

Festival production of Verdi opera



Verdi: *Simon Boccanegra*
New Zealand Festival 2000
production
Soloists, Chapman Tripp Opera
Chorus, New Zealand Symphony
Orchestra conducted by
Marco Guidarini
Trust Records MMT 2045-46
(2CDs 140mins)

VERDI'S opera of politics in 14th-century Genoa might not be his most popular — it has few set-piece arias for an audience to dwell upon — but it is a superb piece of turbulent theatre with a



Classical
John Button

finely drawn characterisation of the central figure, and a marvelously drawn rivalry between him and the nobleman Fiesco.

There is back-stabbing aplenty, and a backdrop of plebeian against patrician political turmoil. Not surprisingly, there have

not been all that many recordings of the opera, the finest being the 1977 La Scala recording under Claudio Abbado.

The NZ Festival 2000 production was hailed by almost everyone — it made a considerable impact both musically and theatrically — but would a recording made from two of the performances stand up to the cold light of day two years on?

It is, I discover slightly to my surprise, most compelling and certainly fit to be set against any of the commercial recordings,

reaches the high notes

even the much-vaunted Abbado recording.

Not being a studio recording there are a lot of extraneous noises, but they are, for the most part, stage noises that actually enhance the sense of theatre. The sound production of Neil Maddever has given a vividness to the sound and, with only a couple of small exceptions, an impeccable balance between voices and the orchestra that requires enormous skill — and perhaps a bit of good luck.

This production was lucky to

have a wonderfully even cast. The American Gordon Hawkins is a strong, yet subtle, Boccanegra and the Fiesco of Vladimir Vaneev is rich and sonorous. The rest of the male members of the cast can stand up to any competition and if the Amelia of Nuccia Focile sounds a little static, it is a fault barely worth noting in this male-dominated opera.

The chorus was widely praised at the time of the production, and the recording reinforces the quality of its singing — urgent, intense and superbly precise.

Conductor Marco Guidarini is a first-class Verdian and he draws from the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra wonderfully idiomatic playing, keeping the whole production moving on in its dark, turbulent way.

Simon Boccanegra is a serious opera full of marvellous music, and all music lovers should celebrate this extraordinary capturing of a very fine production, enhanced as it is by a full libretto, informative notes by Roger Wilson and excellent packaging and design.