

# MAYR REDISCOVERED

ORR 244



This disc is dedicated to the memory of John Stewart Allitt (1934–2007) in acknowledgement of his sterling endeavours to promote the music of Giovanni Simone Mayr

**Booklet cover:** Giovanni Simone Mayr: portrait by Gaetano Barabini, 1827 (reproduced with permission of the Museo Donizettiano, Bergamo)

**CD face:** Alberico Curioni as Giasone in *Medea in Corinto*, in the 1826 London production (Opera Rara Archive)

**Opposite:** Giovanni Simone Mayr (Opera Rara Archive)

**Booklet photographs:** Russell Duncan and Douglas Robertson

## MAYR REDISCOVERED

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## MAYR REDISCOVERED

‘Germany gave England a Handel, France a Gluck, Italy a  
Simone Mayr’  
Ludwig Schiedermaier

JOHANN SIMON MAYR (or as he preferred to call himself, Giovanni Simone Mayr) was born in Mendorf, a small village not far from Ingolstadt in Bavaria, on 14 June 1763. The son of the village organist, he received his first lessons from his father but thereafter was largely self-taught, later recording that he studied all the string and wind instruments. Ever ambitious to study in Italy, he travelled (in about 1786) to Bergamo and on to Venice, but in neither city found a teacher willing to conduct him through what he regarded as a sufficiently rigorous study of harmony and counterpoint. Continually thrown back upon his own resources, he became, like most self-taught men, immensely proud of his hard-won learning, regarding it as a foundation essential for all composers.

His first opera, *Saffo*, was produced in Venice in 1794, and was the first in a list of more than 60 works, ending with *Demetrio* in 1824. The most important of all the composers active in Italy in the years immediately preceding the rise of Rossini, he is particularly remembered for *Medea in Corinto* (Naples, 1813), but many of his works enjoyed great success and were widely heard in their day.

In 1803 he was appointed *maestro di cappella* of S. Maria Maggiore, the great Romanesque basilica of Bergamo, a position which gave him a home-base and a stability enjoyed by few composers at the time. It was in Bergamo that he also became famous as a teacher, founding in 1806 his celebrated *lezioni caritatevoli* or ‘charitable lessons’, which were designed to train the sons of indigent parents as choirboys. His most famous pupil was Gaetano Donizetti.

As the years passed, his interest in teaching increasingly took priority over his willingness to write for the theatre, especially when, from about 1813 onwards, he began to be eclipsed by Rossini. Failing eyesight also played its part, making him reluctant to venture far from home. He died on 2 December 1845.

Famous for his fusion of Italian melody with Germanic harmony, he was one of several composers credited with the invention of the so-called Rossinian crescendo. He is also believed to have been the first to introduce the harp and the cor anglais among the instruments of the Italian operatic orchestra. At the same time he deplored the increase in the size of the orchestra which he saw taking place around him. Believing that ‘the simplest means are always the best’, he concentrated on purity of melody, and on choosing instruments, especially solo instruments, for their timbre and colour. Consequently one has to listen ‘inwardly’ to his music: to harmonies, to instrumental colours

and textures, to the unfolding of melodies, to the expression of words and emotions. As Louis Spohr remarked, Mayr has, 'if not so much imagination as Rossini, yet, certainly, more knowledge and aesthetic feeling'.

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## REDECOUVRIR MAYR

« L'Allemagne a donné Hændel à l'Angleterre, Gluck à la France, et  
Simone Mayr à l'Italie »  
Ludwig Schiedermaier

JOHANN SIMON MAYR (ou plutôt Giovanni Simone Mayr, comme il préférerait qu'on l'appelle) est né le 14 juin 1763 à Mendorf, petit village de Bavière proche d'Ingolstadt. C'est son père, l'organiste du village, qui lui enseigne les rudiments de la musique, mais c'est essentiellement en autodidacte qu'il poursuit sa formation musicale : ainsi il dira plus tard avoir appris tous les instruments à cordes et à vent. Après avoir longtemps chéri l'ambition d'étudier en Italie, il s'y rend vers 1786, mais ne trouve aucun professeur prêt à lui enseigner l'harmonie et le contrepoint avec la rigueur souhaitée ni à Bergame ni à Venise. Perpétuellement réduit à compter sur ses propres moyens, il devient, comme tous les autodidactes, extrêmement fier des connaissances musicales qu'il a durement acquises par lui-même et qu'il considère comme essentielles à la formation de tout compositeur.

