

opposing crescendo diminuendo effects causes ambiguity and confusion. Short in duration, the work seems more like the final scene of a more extensive opera. We need to know more about Mario. We need to know more about Cipolla's infatuation with him other than the simple need to dominate. There needs to be more of everything.

The performance is a star turn for Polgár. A big bass voice capable of nuance enacts a malignant character exceedingly well. The remaining roles are minimal, but well performed. The big chorus has a lot to do (almost another character they are). They create a mass of individuals straining to be separate. The orchestra is opulent when it needs to be, raw-boned when necessary. This is an all round good performance of a work that needs more work.

♫ PARSONS

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *Serenade to Music; Five Mystical Songs; Fantasia on Christmas Carols; Flos campi*

Nobuko Imai, viola; Corydon Singers; English Chamber Orchestra/Matthew Best

Hyperion 66420 (Harmonia Mundi USA) 68 minutes

Matthew Best and his Corydon Singers have apparently made a whole slew of well-received recordings for Hyperion; but somehow they have, up to now, slipped past me. This new one, containing some of the most ravishing music Ralph Vaughan Williams ever wrote, strikes me as resistible only by snobs of the ilk that have no use for anything but the very old and the avant-garde — especially as it is so beautifully performed.

The *Serenade* does not, in fact, involve the Corydons. Written in 1938 in honor of Sir Henry Wood's 50th anniversary on the podium, the vocal passages were parceled out specifically to 16 of the then-reigning British vocal soloists. They included such people as Eva Turner, Isobel Baillie, Walter Widdop, and Heddle Nash. There is an alternate version that uses a mere quartet of soloists and a mixed choir, but Best goes for the original, assigning the parts to something like the original singers' modern counterparts. (Sir Henry made a recording for Columbia with the singers specified by the composer — Pearl 9342).

The text is from the Lorenzo-Jessica scene in the last act of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, and Vaughan Williams's music is in keeping with that moon-haunted poetry. Maciej Rakowski plays the prominent solo violin part and the singers sound every whit as good as those for whom the music was intended. The dynamics of the recording, however, are very wide, and my speakers rattled at the climactic moment.

Flos campi (The Flower of the Field) is an unclassifiable oddity — a series of meditations on the Biblical *Song of Songs* for small orchestra, wordless chorus, and solo viola — and to my thinking one of

the most magical of the composer's works. Nobuko Imai's viola falls hardly short of William Primrose's, who starred in the earliest recording under Boult.

This is a marvelous anthology exquisitely performed. I urge you to investigate it.

♫ GREENE

VERDI: *Don Carlo*

Eugenio Fernandi (Don Carlo), Ettore Bastianini (Rodrigo), Cesare Siepi (King Philip), Marco Stefanoni (Inquisitor), Sena Jurinac (Elisabeth), Giulietta Simionato (Eboli); Vienna Philharmonic/Karajan

Hunt 220 [2CD] (Qualiton) 159 minutes

Once again, a Karajan performance proves more interesting than his studio version of the same work. Karajan's *Don Carlo*, recorded for Angel in 1978, seemed to be the culmination of the maestro's efforts to present a perfect interpretation of Verdi's masterpiece. By the time he reached the studio, however, Karajan had drained some of the life from his account of the score; and the recording often sounds pompous rather than profound.

Not here. In Salzburg 33 years ago, Karajan still favored a symphonic approach to the opera, but then he supported his singers with more care and offered a more human view of Verdi's tragedy. The opera is beautifully paced, with a superb ebb and flow leading to increasing tension and release. As a result, the 'liberata' theme seems drenched with tragedy, not triumph, in its various appearances. Of course, no one could make the Grand Inquisitor scenes more sinister.

The cast is outstanding. Fernandi's bright, clear tenor is a welcome change from the heavyweight voices we usually hear, and he sings very expressively. So does the golden-voiced Bastianini, whose Karajan-inspired shadings in Rodrigo's death scene are quite moving. Siepi is in superb voice — 'Ella giammai m'amo' is magnificent — reminding us that great singing involves careful attention to nuance, text, and expression as well as notes. His restraint will strike some as remoteness, but others will find it perfectly in keeping with Karajan's conception. That same description applies to Jurinac's cool but beautifully sung Elisabetta (her 'Tu che le vanita' is terrific). Simionato has a few rough moments, but you'll forget them after you hear 'O don fatale'.

Boost the mid range and you get excellent sound; probably the tape was made by the house, though the orchestra advances and retreats at times. Stage noises, minor orchestral bobbles, and small imperfections in ensemble are part of the picture. Be warned, though, that Karajan as was his custom employs the four-act version (no Fontainebleu scene), with the usual cuts. No matter — this is an outstanding *Don Carlo* and an important document of Karajan's career.

♫ MILAZZO