

Spellbinding performance an 'expression of power'



Simon Boccanegra by G. Verdi; NZSO and artists, cond. Marcio Guidarini; Trust CD MMT 2045-46

By Bryan James

Simon Boccanegra is opera fuelled by testosterone. Opportunities to see a live performance of this work these days are few, principally because it is not part of the "popular" money-spinning repertoire, and it requires a first-class cast of male soloists.

By the time he wrote it, Verdi had completed 20 operas, three of which — *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata*

— are among the most popular of all time. He had written 14 operas in nine years, an astonishing feat, and by the time he came to write *Simon Boccanegra*, he had no need of more adulation or more money. In short, he could afford to indulge himself by exploring a few of his operatic obsessions.

One of these was the expression of power in psychological drama. His later operas, from *Don Carlos* on, are fantastic studies in psychology and power, all set to music, some of which is sublime. *Simon Boccanegra* is among them.

The opera was greeted by its first audiences as a tuneless fiasco, and evidently Verdi agreed with them, for he set it aside for 24 years, then presented (this) reworked version, when it was greeted with critical and popular acclaim.

Although the plot, necessarily because of censorship rules of the time, is set in the distant past, in this case 14th-century Spain, it is really about



19th-century politics and power, and how such power can be used to good ends, rather than as a means to tyrannical ends. The main character is a reluctant candidate for public office, called to serve the common people so as to enforce a peace between various warring aristocrats and other factions. As Roger Wilson points out in his liner notes, the parallels with mid-19th-century Italian politics are obvious.

Not that it matters much to us today. This recording, made over two performances of the production at the New Zealand Festival of the Arts two years ago, marks an achievement in our music. It may well be the first commercial live recording of a full-length Verdi opera in this country; I cannot think of another.

Those who were fortunate enough to witness the performance will remember what a thrilling one it was, and especially how well-chosen was the cast, and how well-balanced were the leading male singers: Gordon Hawkins,

Vladimir Vanev, Yaron Windmuller, our own Martin Snell, and Paul Clarke. Nuccia Focile was an outstanding Amelia, the only principal female role. It all proved that you do not need big-name singers to achieve operatic success; just high standards, determination, and singers with excellent voices and technical command.

There is some truly memorable music in this opera and it is apparent from the opening bars, which at once set the mood. As an absorbing, intricately-worked *male* musical drama, *Simon Boccanegra* really has few equals in the 19th-century repertoire, and this particular production held its audiences spellbound.

The recording is excellent, very cleverly engineered to overcome the obvious problems of recording in a live auditorium such as the Michael Fowler Centre. The listener soon dismisses the occasional stage noise, for the singing is so focused, and the NZSO's accompaniment so good, that the opera soon envelops the imagination.

The recording comes in two discs, with a full text in Italian and English. The Morrison Music Trust is evidently promising more live recordings of festival operas. If this standard is matched, we are in for a feast.