
Review

Best CD of Verdi's best Schiller opera

by Kathy Wolfe

Don Carlos

by Giuseppe Verdi, based on the drama by Friedrich Schiller
Carlo Maria Giulini, Conductor; Royal Opera House Orchestra, Covent Garden, 1971
EMI CDCC 47701, Five Acts, complete; 3 Compact Discs

The best commercial recording of the most powerful musical setting of a Friedrich Schiller play, *Don Carlos* by Giuseppe Verdi, is now available on compact disc. Carlo Maria Giulini's 1971 EMI recording includes all of Verdi's original five acts, and some of the loveliest Italian bel canto singing on a modern recording. It is Verdi's Italian version, not his original French version composed for Paris in 1867, based on the Schiller drama of 1787.

The cast features Plácido Domingo as Don Carlos, Montserrat Caballé as Elisabetta, Sherrill Milnes as Posa, Ruggero Raimondi as King Philip, Shirley Verrett as Eboli, and Giovanni Foiani as the Inquisitor. All are at their peak of legato singing, before the dents which high pitch, jet lag, and too many *verismo* operas have now made in those voices.

It is Giulini, however, who makes this Schiller as Verdi intended it, in the power and depth of his conducting. Giulini is above all a Beethoven conductor, as his recordings of Beethoven's masses attest. Verdi knew that Beethoven's concept of Promethean greatness is required to set Schiller, and here rises to his most "Beethovenian."

Patriot and world citizen

Giulini brings out the concept of Schiller's *world history* here, as could only a musician steeped in Beethoven's counterpoint. The power of the opera, as of the play, is that of the grand march of universal history, of the fate of nations and peoples. This makes up a "fugal" development, in which the voices of individuals remain fully individual, yet each will ultimately be judged by history, according to whether they

meet Schiller's criterion for "patriot and world citizen": one for whom the progress of nations is the greatest personal joy.

Because Giulini grasps this, he gives emphasis, broad tempi and poetic phrasing, to choral ensembles and orchestral transitions between different voices and poetic ideas. That, for example, is the beauty of his Act I, set in France, in which Elisabetta and Carlos meet, only to be parted. Their soprano-tenor duet must be heard as Giulini directs it, against the jubilant chorus of the French people, who bless Elisabetta for ending the ruinous Franco-Spanish war. When Elisabetta repeats with the chorus, "*Pace, pace!*" (peace!), she evokes the highest form of human beauty, the individual reconciling herself to a higher purpose, for the love of mankind and God.

Giulini, that is, grasps those scenes wherein Verdi used heightened musical pacing, to explicate just the dramatic pacing which Schiller demands.

Schiller's 'Don Carlos'

Schiller's *Don Carlos* drew upon the 16th-century struggle for freedom by the provinces of Flanders against Spain's Hapsburg monarchy, as outlined in his *History of the Revolt of the United Netherlands*. In the play, Schiller handled some historical details loosely, to convey poetic truths of universal consequence. Verdi's librettists, working under his close supervision, produced a version of the drama which many listeners' first taste of Schiller's noble ideas.

In Schiller's "Letters on Don Carlos," Schiller states that the real story is not about Carlos, the Crown Prince of Spain, but about the tragic failure of Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, to establish a republic in Flanders, which has been put to the torch by the Spanish Inquisition. "So soon the edifice stands complete, so falls the scaffolding," Schiller says in Letter V. "So the story of Carlos's passion, the mere preparatory action, retreats to make way" for Posa's story.

The play begins by revealing Carlos's love for Elizabeth of France, whom his father King Philip of Spain has wed. Carlos's friend Posa points out that the prince's fixation on his own problems, while millions are dying, is a major flaw, and asks his help to save Flanders. It is Posa's more serious flaw of ego, however, Schiller writes in his Letters, which leads the protagonists to death, and dooms Flanders. The real need, Schiller states, is for Posa's weakness to be exposed, so that potential patriots in the audience may learn to *succeed* in founding future republics. This crucial lesson was timely, since Schiller was writing on the eve of the French Revolution; similarly, Verdi composed his opera during Italy's struggle for national independence. The lessons are no less urgent today.

Posa must die because he cannot control his emotions, which lead him into a series of fantasies, first, about his influence over the King; later, to decide foolishly upon suicide. Blinded by emotion, Posa is oblivious to the real power behind the throne: the blind old Grand Inquisitor, the real tyrant, the one character who knows how the world "really"

works, who ironically sees more than all others.

Thus, Posa falls into a "flight forward": He panics, and runs right into the Inquisitor's gunman. He dies as a "heroic palliative," writes Schiller, because it is easier than fighting on. "Might not his life, have been of more service than his death?" Schiller asks. "Why did he not employ the time consumed in contriving his death, in thinking of some plan of saving his life?"

