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Classical Editor: Rob Barnett

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BARGAIN OF THE MONTH



ROSSINI 2 CDs
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 Rhys-Evans • Cigna • Utzeri • Bianchini
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 Alessandro de Marchi

Gioachino ROSSINI (1792-1868)
Torvaldo e Dorliska. Damma semi-seria in two acts (1815)
Torvaldo, Huw Rhys-Evans (ten);
Dorliska, **Torvaldo's** wife, Paola Cigna (sop); Giorgio, custodian of the Duke of Ordow's castle, Mauro Utzeri (bar); Duca d'Ordow, Mauro **Bianchini** (bass); Ormondo, Captain of the Duke's guard, Giovanna Bellavia (bass-bar); Carlotta, Giorgio's sister, Anna-Rita Gemmabella (mezzo)
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Researching for my Rossini conspectus, published in two parts by Musicweb-International in November 2005 ([Part 1](#)) and ([Part 2](#)) I could find no extant recording of **Torvaldo e Dorliska**, Rossini's 16th opera. Charles Osborne in *The bel canto Operas* (Methuen 1994) mentions an LP version under Alberto Zedda with a fine cast including Cuberli, Valentini-Terrani, Dara and Nimgern, but this seems never to have made it onto CD. Knowing that the opera had been performed at Bad Wildbad, known as the Pesaro of the North, in 2003 and that Naxos had previously recorded from there, Musicweb approached the company for me. Naxos confirmed they had it in the can and I can now welcome its issue as yet another addition to the burgeoning list of Rossini operas readily available on either CD or DVD.

Rossini had already agreed to compose a work to open the Carnival Season at Rome's Teatro Valle on 26 December 1815 as he prepared his first opera seria

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for Naples, *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*. This was enthusiastically received at its premiere on 4 October 1815. On his arrival in Rome to rehearse *Il Turco in Italia* a month later he did not like the libretto prepared for him by Angelo Anelli, the librettist of *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Instead of turning to the more experienced Jacopo Ferretti he instead commissioned a young but well-read civil servant, inexperienced as a librettist, Cesare Sterbini. He produced a semi-seria libretto that essentially belongs in the category of a 'rescue opera' of which the outstanding example is Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

The opera is set in and around the castle of the Duke of Ordow (bar). The evil Duke is in love with Dorliska (sop), the wife of the knight **Torvaldo** (ten). The Duke had attacked the couple on their wedding day with the intent of taking Dorliska for himself. In the struggle **Torvaldo** was wounded and left for dead. Dorliska having escaped arrives at the castle and seeks shelter not knowing it is the home of the Duke. At first she is given shelter by Giorgio (bass), the castle guardian, and his wife Carlotta (mezzo) but is discovered by the Duke. **Torvaldo**, who has not been killed, arrives at the castle in disguise to rescue her but she inadvertently reveals his identity and he becomes a prisoner. Giorgio declares that he is an honourable man and with the aid of his wife and disaffected villagers tired of their tyrant Duke, **Torvaldo** and Dorliska are rescued.

Rossini did not try to import the musical and dramatic initiatives of his Naples opera to Rome; rather he presented a traditional structure with recitative interspersed between the musical numbers. Although there are self-borrowings in places the music has impetus and drama with significant demands on the principal singers. Bad Wildbad has a reputation of giving up-and-coming singers opportunities in this repertoire together with more experienced colleagues. The bass Mauro **Bianchini** as the Duke, who has sung widely in Italy, the USA and Australasia, has a sonorous big voice. I thought at first (CD 1 tr.2) that the middle of his voice was too low for the role and he had trouble maintaining a legato line. However, his voice warms and his flexibility improves to the benefit of his characterisation. He is a villain one can believe in and his vocal timbre is distinct from the lighter tone of Mauro Utzeri as the good guy Giorgio in their scenes together (CD 2 tr.12).

Utzeri has appeared at the Pesaro festival as well as leading Italian houses including La Scala. His lean clear-toned baritone singing is incisive and he brings the character to life. As **Torvaldo** the Welsh tenor Huw Rhys-Evans hasn't quite the heady top to his voice of the ideal Rossini tenor. His is a light lyric tenor voice with a metallic edge and rather white tone. Nonetheless his singing is expressive and musical and his hero is believable (CD 1 tr.9). As his wife Dorliska, Paola Cigna is a little stretched at the top of her lyric voice (CD 1 tr.5) but colours and covers her tone well to give a very convincing portrayal. As Ormando and his sister Carlotta, essential to the plot, Giovanni Bellavia (CD 1 tr.12) and Anna-Rita Gemmabella (CD 2 tr.11) are vocally distinctive and sing and portray their roles well.

The Naxos booklet gives a detailed track-listing, an excellent track-related synopsis, artist profiles and an introductory essay, all in English and German. A full libretto in Italian is available on the web. With excellent conducting by Alessandro de Marchi of the skilled orchestra and chorus, this performance from Bad Wildbad fills a gap in the current availability of Rossini operas on record. Like many live recordings there is the intrusion of applause, which can disturb the dramatic flow. However, another characteristic of Bad Wildbad is that the applause is encouraging and never overdone. I never know if the performances are in concert or staged. There are no obvious stage noises although once or twice the balance indicates a singer moving off mike.

Whilst Rossini was preparing *Torvaldo e Dorliska* for its premiere on 26 December 1815, as the first opera of the Carnival Season at the Teatro Valle in Rome, the composer signed a contract with the rival Teatro Argentina to compose a comic opera for later in the season. With little time for the composition he again turned down a libretto by Ferretti as unsuitable. Instead Cesare Sterbini the apprentice librettist of *Torvaldo e Dorliska* provided the verses for the work of which Verdi said 'I cannot help believing that, for abundance of ideas, comic verve and truth of declamation, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is the most beautiful opera buffa in existence'. It was premiered on 20 February 1816. Although *Torvaldo e Dorliska* has not the musical invention of its successor it does not deserve the neglect it has had in performance or on record. The work is being performed in Pesaro in 2006 with a cast including **Michele** Pertusi, Bruno Pratico and Francesaco Meli among others. Given the quality of this performance and recording I would not wait with bated breath to see if a recording emerges and would recommend all lovers of Rossini's operas to investigate this performance.

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