

For the Ear and the Eye
I Capuleti e i Montecchi on CD and DVD

Although it was not the first modern revival of Vincenzo Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, the 1966 La Scala, Milan, production conducted by Claudio Abbado in an edition he prepared which substituted a tenor for Bellini's mezzo-soprano as Romeo can be considered the beginning of the opera's rediscovery for the modern repertory. Abbado's version is documented in two "unofficial" recordings, both featuring Giacomo Aragall as the hero. The performance of that staging at the Holland Festival (Melodram), with Margherita Rinaldi as Giulietta, features somewhat better sound than a 1968 La Scala performance (Night at the Opera and other labels) with Renata Scotto in the soprano lead. With their limited sound quality and inauthentic edition, these recordings are mainly of interest because of the otherwise unrecorded tenor adaptation and especially for the presence of the young Luciano Pavarotti as Tebaldo, a role he did not subsequently record.

Beverly Sills sings Giulietta in another primitively recorded live performance by the Opera Company of Boston (VAI, 1975), a copy pasted together from two incomplete tapes conducted by Sarah Caldwell and William Fred Scott. This roughly performed version is of value for the presence of one singer, Tatiana Troyanos as a stunning Romeo, a role she never otherwise recorded. (No libretto is included with any of these three live recordings.) Fortunately Sills' fine Giulietta can be heard to much better advantage in her London studio recording, made just a few weeks later (EMI). In this version she is partnered by the fervent Romeo of Janet Baker, with Nicolai Gedda as a forceful Tebaldo. Sills was caught just a bit beyond her prime here, but she still provides plenty of exciting vocalism and an appropriate sense of melancholy in the part, and the performance is strongly conducted by Giuseppe Patanè. The current release of this performance also lacks a libretto, but it can be accessed online.

A competent 1991 live performance from the Teatro La Fenice in Venice is available from Nuova Era and as part of a bargain box set of five Bellini operas on the Brilliant Classics label (no libretto). Katia Ricciarelli is dramatically convincing as Giulietta, though she seems to tire vocally in the second act and Diana Montague is a sensitive, bright-voiced Romeo, a bit underpowered in the climaxes. With rather routine conducting by Bruno Campanella, this version was probably a satisfying evening in the theatre but can't match the overall quality of the best recorded versions.

Three CD versions of the opera, two studio performances and one live, are outstanding. The most recent of the three, a 1997 studio recording in fine sound with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under the forceful direction of Donald Runnicles (Teldec), features an exceptionally exciting and dramatic Romeo in Jennifer Larmore, who also provides vocal fireworks with her richly ornamented take on the music. Richard Croft is a stylish Tebaldo, lighter-voiced than the competition, and very appealing. As Giulietta, Hei-Kyung Hong offers warm tone when her voice is not under pressure, but some top notes are wiry and her coloratura is not ideally fluent. Another very good version dates from 1997 with forces of the Bavarian Radio under Roberto Abbado (RCA Victor). Eva Mei is fluent and expressive as Giulietta; only some hardness in her tone sounds a bit mature for the character. Vessalina Kassarova is a passionate and exciting Romeo, singing with a wide range of dynamics and incredible flexibility. Ramon Vargas' golden tenor and stylish singing provides the best Tebaldo in all of these performances.

Despite the high quality of the competition, for me one version strongly tops the list, a 1984 live performance issued by EMI from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, under the galvanizing direction of Riccardo Muti. Edita Gruberova is ideal as Giulietta—convincingly youthful in sound, vibrantly expressive in the drama, and making every run and flourish of the elaborately ornamented vocal line both a tour de force of fine singing and also—most importantly—an expression of character, emotion and the dramatic situation. Agnes Baltsa is a fine match for Gruberova’s intense Giulietta and their voices blend ravishingly in their duets. Dano Raffanti is an excellent Tebaldo and Gwynne Howell and John Tomlinson are luxury casting in the rather small bass parts of Capellio and Lorenzo. These fine components are shaped into an exciting whole by Muti, who brings dramatic fire (but not heavy-handedness) to the score and does justice to Bellini’s often underestimated orchestral colors.

The only two available DVD versions of the opera take strongly contrasting approaches to its staging. Both are enjoyable, despite some flaws in their presentation. A 2005 performance from the Ravenna Festival (Kicco Classic) is set in the appropriate period (Renaissance Verona) but makes unconventional use of modern video technology for the scenery. The designs are based on paintings by the Venetian painter, Vittore Carpaccio and are projected on semi-transparent wings and backdrops, often forming stage tableaux combining painted figures with the live singers. The projections are not used “realistically”—locations often change within scenes, color washes respond to mood changes and the harp and clarinet soloists supporting arias are seen onstage blended into the projections. Within this quite striking visual imagery the singers, in traditional period costumes, perform conventionally. Most of the time the effect is quite beautiful, though at times a bit gimmicky, especially when the video director gets carried away with superimposing closeups over the full stage view. A quite young cast sings stylishly and the two leads, soprano Valentina Farcas (Giulietta) and mezzo-soprano Paola Gardina (Romeo) look perfect for their roles. The subtitles are riddled with typos and incomprehensible phrasing.

The alternative DVD version was also recorded at a festival in 2005 (Dynamic), this time on an outdoor stage using the handsome facade of the ducal palace in Martina Franca as a backdrop, with no other scenic units and minimal props. Strong lighting changes provide the main element of visual variety. The singers appear in 20th Century dress suggestive of feuding modern gangs, complete with pistols and rifles, but within that context the stage director works with fairly conventional character interaction and tableaux. As a result, the focus falls on the singers and the fine cast rises to the occasion. Patrizia Ciofi is a superb Giulietta, highly expressive vocally and physically, the voice warm and full yet flexible—a major artist in her prime. Her Romeo is a hugely talented young soprano, Clara Polito, whose darker tone contrasts effectively with Ciofi and who is convincingly boyish. Their death scene is deeply moving. Tenor Danilo Formaggia provides a strongly sung Tebaldo and the recorded sound is rich and full. The camera work is generally effective but too busy at times and also overdoes the superimposed images. The white on white subtitles are at times hard to read and do not always make it clear who is singing what.

Musically the Martina Franca production offers a richer, more mature interpretation of the score in a tastefully updated staging, but the visual beauty of the Ravenna version and the freshness of its young cast are also appealing. Both productions are enjoyable and your choice may boil down to how you respond to updated vs. period stagings.

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