*Saffo*, son premier opéra, est représenté à Venise en 1794. Son œuvre lyrique en comprendra plus de soixante autres et s'achèvera en 1824 avec *Demetrio*. Bien que Mayr doive d'abord sa renommée posthume à *Medea in Corinto* (Naples, 1813), ses nombreux opéras, très acclamés et

fort connus pour la plupart de ses contemporains, en font le compositeur le plus important en Italie avant l'avènement de Rossini.

En 1803, il est nommé *maestro di cappella* de Santa Maria Maggiore, la grande basilique romane de Bergame – position qui lui assure un public et une stabilité rares pour l'époque. C'est à Bergame qu'il se fait un nom comme professeur avec la création en 1806 de ses célèbres *lezioni caritatevoli*, cours gratuits destinés à assurer la formation musicale des enfants de chœur issus de familles indigentes. Le plus célèbre de ses élèves sera Gaetano Donizetti.

Au fil des années, son intérêt pour l'enseignement prend le pas sur son désir de composer pour la scène lyrique, surtout à partir du moment, vers 1813, où il commence à être éclipsé par Rossini. Sa cécité progressive, qui lui fait redouter les déplacements, contribue également à ce retrait. Il meurt le 2 décembre 1845.

Célèbre pour la manière dont il a su allier mélodie italienne et harmonie allemande, Mayr compte parmi la poignée de compositeurs à qui l'on attribue l'invention du fameux « crescendo rossinien ». Il aurait été également le premier à faire entrer la harpe et le cor anglais dans l'orchestre lyrique italien, tout en déplorant l'accroissement manifeste à l'époque des forces de l'orchestre. Convaincu, en effet, que « les moyens les plus simples sont toujours les meilleurs », il privilégiait



la pureté de la mélodie et choisissait ses instruments, surtout les instruments solo, pour leur timbre et leur couleur. Aussi convient-il d'écouter sa musique « de l'intérieur » : d'apprécier les harmonies, la couleur et la texture instrumentales, le développement de la mélodie, les paroles et l'émotion. Comme le disait Louis Spohr, s'il n'a « pas autant d'imagination que Rossini », il possède « certainement de plus grandes connaissances musicales et un meilleur sens de l'esthétique. »

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Traduction : Mireille Ribière

## MAYR – EINE WIEDERENTDECKUNG

„Deutschland gab England einen Handel, Frankreich einen Gluck,  
Italien einen Simone Mayr.“  
Ludwig Schiederemair

JOHANN SIMON MAYR (oder Giovanni Simone Mayr, wie er sich zu nennen pflegte) kam am 14. Juni 1763 in Mendorf zur Welt, einem kleinen Dorf in der Nähe von Ingolstadt. Als Sohn des Dorfforganisten erhielt er ersten Unterricht von seinem Vater, doch im weiteres eignete er sich sein Wissen als Autodidakt an und erzählte später, er habe sich mit allen Streichinstrumenten und Holzbläsern im Selbststudium vertraut gemacht. Um sich seinen Wunschtraum von einem Studium in Italien zu erfüllen, reiste er um 1786 nach Bergamo und dann weiter nach Venedig, fand aber weder hier noch dort einen Lehrer, der bereit gewesen wäre, ihn seinen strengen Maßstäben entsprechend in Harmonie und Kontrapunkts zu unterweisen. Stets auf sich selbst zurückverwiesen, entwickelte er, wie die meisten Autodidakten, einen unglaublichen Stolz auf seine hart erarbeiteten Kenntnisse und betrachtete seine Schule als notwendige Grundlage für alle Komponisten.

