

PARTERRE

queen sized

by [Christopher Corwin](#) | 11:16 am | Feb 15, 2015

The last day of December a parcel arrived in the mail containing an absolute delight: “Semiramide—La Signora Regale.” One of best vocal recordings of 2014, this sumptuous 2-CD set on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi features the marvelous Italian mezzo-soprano **Anna Bonitatibus** and includes 90 minutes of rarely-heard music written for the legendary Babylonian queen.

In addition to striking reproductions of paintings and sculptures of Semiramide, the impressive 132-page, full-color booklet accompanying the set provides several fascinating essays (in four languages!) differentiating the important historical figure of the Assyrian queen Sammuamat who lived from 850 BC to 785 BC from the infamous virago of legend who turns up in everything from Dante’s *Inferno* to Voltaire’s 1748 play *Semiramis* to a 1950s Hollywood B-movie (or is it C?) embodied by **Rhonda Fleming**.

While everyone is surely familiar with Rossini’s 1823 *melodramma tragico* or at least its queen’s famous *scena* “Bel raggio lusinghier,” how many know that the first Semiramide opera (by Francesco Saccati) appeared in 1648 and as recently as 1983 German composer Peter Michael Hamel wrote a *Semiramis*? As this collection limits itself to 14 works which premiered between 1724 and 1828, we unfortunately miss excerpts from earlier works like Cesti’s 1667 *La Semirami* which was so memorably revived by **Alan Curtis** at the 1987 Innsbruck Festival.

What we *do* get is a fascinatingly varied anthology of the evolution of Italian operatic writing for the female voice over those hundred years. Not only are many composers represented on this collection, we get nine librettists’ wildly differing takes on the occasionally murderous and libidinous, yet always larger-than-life queen. However, the heroine of the most commonly set text, Metastasio’s *Semiramide Riconosciuta*, bears little resemblance to that meme. Heard here in arias by Jommelli, Traetta, and Paisiello, that Semiramide is simply a love-struck widowed queen pining for Scitalce, a paramour from the past who has returned to court but who is also loved by Tamiri.

Lively, brief *da capo* arias by Caldara and Porpora set to earlier libretti from the 1720s illustrate the

high baroque, while Jommelli’s dramatic *accompagnato* and aria from 1741 illuminate the beginnings of a freer style. The highpoints of the first CD are both from 1765—an exquisite lament by Bernasconi and a smashing mini-concerto for voice and violin by Traetta—and demonstrate composers moving tentatively into the full classical style, while Paisiello’s 1772 “Serbo in seno” from *La Semiramide in Villa* could easily be mistaken for early Mozart.

One feels a seismic shift at the beginning of the second CD with a *sturm und drang*-influenced overture to 1790’s *La Vendetta di Nino* by Bianchi. “Figlio diletto” from Borghi’s *La morte di Semiramide ossia La vendetta di Nino* which premiered the next year anticipates the *cavatina-cabaletta* structure as the queen struggles to comprehend how her beloved Arsace could, in reality, be her long-lost son moving from anguish in the initial slow section to fear in the spirited *allegro* conclusion.

A long excerpt from Nasolini’s 1792 opera could easily be mistaken for a lost *scena* from an early Rossini opera. For the first time, the chorus is prominently featured as the queen bubbles with elaborately jubilant coloratura celebrating her (doomed) love for Arsace.

We finally arrive in the 19th century with a charming *canzonetta* with chorus and harp obbligato from Meyerbeer’s *Semiramide* (the only excerpt previously recorded), followed by the world premiere of a reconstruction by **Philip Gossett** of an early version of Rossini’s “Bel raggio” which omits the traditional cabaletta “Dolce pensiero.” Accompanied only by wind instruments, a simple prayer by Manuel Garcia (famed teacher and brother of Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot) concludes the chronological program, but “Fuggi dagl’occhi miei” from a Handel-Vinci *pasticcio* (sounding neither like Handel or Vinci) turns up as a “bonus” at the end of CD2.

