

■ Music

Preserving the best of the festivals



The classics

Rod Biss

VERDI: Simon Boccanegra
NZSO and artists of the New Zealand
Festival 2000 production/Guidarini
(Trust MMT 2045-46)

LLOYD MORRISON is an opera enthusiast who believes what he's seen and heard at successive New Zealand festivals is worth preserving.

He believes if more people from overseas knew of the operas the festival consistently puts at the heart of its programmes, and of the international standards it achieves, they would travel here to hear them.

He also worries there is no archive of festival achievements being built up – no recordings publicly available we can listen to to re-live the experience.

But he intends changing that. Putting his money where his enthusiasm is, and with the eager co-operation of festival management, the Morrison Trust label which he controls has just issued recordings of *Simon Boccanegra* made at the 2000 festival. He intends to do the same with this year's production of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Simon Boccanegra is one of Verdi's finest, most searching operas. It has never had the popularity of *La Traviata* or *Il Trovatore* largely because it is not just a chain of arias and recitatives – you're unlikely to hear Andrea Bocelli or Charlotte Church singing extracts from *Boccanegra* in your local cafe. But once you put these *Boccanegra* CDs on, you'll be gripped; put aside the 140 minutes you'll need to hear it right through, and if you were there you'll remember Stephen Lawless' production and the starkly effective designs that were an integral part of it.

Boccanegra is about politics, ideas, paternal love and the conflict between personal love and public duty. The drama Verdi creates from this cauldron is tremendous theatre; the council chamber scene and the confrontation between Boccanegra and Paolo with which it ends is one of the greatest scenes in all opera, and that is just one part of an opera that never lets you go.

The role of Boccanegra was sung by Gordon Hawkins, a singer of great physical and dramatic stature with a noble voice to match.

Part of the impact comes from the confrontation between three great baritone voices; the role of Fiesco is sung by the exciting Russian bass Vladimir Vaneev and Paolo is sung by Yaron Windmuller. These CDs capture their magnificent singing that was also such an impressive feature of the production.

Conductor Marco Guidarini gets a wonderfully glowing Verdi sound from the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. His commitment and instinctive understanding of Verdi can be heard in the supple pacing and marvellous rapport between pit and stage.

The recorded performance is a skilful amalgam of two live performances engineered by Neil Maddever and produced by Murray Khouri. The audience noise has been minimised, there are still a few stage thumps and bumps as the singers move around but they are a small price to pay for a performance with such unity of purpose and such convincing drive.

The booklet contains the complete libretto, an English translation, synopsis of the plot and two particularly lucid essays by Roger Wilson on the opera itself and on Verdi and politics.

Everyone who was present at those performances knew they had witnessed a historic, uniquely distinguished occasion – these discs amazingly recreate it.

You'll need to buy two sets though, one for yourself and another to send overseas to anyone who needs to hear just what the festival is achieving.