*Saffo*, seine erste Oper, wurde 1794 in Venedig aufgeführt und war das erste von seinen insgesamt über sechzig Werken, zu denen 1824

*Demetrio* den Schlusspunkt bildete. Als bedeutendster der in Italien direkt vor dem Aufstieg Rossinis tätigen Komponisten begründet sich sein späterer Ruhm insbesondere auf *Medea in Corinto* (Neapel, 1813), doch zu seinen Lebzeiten erfreuten sich viele seiner Werke großer Beliebtheit und wurden häufig aufgeführt.

1803 wurde er zum *maestro di cappella* an der S. Maria Maggiore ernannt, der großen romanischen Basilika in Bergamo, und dieser Stellung verdankte er eine Basis und eine Sicherheit, wie sie damals nur wenige Komponisten kannten. In Bergamo machte er sich auch als Lehrer einen Namen, 1806 begründete er seine berühmten *lezioni caritatevoli*, seinen „wohltätigen Unterricht“, in dessen Rahmen er Söhne mittelloser Familien zu Chorknaben ausbildete. Sein berühmtester Schüler war Gaetano Donizetti.

Im Lauf der Jahre drängte sein pädagogisches Interesse seine Freude am Schreiben von Bühnenmusik in den Hintergrund, vor allem, als ab etwa 1813 Rossini ihn zu überflügeln begann. Seine nachlassende Sehkraft trug ihren Teil dazu bei, er verließ nur noch ungerne die nächste Umgebung seines Zuhauses. Er starb am 2. Dezember 1845.

Gerühmt wurde er wegen seiner Verbindung von italienischer Melodik und deutscher Harmonie, und er war einer von mehreren Komponisten, denen die Erfindung des so genannten Rossinischen

Crescendos zugeschrieben wurde. Außerdem gilt er als derjenige, der die Instrumente des italienischen Opernorchesters um Harfe und Englischhorn erweiterte. Gleichwohl beklagte er die stete Vergrößerung der Orchester, die er allenthalben bemerkte, und war der Überzeugung, dass die einfachsten Mittel unweigerlich die besten seien, nämlich Reinheit der Melodie und Wahl der Instrumente – insbesondere der Soloinstrumente – nach Timbre und Klangfarbe. Dementsprechend muss man seine Musik „innerlich“ hören, muss auf Harmonien achten, auf Instrumental- und Klangfarben, auf das Entfalten von Melodien, den Ausdruck von Worten und Gefühlen. Mayr mochte, wie Louis Spohr einmal anmerkte, weniger Phantasie als Rossini haben, aber er besaß zweifellos ein größeres Wissen und mehr ästhetisches Empfinden.

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## LA RISCOPERTA DI MAYR

“La Germania ha donato Handel all’Inghilterra, Gluck alla Francia,  
Simone Mayr all’Italia”  
Ludwig Schiedermair

JOHANN SIMON MAYR (o, come preferiva chiamarsi, Giovanni Simone Mayr) nacque a Mendorf, un paesino non lontano da Ingolstadt in Baviera, il 14 giugno 1763. Era figlio dell’organista del villaggio, che gli diede le prime lezioni di musica, ma in seguito fu per lo più autodidatta, e dichiarò di aver studiato tutti gli strumenti ad arco e a fiato. Avendo sempre nutrito l’ambizione di studiare in Italia, si recò a Bergamo e poi a Venezia (intorno al 1786), ma in nessuna delle due città trovò un maestro disposto a guidarlo attraverso uno studio per lui sufficientemente rigoroso dell’armonia e del contrappunto. Costretto a fare affidamento sulle proprie risorse, divenne, come moltissimi autodidatti, immensamente orgoglioso delle conoscenze guadagnate con tanta fatica, e le considerò un retroterra indispensabile per tutti i compositori.

La sua prima opera, *Saffo*, allestita a Venezia nel 1794, fu seguita da oltre sessanta composizioni teatrali, l’ultima delle quali fu *Demetrio*, nel 1824, e Mayr pertanto risulta il più importante compositore attivo in Italia negli anni immediatamente precedenti l’ascesa di Rossini. Nella

sua produzione si ricorda in particolare la *Medea in Corinto* (Napoli, 1813), ma molte sue opere ebbero grande successo e notorietà al loro tempo.

