



Andreas Bauer Kanabas

superb, psychologically probing account of the Aleko aria, where he's very much inside the character and the situation.

Enriched tone distinguishes Banquo's aria, while his ideal sonority and range,

The Complete Celestina Boninsegna

Extracts from *Norma* (Bellini), *Il trovatore*, *Aida*, *Ernani*, *I vespri siciliani*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *La forza del destino* (Verdi), *La Gioconda* (Ponchielli), *Manon Lescaut*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca* (Puccini), *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Le maschere*, *Isabeau* (Mascagni), *Faust* (Gounod), *L'Africana* (Meyerbeer), *Ruy Blas* (Marchetti), *Mefistofele* (Boito), *Semiramide* (Rossini), *Lucrezia Borgia* (Donizetti), *Lobengrin* (Wagner), *Il Guarany* (Gomes), *Loreley* (Catalani), *Andrea Chénier* (Giordano); songs by Leoncavallo, Cantoni, Sabajno, Bach-Gounod, Braga. With Nini Frascani (mezzo-soprano), Giovanni Valls, Fernando De Lucia, Luigi Colazza, Augusto Scampini, Emanuele Ischierdo, Narciso del Ry, Luigi Bolis, Icilio Calleja, Jesús de Gaviria (tenors), Francesco Cigada (baritone), Andrés de Seguro (bass), Carlo Sabajno (piano, conductor). Marston 55003-2 (five CDs)

Like her close contemporaries Enrico Caruso and Titta Ruffo, Celestina Boninsegna (1877-1947) was a vocal phenomenon. When she made her first recordings in Milan in 1904, it was clear that hers was an exceptionally phonogenic voice: a remarkable combination of power, range, agility, dynamic control and beauty of tone. And her final discs, recorded in the same city in 1917-19, are no less impressive: the voice responds promptly at both ends of the range (she sails up to a resplendent

matched with expert phrasing and impeccable intonation, bring dimensionality to Zaccaria's aria in *Nabucco*.

The melancholy to which he draws attention certainly finds its way into the Water Sprite's solo from *Rusalka*, and is arguably even more present in an unusual item for this kind of portrait disc, the final scene from Bartók's enigmatic *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, where it is combined with sensitivity, vulnerability and a whole set of sombre colours: Tanja Ariane Baumgartner is an equal partner here.

The rising star conductor Karsten Januschke brings fluidity to this episode, while ensuring that there is a sense of direction throughout the mostly slow tempo, 13-minute extract from Wagner's epic. Excellent musicianship from the orchestra throughout. GEORGE HALL

top C in *Un ballo in maschera* and brings searing emotional involvement to Azucena's 'Condotta ell'era in ceppi') and the duets give her the chance to generate an appreciable degree of theatrical tension. It is in these later recordings, moreover, that she reveals her ability to bring now-neglected works such as Gomes's *Il Guarany*, Catalani's *Loreley* and Mascagni's *Isabeau* compellingly to life. She is less successful in doing so in the two excerpts from Meyerbeer's *L'Africana*, recorded in

1905 (all her discs are in Italian). Boninsegna had the sensibility of a verismo singer and was most at ease performing works composed after 1870: she enjoyed, for example, a close association with Mascagni and sings very persuasively as Santuzza, Rosaura (in *Le maschere*) and Isabeau, as she does in such Puccini roles as Manon and Tosca (Mimi was less congenial), Boito's Margherita and Ponchielli's Gioconda.

Of these only Gioconda, Santuzza and Tosca were central to her repertory in the opera house, where her most frequently performed roles were Aida and Leonora in *Il trovatore*. She made multiple recordings of excerpts from these Verdi operas—as well as from *Un ballo in maschera* and *La forza del destino*—which have long been admired by record collectors, as have her versions of Bellini's 'Casta diva'. In many respects, indeed, these discs represent a standard of singing that is rarely—if ever—heard today, for Boninsegna combines an excellent legato with brilliance of attack and clarity of diction, boasts a fully developed chest register and ascends effortlessly above the stave without any undue covering of tone. The effect is often electrifying, but the open emission in the middle register creates an impression of psychological immaturity that ill-suits the more spiritually evolved Romantic heroines. And although that strong chest register guarantees audibility of line in

every descent below the stave, Boninsegna's reluctance to transition gently into that register, blending it subtly with the medium so as to create the illusion of a seamless scale, sometimes results in musically crude effects.

Michael Aspinall, in the masterly essay that accompanies these superb transfers by Ward Marston, is quick to acknowledge the soprano's weaknesses, but also shares his enthusiasm for her many strengths, while highlighting her progress over the years: her Columbia and Edison recordings made between 1910 and 1914 are particularly satisfying, thanks in part to the longer duration of the discs. Boninsegna's Edison 'Ritorna vincitor!' is brimming with contrasting emotions, while in 'Pace, mio Dio' we can appreciate her impeccable *messa di voce* and control of the head register. But even as early as 1904-5 we come across treasurable recordings, including one of the most fluently full-voiced versions of 'Mercè dilette amiche' and an appropriately nuanced 'In quelle trine morbide'.

Boninsegna recorded duets with a number of partners. She cannot match the exquisite refinement of Fernando De Lucia in the Garden Scene from *Faust*, but is ideally partnered by Augusto Scampini (in a *Trovatore* 'Miserere') and generates real theatrical excitement alongside the mezzo Nini Frascani and the tenor Icilio Calleja in her final *Aida* recordings.

STEPHEN HASTINGS

OPERA BOOKS

Opera for All: The biography of Sir Peter Jonas

By Julia Glesner, trans. Edward Malthby. Tandem Publishing. 544pp. £25. ISBN: 979-8370810879

Julia Glesner has written a vivid and nuanced portrayal of Peter Jonas, drawing on their conversations during the last year

or so of his life (he died in April 2020) and the memories of selected friends and colleagues from a much longer period.