

"At the age of 116 years *La Favorita* is not quite the favourite she was, dear creaky old soul! Verdi did it so much better, this sort of thing: and in 1840 Verdi was just round the corner, even if he did not pull off a basso-cum-trombone scene as exciting as this one where Baldassare denounces the king until the abbot's "Il santo speco" in *La Forza*. Nevertheless the opera, for all its tedious passages and routines, has some very fine pages and it remains a noble vehicle for a certain kind of Italian mezzo soprano: or a highly dramatic and potent soprano of the fruitier sort. It used to be done waggishly on Derby Night at Covent Garden, but is now a rarity. The last time I heard it was out doors in the Verona amphitheatre, with majestic Stignani standing in the cross fire of two searchlights, smacking the Veronese midges dead on her splendid arms as she sang!

This recording is technically expert enough, if a little dry in patches. But the performance is the sort you would expect in present day Italian opera; i.e., good orchestral playing (all those cornets in thirds!), conciliatory conducting (from Erede), a weak and slightly lazy chorus and some energetic star vocalisation..."

– P. H.-W., *The Gramophone*, March 1956

Donizetti's *La Favorita* or, in its original French productions, *La favorite*, is a grand opera in four acts by Gaetano Donizetti to a French-language libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz, based on the play *Le comte de Comminges* by Baculard d'Arnaud with additions by Eugène Scribe based on the story of Leonora de Guzman. The opera concerns the romantic struggles of the King of Castile, Alfonso XI, and his mistress, the "favourite" Leonora, in a love triangle with a young ex-novice monk, Fernando - against the backdrop of the political wiles of receding Moorish Spain and the life of the Catholic Church in 1340. It premiered on 2 December 1840 at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris and was first performed in Italian in Padua in 1842, remaining in the operatic repertoire of both countries for many years, its popularity gradually fading as the operas first of Verdi and later Puccini grew in stature.

In its full form the opera is lengthy – a recent revival at the Bordeaux Opera, which included the full ballet music, ran to some three and a half hours. It is not surprising, therefore, to find this 1950s Decca recorded version heavily cut, running to a little under two hours and ten minutes, and arguably somewhat the better for it. A later Decca production, made in 1974 with Pavarotti in the role of Fernando, included a very small amount of extra music, as well as twenty minutes of ballet, but with a faster-paced delivery still came out a good hour or so less than the *complete* opera normally requires.

We are lucky that this Decca production was recorded on location in Italy in both stereo and mono. In a practise begun the previous summer with the recording of Verdi's *Otello* at Santa Cecilia in Rome, the record company sent two production teams to produce two separate recordings from the same sessions, one for the then-current mono vinyl releases, the other for the anticipated arrival of stereo reproduction – a revolution their rivals at EMI, at the behest of Walter Legge, would stubbornly refuse to contemplate through many immortal recordings made at this time which are sadly only available in mono. Decca had started recording in both formats in England in 1954 and would continue to employ two teams in this way until the early 1960s, when the mono-only version was quietly shelved, for most of their recording sessions.

The original Decca sound recordings used for this XR restoration were of course, given their reputation for technical excellence, very well made for the era. This new Pristine release builds on that superb Decca sound by bringing a more rounded acoustic with extra body and presence to the production. If voices sometimes sounded a little thin and dry in the original they now spring to life, to often beautiful effect.

Andrew Rose

Pristine
XR
PACO 200

donizetti

la favorita

ettore bastianini
gianni poggi
giulietta simionato
jerome hines
piero de palma
bice magnani

maggio musicale fiorentino
chorus & orchestra

alberto erede, conductor

stereo studio recording, 1955

disc one
(58:39)

1. Sinfonia (5:32)
- ACT ONE
2. Bell'alba foriera (2:21)
3. Quella preghiera non odi tu? (1:34)
4. Parla figlio ... Una vergine un'angel di Dio (2:19)
5. E fia ver? Son desto o vaneggio? (4:27)
6. Bei raggi lucenti, bell'aure beate! (3:26)
7. Silenzio! Silenzio! (2:27)
8. Messaggera gentile, ninfa discreta (1:56)
9. Ah, mio bene! (3:41)
10. Fia vero? Lasciarti! (4:15)

ACT TWO

11. Preludio ... Giardini d Alcazar (4:21)
12. Vieni, amor! A piedi tuoi! (2:58)
13. De'nemici tuoi lo sdegno (1:13)
14. Tutta la mia corte per la festa previeni! (2:43)
15. In questo suol a lusingar tua cura (4:26)
16. Ah Sire! ... Che mai fu? (3:42)
17. Ah, paventa il furor (2:58)
18. Voi tutti che m'udite (4:20)

disc two
(70:31)

ACT THREE

1. A lei son presso alfine! (4:52)
2. Leonora, ei del suo cor la brama (1:23)
3. A tanto amor, Leonora, il tuo risponda (2:35)
4. Fia dunque vero? (1:16)
5. O mio Fernando, della terra il trono (3:49)
6. Scritto in cielo è il mio dolor (1:50)
7. Di già vella cappella (4:54)
8. O viltade, obbrobrio insano! (2:42)
9. Per me del ciel si dispiega il favor (3:36)
10. Sire, io ti deggio ... O ciel! Di quell'alma (4:14)
11. Orsù, Fernando, ascolta! (2:55)

ACT FOUR

12. Preludio ... Fratelli! Fratelli andiam (7:39)
13. Figlio diletto, ascolta! (2:38)
14. Favorita del re! (1:09)
15. Spirto gentil, de'sogni miei (3:29)
16. Figlio, deh, vien! (1:47)
17. Fernando, Fernando! Dove mai lo troverò? (4:38)
18. Fuggiam da queste soglie! (5:14)
19. Pietoso al par del Nume (3:01)
20. Addio! Fuggir mi lascia! (2:01)
21. Vieni, ah vien! Io m'abbandono alla gioia (4:48)

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACO 200

CAST

Gianni Poggi (tenor) - Fernando
 Giulietta Simionato (mezzo-soprano) - Leonora
 Ettore Bastianini (baritone) - King Alfonso
 Jerome Hines (bass) - Baldassare
 Piero de Palma (tenor) - Don Gasparo
 Bice Magnani (soprano) - Ines

Maggio Musicale Fiorentino
 Chorus & Orchestra
 conducted by Alberto Erede

Original libretto by Alphonse Royer,
 Gustave Vaéz & Eugène Scribe
 Performed in Italian

Recorded at Teatro Pergola,
 Florence, 20-31 August 1955
 Stereo producer: Peter Andry
 Stereo engineer: James Brown
 First issued as Decca mono LPs
 LXT.5146-48, February 1956

Ambient Stereo XR remastering by Andrew Rose
 Front cover artwork: Ettore Bastianini
 as King Alfonso in La Favorita

Total duration: 2hr 09:10

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