal, and thematic details to latch on to while listening. John Comber's subsequent English translation of Stepien-Kutera's work is effective, but there are a few slightly clumsy syntactical choices and a handful of typesetting errors, particularly with spacing and italicization, that are somewhat distracting to the reader. The libretto is then included, translated from Italian into Polish by Agnieszka Gołębiewska and into English by Comber, before the booklet concludes with biographies of each of the principals, Biondi, Europa Galante, the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Choir, and Bielecka.

While *Il corsaro* certainly has its fair share of traditional scenes and tropes, the work stands as a testing ground to articulate both melodramatic and more introspective sensibilities within Verdi's middle-period style. As Julian Budden aptly remarked, 'beneath the often conventional surface of *Il corsaro* the process of refinement is ceaselessly at work'.<sup>9</sup> In and of itself, this release offers ample opportunity to reflect critically upon the value of historical practices, not only with the period instruments of Europa Galante, but some of the perhaps bolder melodramatic choices made by some of the principal singers. For us contemporary listeners, it is perhaps the layers of historicism that can reveal to us the greatest novelties.

Jane Sylvester  
University of Missouri-Kansas City  
[jsylvester@umkc.edu](mailto:jsylvester@umkc.edu)

doi: 10.1017/S1479409823000198

First published online 27 June 2023

### Polish Romantic Guitar: Chopin, Bobrowicz, Horecki, Szczepanowski, Sokołowski

---

Mateusz Kowalski, *guitar*  
The Fryderyk Chopin Institute NIFCCD 118, 2020  
(1 CD: 79 minutes). €15.00

---

For many readers of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, the words 'Polish Romantic' are apt to evoke Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849) and his iconic nocturnes.<sup>1</sup> For some, they will prompt recall of the mid-nineteenth-century operas *Halka* (1854), *Hrabina* ('The Countess'; 1860) and *Straszny dwór* ('The Haunted Manor'; 1865) of Stanisław

---

<sup>9</sup> Budden, *Verdi*, 209.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Bennett Zon, General Editor of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, for editing this CD review. I also thank Heather de Savage for reading an earlier draft and offering suggestions regarding its improvement.