

imminent war of independence with the Ottoman Turks.

Rossini twice revised the opera. First, for Venice in 1823, simplified and given a showpiece happy ending. Then, as *Le siège de Corinthe*, for Paris in 1826, by which time the Greek war had become Europe's most fashionable cause. Equipped with an even more politically pertinent French text, this faster-moving version, spectacularly staged by the Opéra, exploited the public mood in a way the 1820 Neapolitan prequel hadn't been placed to do.

The first complete recording of *Maometto II* was made by Philips in London in 1983. Indifferently conducted by Claudio Scimone, whose performing edition this was, it hasn't worn especially well, musically or technically, despite boasting what, on paper at least, was a first-rate cast headed by Samuel Ramey and June Anderson.

The work's epic reach, and the sense of a world on fire, is conveyed with greater cogency and power in the superbly conducted and finely engineered live recording which Avie made of the UK premiere of *Maometto II*, staged by Garsington Opera in summer 2013. I remember Rodney Milnes, that exemplary Rossinian, worrying that the CDs might simply be a pleasing souvenir of a performance that had excited in the moment. Not a bit of it, he concluded in *Opera*. 'This is an astounding account of the work *tout court*.' And so, indeed, it is.

The enterprising Rossini in Wildbad Festival has already given us a serviceable account of the Venice version of *Maometto II* (8 660149/51) and a more than serviceable account of *Le siège de Corinthe* (8 660329/30). Sadly, this final panel in their *Maometto* triptych is less recommendable.

It is at its best in the opera's dying fall of an end, where the heroine Anna Erisso prepares to take her own life in the catacombs of the besieged citadel. This is beautifully handled by Elisa Balbo. Earlier in the piece Garsington's Siân Davies is to be preferred, though not in this final scene.

Wildbad also has a fine Calbo, the Venetian general (a *travesti* role) who is promised in marriage to Anna. But, then, few singers of quality disappoint in Calbo's stand-alone Act 2 aria. The new set's larger problem lies with the often sketchy coloratura of the male antagonists. The Turkish tenor Mert Süngü is no match for Garsington's Paul Nilon, in the form of his life as the Venetian commander Paolo Erisso. And Mirco Palazzi, a plausible Assur in the recent Opera Rara recording of *Semiramide* (A/18), lacks the means to

cope with the virtuoso demands of the role of Maometto as originally written.

Garsington's *Maometto*, Darren Jeffery, acts powerfully and – thanks to David Parry's command of the music, both as a *bel canto* accompanist and as a shaper and driver of the larger drama – is better placed to husband his vocal resources. The Garsington choral work is also in a different league from that of Wildbad's often poorly disciplined Polish singers.

Both sets use Hans Schellevis's Critical Edition, with the Garsington performance tightening the slow-moving denouement with several well-judged small cuts. Handsomely cased, the Garsington set is the more expensive. But, then, it has a full text and English translation: important in an opera where Rossini takes accompanied recitative to new levels of expressive power.

Richard Osborne

Comparative versions:

Scimone (6/85) (PHIL) 475 5092PTR3; 412 148-2PH3
Parry (8/14) (AVIE) AV2312

Rousseau



Le devin du village

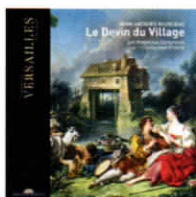
Caroline Mutel *sop*.....Colette
Cyrille Dubois *ten*.....Colin
Frédéric Caton *bar*.....Soothsayer

Les Nouveaux Caractères / Sébastien d'Hérin
Château de Versailles Spectacles

Ⓢ (CD + DVD) CVS004 (68' • DDD)

Recorded live at the Théâtre de la Reine, Versailles, July 1 & 2, 2017

Includes libretto and translation



Hard on the heels of the boy Mozart's parody, *Bastien und Bastienne* (Signum,

A/18), comes the original. *The Village Soothsayer* was first staged at Fontainebleau in October 1752; the lovers were sung by Marie Fel and Pierre de Jélyotte, both of them renowned for their association with the operas of Rameau. Rousseau's little piece was revived at the Opéra a few months later, and it was regularly performed in Paris till well into the 19th century. In 1780 Marie Antoinette took the role of Colette in her new theatre in the Trianon at Versailles, and it's from that very theatre – not to be confused with the Opéra Royal – that this recording comes.

It might seem perverse for Rousseau to have composed an opera in French, given his forcefully held opinion that the French language was not suitable for opera. But *Le devin du village* is more like an intermezzo, in the vein of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1733): with one exception the recitatives

are *secco*, and the arias are simple, even artless. The story is simple, too. Colin, a shepherd, has left Colette, a shepherdess, for the lady of the manor. The Soothsayer (in return for cash down, let it be said) advises Colette to pretend that she, too, has a new lover. Colin returns to heel and all is well. Their reconciliation is achieved at the halfway mark: there is then 30 minutes of rejoicing.

Given the amount of dancing, it's odd for this to be billed as a CD, with the DVD as a bonus; especially as there's a 'Pantomime', unexplained in the booklet, where a courtier, having tempted a village girl and threatened to kill her lover, in the end does the decent thing by yielding her up. The production by Jean-Jacques Schaeffel, filmed by Olivier Simonnet, is straightforward. The 18th-century sets include a wooded landscape, an interior, and descending clouds. Colette wears a rust-coloured cloak and a floral dress, Colin is in coat and breeches, while the Soothsayer sports a turban with magnificent plumes.

The singers are hardly taxed by the music but they sing mellifluously and act with conviction; the 12-strong band under Sébastien d'Hérin is grace itself. The DVD isn't divided into chapters and there are no subtitles, but the booklet includes the libretto and English translation. It's all very enjoyable; but the servants in 1780, witnessing the queen pretending to be a shepherdess, must have thought that the Revolution couldn't come too soon.

Richard Lawrence

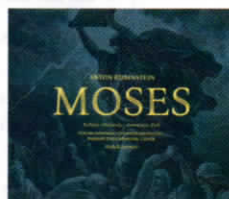
Rubinstein

Moses

Stanisław Kuflyuk *bar*.....Moses
Torsten Kerl *ten*.....Pharaoh
Evelina Dobračeva *sop*.....Asnath
Małgorzata Walewska *mez*.....Johebet
Chen Reiss *sop*.....Miriam
Adam Zdunikowski *ten*.....Job

Artos Children's Choir; Warsaw Philharmonic Choir; Polish Sinfonia Iuventus Orchestra / Michail Jurowski

Warner Classics Ⓢ ③ 9029 55864-3 (3h 18' • DDD)



Moses and the Israelites were cursed with 40 years'

wandering in the wilderness. Those who survive the three CDs of Anton Rubinstein's biblical epic may feel that the chosen people got off lightly. This was Rubinstein's great labour of love, and it took him seven years, from 1884 to 1891,