Verdi's portrayal

It is this "red thread" of psychological truth through Schiller's drama as a whole, which Verdi weaves into a unified opera, and Giulini realizes for us.

For example, Verdi in Act II successfully shows the intent Schiller expressed in his Letters, by incisive condensations of the play. He sets a later meeting in Spain of Carlos and Elisabetta (Elizabeth), now the prince's stepmother, as a "mad scene" for Carlos. Under Giulini's baton Domingo sings this part with intense Italianate lyricism. Two scenes later, Verdi counterposes Posa's meeting with the King to Carlos's madness. Posa, he shows, is the victim of a more subtle madness.

In the play Schiller took several scenes to bring this out. At one point the King suddenly tells Posa "You are a Protestant!" which is not true, but is the irrational voice of the Inquisition speaking. This psychological one-liner is often lost in performances of the play. Elizabeth later states openly that Posa is insane to imagine that he could convince the King to save Flanders. The self-absorbed Posa is blind to the fact, of which Elizabeth is too well aware, that the Inquisitor has "majority control" of the King's heart and mind. In Schiller, that is Posa's sin: Posa speaks *at* the King, not *to* him, without treating the King as a human being.

Verdi—and in performance, Giulini—capture this precisely. The pace of Posa's music quickens, as he is carried away by the fantasy that he will sway the King, marvelously brought out in Sherrill Milnes's Leonard Warren-like, full legato singing. Philip's attraction to Posa's ideas and Posa's blindness to the King's internal struggle, is underlined when the King warns Posa: "Ma, ti guarda dal Grande Inquisitor!" ("But—beware the Grand Inquisitor!") Posa is oblivious, no matter how often the terrified Philip repeats: "Ti *guarda!*" (Beware!)

Verdi and Giulini's other portrayals of the power of the Inquisitor over the soul of Spain, and the fact that it goes unchallenged, are equally strong. From the introduction to Act II at the tomb of Charles V, to the fanfare and monks' processional at the terrible auto-da-fé of Act III, Giulini brings out with inexorable motion Verdi's brass and bassoon themes for the Inquisitor.

When the Inquisitor himself at last appears in Act IV, Verdi introduces him with the deepest voice of the contrabassoons, a reference to Beethoven's singular use of the contrabassoons in the dungeon scene of *Fidelio*. The Inquisitor, at

his most manipulative, mimics the voice of Heaven by offering the King salvation over Posa's dead body: "Ritorna al tuo dover" ("Return to your duty"); here Giulini shifts to a new voice, and the flutes sing, with consummate irony. His power enforced, the Inquisitor exits, again to contrabassoons.

The soul of the drama

Thus Giulini brings out those high points where Verdi's condensation of Schiller captures the spirit of Schiller, as no pedantic, "verbatim" setting could have. As Beethoven and Brahms emphasized for the different case of *lieder*, the musician must indeed master any text to be set, but then the particulars of it—this word, that sound—are put aside, in favor of penetrating into the single *preconscious idea* of the poem, the "gist" of it, the "unheard sounds" which as Keats said, "are sweeter still." Although a musical drama—in this case twice-removed due to translation from German into Italian—is different from the *lied*, where the poem is set to music, the principle is the same.

Brahms taught that with song, "there is an underlying mood which is maintained through all particulars or all the varied images," as his student Gustav Jenner wrote.* Of one Schubert song, Brahms said, "This melody has welled up from the same single deep emotion from which flowed all the images which are so manifold and yet always say the same thing anew. It is a musical expression of what the *entire* poem left as an impression, within the composer. . . ."

Since the medium of music is distinct from that of poetry, from this *unit idea*, the true musician then must generate a valid new idea, in the medium of music.

Giulini brings out a rarely heard thematic development which begins in that very first "French" Act I Elisabetta-Carlos duet with chorus, "Di qual amor." A key reason for the opera's compelling emotional drive from start to finish, is that this theme reappears, as a theme and variations, throughout the work. (This is one reason why Act I, often cut out with the excuse that Schiller has no such French prelude, should in fact be performed.)

One famous variation of the "French" duet is the Carlos-Posa "Friendship Duet" in Act II, "Dio, che nell'alma infondere." It appears during the auto-da-fé in Act III, when the entire populace of Madrid pleads for the Flemish deputies "Pietà! il Fiammingo nel duol" ("Have pity on Flanders in pain"); in the final act in Elisabetta's monumental aria "Tu che le vanità," as well as in her last duet with Carlos, "Si! l'eroismo è questo."

Only here, at the finale, when Carlos finally transforms himself into a patriot, does Elisabetta weep, as she repeats this theme. These, she says, are the tears of joy, "the tears we shed for our heroes."

* In *Johannes Brahms as Man, Teacher and Artist*, by Gustav Jenner (1865-1920), Brahms's student from 1887 to 1895. The Schiller Institute will publish the English translation in the near future.