Nel 1803 Mayr fu nominato maestro di cappella di S. Maria Maggiore, la grande basilica romanica di Bergamo: grazie a questa carica ebbe diritto a una dimora e a una stabilità di cui pochi compositori godevano all'epoca. Sempre a Bergamo il compositore si fece una reputazione anche come insegnante: nel 1806 istituì le sue celebrate *lezioni caritatevoli*, al fine di istruire i figli dei poveri come coristi. Il suo allievo più famoso fu Gaetano Donizetti.

Con il passare degli anni, l'interesse per l'insegnamento gradualmente prese il sopravvento sulla disponibilità a scrivere per il teatro, soprattutto a partire dal 1813 circa in poi, quando il nome del compositore cominciò a essere eclissato da quello di Rossini. Inoltre alcuni problemi di vista lo resero riluttante a viaggiare. Morì il 2 dicembre 1845.

Famoso per il suo accostamento di melodie italiane e armonie tedesche, Mayr fu uno dei compositori a cui è stata attribuita l'invenzione del cosiddetto crescendo rossiniano. Si pensa che sia stato anche il primo a introdurre l'arpa e il corno inglese tra gli strumenti dell'orchestra operistica italiana. Allo stesso tempo deplorò le crescenti

dimensioni dell'orchestra e, convinto che “i mezzi migliori sono sempre i più semplici”, si concentrò sulla purezza della melodia e sulla scelta degli strumenti, in particolare quelli solistici, per il loro timbro e colore. Di conseguenza la sua musica va ascoltata “dall'interno”, con le armonie, i colori e le tessiture strumentali, lo sviluppo delle melodie, l'espressione delle parole e dei sentimenti. Come dichiarò Luigi Spohr, tra le sue doti Mayr ebbe “se non la stessa fantasia di Rossini, sicuramente più conoscenza e senso dell'estetica”.

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Traduzione di Emanuela Guastella



David Parry



[1]

**ELISA**

Dramma sentimentale in one act

Libretto by Gaetano Rossi

First performance: 5 July 1804

Teatro S. Benedetto, Venice

Overture

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1800-1810* (ORCH101)

THIS OPERA illustrates several of the literary and artistic trends of its day. A late example of 18th century sentimentalism, it also shows the early romantics' taste for the sublime in landscape, and their fascination with the wild, unleashed forces of nature.

Set in the Alps, at the hospice of Mont Bernard, the story tells of Teorindo, a painter who believes that he has been betrayed in love, and who seeks solace and distraction amid the alpine scenery. When we meet Elisa, we discover that she has not betrayed him at all, but was prevented from marrying him by an avaricious and ambitious father. Now that her father has died, there is no longer any obstacle to their union – though we do not reach the happy ending before Teorindo, wandering amongst the mountain crags in a suicidal frame of mind, has been caught in a storm, buried by an avalanche, and rescued by the 'virtuous souls' (for reasons of censorship, the Italian libretto never describes them as monks) of St Bernard.

From this account, one might expect the overture to be in the grand, sublime style, but it is not so. This is an opera semiseria, the characters including a comic letter-carrier and a chorus of Savoyards on their way to Paris (anticipating Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* by almost 40 years). The opening section may convey a sense of spaciousness, with horns (and later trumpets) answering woodwinds like calls carrying across valleys, but once we reach the *allegro*, with its opening drone and chattering woodwinds, the atmosphere is thoroughly bucolic, suggesting the dances and songs of the Savoyard chorus.

[2]

### **GINEVRA DI SCOZIA**

Dramma eroico in two acts

Libretto by Gaetano Rossi

First performance: 21 April 1801

Teatro Nuovo, Trieste

Duet, 'Vieni, colà t'attendo'

Ariodante.....Daniela Barcellona

Polinesso.....Antonino Siragusa

Taken from *Ginevra di Scozia* (ORC23)

THIS OPERA is no longer the unknown quantity it once was, since, composed for the inauguration of the Teatro Nuovo in Trieste in 1801, it was revived to mark the theatre's 200th anniversary in 2001. We

present two duets from it, the first taken from the complete recording made in Trieste in 2001, the second from the first volume of *A Hundred Years of Italian Opera*.