Unsurprisingly, Bonitatibus was passionately involved with this ambitious project: she not only originated the concept and collaborated on the musicological research; she also wrote several of the CD’s extensive program notes and composed

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her own ornaments and cadenzas. If this all weren't enough, she sings splendidly in the 12 demanding arias she programmed. Hers is a wide-ranging, idiosyncratic mezzo soprano, dark and smoky and always used with an urgent intensity that makes it instantly memorable. There can be a pronounced vibrato which I could imagine might put off some listeners but instead it lends her commanding singing a touch of appealing vulnerability.

One never hears just a series of notes—they are always linked with an unerring legato. Her impressive command of florid singing is most telling in that it rarely sounds like showing off—the melismatic bursts in an exciting bravura piece like “Il pastor se torna aprile” first serve Traetta and Metastasio's grand similes for Semiramide's hope that she will regain love with Scitalce.

Although I was initially unfamiliar with both the period orchestra—Accademia degli Astrusi—and chorus—La Stagione Armonica—featured on this recording, both perform suavely under the direction of conductor **Federico Ferri**. The orchestra in particular does well in idiomatic readings of the widely varied arias and instrumental pieces included.

That Bonitatibus has possibly remained unfamiliar to American audiences is not surprising. She has so far only appeared twice in the US—both times in northeastern Ohio! At the invitation of **Franz Welser-Möst** she performed Dorabella in a semi-staging of *Così fan tutte* in 2010 and then Rossini's *Stabat Mater* a year later, both with the Cleveland Orchestra. Otherwise one would have come to know her through her other recordings and DVDs.

Her repertoire is not the usual Italian mezzo fare—no Azucena or Princess de Bouillon for her—she focuses primarily on operas from Monteverdi to Rossini. My memorable first exposure to Bonitatibus was her superlative Ulisse on Alan Curtis's 2002 recording of Handel's *Deidamia* opposite a dazzling **Simone Kermes** caught here before her off-putting self-indulgence took over.

I was then lucky enough to catch my sole live Bonitatibus experience in Munich in 2005: a thrilling Orphée in **Nigel Lowery**'s silly production of the Berlioz edition of Gluck's great opera. In fact, she has sung numerous roles at the Bavarian State Opera including Diana in Cavalli's *La Calisto* and the Messagiera and Proserpina in last summer's terrifically ugly production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, along with a terrific Sifare in Mozart's *Mitridate*.

Well before the musicological dig necessary for “Semiramide” she has been a committed proponent of obscure operas, performing in both Pergolesi's and Cimarosa's fiendishly florid settings of *L'Olimpiade*.

She's also a superb Ariodante in a recent recording of Simon Mayr's *Ginevra di Scozia*, which is unfortunately nearly ruined by a dreadful leading soprano and tenor. However, her appealing CD recitals of Rossini songs and rarely done Haydn arias are recommendable without reservation.

Important aspects of Bonitatibus's art can be viewed on excellent DVDs of several 17th century operas including Cavalli's *La Didone* (though I find that opera very dull), and, although I don't enjoy **David Alden**'s production, her Giunone is featured in a marvelous cast in that composer's Parisian opera *Ercole Amante*. As an imperial Ottavia in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* she steals the show from **Danielle de Niese**'s petulant Poppea and **Philippe Jaroussky**'s screamly Nerone.

US audiences for now must content themselves with these and the sterling, essential “Semiramide-La Signora Regale” while hoping that some American opera company or orchestra soon engages the regal Italian mezzo; however, next month lucky audiences in Lausanne will get to experience Bonitatibus's first-ever Tancredi opposite **Jessica Pratt** while her spicy Isabella will enliven **Jean-Pierre Ponnelle**'s venerable version of *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Vienna Staatsoper opposite **Javier Camarena** and **Ildar Abdrazakov** in April.