The story is drawn from the *Orlando furioso* of Ariosto. Ginevra, daughter of the King of Scotland, is promised in marriage to an Italian knight, Ariodante. She has, however, also attracted the notice of Polinesso, Duke of Albany, who, having been rejected, tries to manoeuvre her into his power through deceit. He persuades Ginevra's maid, Dalinda, to impersonate her mistress and grant him an assignation, at the same time ensuring that their meeting will be witnessed by Ariodante. Ariodante, convinced of Ginevra's faithlessness, tries to commit suicide, and his brother Lurcanio, believing him dead, accuses Ginevra of being unchaste.

Ginevra is condemned to death, and is about to be led to the stake when an unknown knight appears, his vizor lowered, and offering to defend her. It is, of course, Ariodante, who has survived and come to her aid. He and Lurcanio enter the lists, but their combat is interrupted when Dalinda confesses her impersonation of Ginevra. Polinesso, now obliged to enter the lists against Ginevra's unknown knight, is disarmed and forced to acknowledge his guilt. Not only is Ginevra's honour vindicated, but her knight has only to raise his vizor for her to find herself again in the arms of her beloved.



Antonino Siragusa



Daniela Barcellona

This first extract comes early in the opera. Polinesso is taunting Ariodante, bidding him come beneath Ginevra's window that evening, when he will see for himself his lady's infidelity as she encourages him, Polinesso, to scale her balcony and join her in her bedroom. As already explained, he has persuaded Ginevra's maid, the infatuated Dalinda, to impersonate her mistress.

The music Mayr writes suggests that Polinesso regards himself as every inch Ariodante's equal. Indeed, Ariodante's mounting dismay arises, one feels, not so much from any doubt about Ginevra's constancy, but from the shock of finding himself confronted and challenged by the insolent self-assurance of Polinesso. In the homophonic central *larghetto cantabile*, 'Quanti mai contrari affetti', we realise that, internally, both are shaken by the audacity of what has been suggested, while in the final *allegro*, following Ariodante's appalled concession that if Polinesso can prove Ginevra guilty, she shall be his (a moment of near-cessation of onward movement, emphasised by a telling shudder in the strings), the voices sing either in canon or homophonically – both procedures suggesting the refusal of either character to capitulate.

[3]

**GINEVRA DI SCOZIA**

Duet, 'Per pietà, deh! non lasciarmi'

Ginevra.....Marilyn Hill Smith

Ariodante.....Della Jones

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1800-1810* (ORCH101)

THE SECOND duet comes towards the end of the opera, when Ariodante (mezzo-soprano, but originally sung by a castrato) presents himself to Ginevra as her champion. Their colloquy is interrupted, as he is on the point of confessing his identity, by a trumpet-call summoning him to the lists. Despite a marked aversion to 'Mayer', as he spells him, and to his music, Stendhal, in his *Vie de Rossini*, felt compelled to write that 'This situation, as moving perhaps, as any that the most stirring of all passions in the human breast could have furnished, is [...] superb. [...] The music which Mayer [gives] us is masterly.' Long remembered in Italy, the duet was widely recognised as one of Mayer's major achievements.

[4]

## L'AMOR CONIUGALE

Farsa sentimentale in one act

Libretto by Gaetano Rossi

First performance: 26 July 1805

Teatro Comunale, Padua

Recitative and aria, 'Rendi il consorte amato'

Zeliska..... Eiddwen Harrhy

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1800-1810* (ORCH101)

THE DESCRIPTION of *L'amor coniugale* as a 'farsa sentimentale' is misleading, since it contains no element of farce. Treating the same subject as Beethoven's *Fidelio* (which had its premiere four months later in Vienna), it is an opera semiseria, and the description 'dramma di sentimento', used at later performances, would seem more appropriate.

The action is set in Poland, rather than Spain, and the names of the characters are consequently changed. Zeliska (the equivalent of Beethoven's Leonore) has heard that she may accompany Peters (Rocco) down to the dungeons, but she has also learned that the unknown prisoner – whom she rightly believes to be her husband – is to be put to death within the hour. In this, her great aria of determination to come to her husband's rescue, Mayr writes an Italian aria in the grand



Eiddwen Harrhy



manner, much influenced by opera seria, but never losing sight of sentiment and lyricism.

[5]

**ADELASIA ED ALERAMO**

Melodramma serio in two acts

Libretto by Luigi Romanelli

First performance: 26 December 1806

Teatro alla Scala, Milan

Storm, Scena 'Dove salvarmi?... Oh Dio!', and Terzetto 'Ah! ch'io fra voi amato'

Adelasia.....Nan Christie

Aleramo.....Sandra Dugdale

Teofania.....Eiddwen HARRY

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1800-1810* (ORCH101)

*ADELASIA ED ALERAMO* is musically one of Mayr's strongest operas. It received 54 performances in its first season alone, and continued to hold the stage until about 1820.

Drawn from a legend of Piedmontese history and set in the 10th century, it tells of Aleramo, the son of noble German parents but an orphan from his childhood, who falls in love with Adelasia, daughter of

the Emperor Ottone. Anticipating that her father will oppose the match, Adelasia flees from the court. When the curtain rises, she and Aleramo have been living together in pastoral obscurity for ten years, and are the parents of two children.

Their tranquillity is shattered when a royal hunt is overtaken by a storm, and the Empress Teofania, separated from her companions, takes shelter in their cottage. Mother and daughter recognise each other, and the rest of the libretto concerns their efforts, eventually successful, to induce Ottone to pardon Aleramo and accept him as his son-in-law.

The present extract shows Mayr's writing at its very best. Hunt merges into storm in masterly fashion, only to dissolve – the music uninterrupted by any change of scenery – into accompanied recitative and a flowing, eloquent 'trio of sentiment' as Teofania, Adelasia and Aleramo rejoice to be reunited.

[6]

## ELENA

Dramma in two acts

Libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola

First performance: 28 January 1814

Teatro dei Fiorentini, Naples

Aria, 'Ah! se mirar potessi'

Costantino.....Russell Smythe

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1810-1820* (ORCH103)

AN OPERA SEMISERIA, *Elena* tells the story of Costantino, the son of a Count of Arles, who is wrongfully accused of murdering his father. Dispossessed by his uncle Romualdo, the true murderer, he is forced to flee, taking with him his wife Elena and their young son Adolfo. They are pursued and become separated. Elena gains employment – and sustenance for herself and Adolfo – by disguising herself as a boy and working on a farm.

Costantino's aria is sung very soon after his first appearance in Act I. In the course of a harvest festival he arrives, disguised as a reaper, at the farm where Elena is working, though he little realises how close he is at this point to finding her again. When he finds himself alone he launches into this soliloquy, lamenting the injustices to which he has been subjected and wishing that death would cut short his suffering.



Yvonne Kenny



Russell Smythe

Like so many great scenes in Italian opera of this period, the aria grows from a quiet opening to an impassioned conclusion. The present performance is of particular interest, since it follows an autograph score preserved in Bergamo in which Mayr wrote out all his own embellishments. It is an item that calls for both virtuoso playing and virtuoso singing.

[7]

### CORA

Dramma in three acts

Libretto by Marchese Francesco Berio di Salsa

First performance: 27 March 1815

Teatro S. Carlo, Naples

Quintet, 'Sempre uniti insiem saremo'

Ataliba.....Philip Doghan

Cora.....Yvonne Kenny Gran Sacerdote....Russell Smythe

Alonzo.....Kevin John Rolla.....Robin Leggate

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1810-1820* (ORCH103)

*CORA* WAS a spectacle opera, designed to exploit the ingenuity of the set-designers and 'machinists' of the Teatro S. Carlo in Naples. A story of the Incas of Peru and Ecuador, the opening scene features a solar eclipse, while the first act ends with a volcanic eruption that destroys

the Temple of the Sun. Other scenes show the splendour of the palace of Quito, and, after the eruption, the ruins of the temple. More fortuitously, *Cora* turned out to be the last new opera produced in Italy under the Napoleonic regime, for on 26 February 1815 Napoleon escaped from Elba and began his last desperate attempt to recover power. By 27 March, when *Cora* was produced, Gioacchino Murat, the King of Naples, had already set out for the north in support of his brother-in-law.

As we should expect of a work written at this time in Naples, the opera shows many influences of French opera. The extract recorded here, the finale to the last act, is modelled on a French vaudeville: that particular variety of finale in which each character in turn sings a short verse, and the others join in a choral refrain. We may also draw a comparison with an air and variations, for each character varies the melody, vying with the others in brilliant pyrotechnics.

[8] **ALFREDO IL GRANDE, RE DEGLI ANGLO-SASSONI**

Melodramma serio in two acts

Libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli

First performance: 26 December 1819

Teatro della Società, Bergamo

Romanza, 'Ov'è la bella vergine?'

Alfredo.....Diana Montague Alsvita.....Myrna Moreno

Gutrumo.....Kevin John Etelberto.....Russell Smythe

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1810-1820* (ORCH103)

THE LIBRETTO of this opera deals with the period of King Alfred's reign when, hard pressed by the Danes, he all but lost control of Wessex and was forced to withdraw to the Somerset marshes. Alsvita, the young woman he loves, has, together with her father Etelberto, fallen into the hands of the Danes. She is being pressured into marrying the Danish leader Gutrumo (Guthrum), when Alfredo, disguised as a minstrel, penetrates the lines, aiming both to gain intelligence of the strength and strategy of his enemies, and to reassure Alsvita that he is intent upon rescuing her. At Gutrumo's request, he sings this romanza – a thinly veiled commentary upon the situation.



Diana Montague



In addition to the harp, upon which he is ostensibly playing, the item is accompanied by six other solo instruments: violin, cello, double bass, clarinet, cor anglais and horn. Mayr exploits their tonal variation, drawing from them ravishingly beautiful and expressive lines of melody. Rosa Mariani, the singer who created the role of Alfredo, scored a particular success in this remarkable item.

[9]

### FEDRA

Melodramma serio in two acts

Libretto by Luigi Romanelli

First performance: 26 December 1820

Teatro alla Scala, Milan

Aria, 'Se fiero, Ippolito'

Fedra....Penelope Walker

Taken from *100 Years of Italian Opera 1820-1830* (ORCH104)

*FEDRA*, MAYR'S third-to-last opera, tells the story of the ill-fated love of Phaedra (Fedra), the second wife of Theseus (Teseo), for her stepson Hippolytus (Ippolito). An early example in Italy of an opera with a tragic ending, it culminates in a long and varied scene – a 'great aria with recitatives' – in which Fedra, who has taken poison, approaches her death. The brief extract chosen for inclusion here is the *andantino* section in which she looks forward to an end to her suffering.

A fine example of Mayr at his most melodic, the florid vocal line is always inextricably bound to the situation, the mood and the words. The aria is also noteworthy for its sombre instrumental colouring, the result both of the use of horn and bassoon in the introductory ritornello, and of the total exclusion of violins from the orchestra.

[10]

**MEDEA IN CORINTO**

Opera seria in two acts

Libretto by Felice Romani

First performance: 28 November 1813

Teatro S. Carlo, Naples

Marcia, Chorus 'Fosti grande', and Cavatina 'Di gloria all'invito'

Giasone.....Bruce Ford

with Yvonne Kenny (Creusa) and the Geoffrey Mitchell Choir

Taken from *Medea in Corinto* (ORC11)

AS THE last extract on this disc, we present an item from the opera which has always been accounted Mayr's masterpiece, *Medea in Corinto*. Giasone (Jason) has deserted his wife, Medea, and has transferred his affections to Creusa, the daughter of Creonte, king of Corinth. Here, near the beginning of the opera, he returns victorious from a campaign in Corinth's defence. Creusa hears his approach – the



Bruce Ford

populace greets him – and he sings a florid aria which, we believe, makes a most rousing and fitting close to this disc. The *bravura* entrance aria for a military commander returning from the wars was, it goes almost without saying, a commonplace of heroic opera of the time. Listeners may find it interesting to compare this example by Mayr with the aria that Rossini wrote for Otello at the beginning of his opera of that name.

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