



## SESSION REPORT Donizetti from Opera Rara

Work	<i>Donizetti: Belisario</i>	Artists	Soloists, BBC Singers, BBC Symphony Orchestra		
Conductor	Sir Mark Elder	Venue	BBC Maida Vale Studios, London		
Producer	Michael Haas	Engineer	Neil Pemberton	Record label	Opera Rara
Date of sessions	October 2012	Words	Adrian Edwards		

‘Orchestra, I’d like you to take a look at the Sinfonia. It opens with a bar’s rest. Donizetti must have had a late night – he couldn’t think of anything to put in!’ This is Sir Mark Elder’s good-natured remark highlighting an editorial point to his players in the BBC Symphony Orchestra who are gathered together for a week’s recording session of the opera *Belisario*, the second collaboration between Opera Rara and BBC Radio 3.

The project has Sir Mark’s stamp firmly imprinted on it, for as well as being artistic director of Opera Rara he is also responsible, with Roger Parker and Jürgen Selk, for the performing edition used in this recording. An international cast has been assembled for *Belisario*, an opera that was a big hit in 1836, until it was superseded in popularity by the same composer’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

The core of the first recording session features an extended scene from Act 1 where Belisario, a general in the Byzantine army, is cheered as he arrives with his supporters followed by his prisoners of war, one of whom, Alamiro, has become a confidant. The two men each recount their past, Belisario not knowing that in fact Alamiro is his son. The Sicilian baritone Nicola Alaimo (Belisario) and New York-born tenor Russell Thomas (Alamiro) swear eternal loyalty, a prototype for the Alvaro–Carlo duet in Verdi’s *La forza del destino*. Elder asks the singers to pay attention to their dynamics and the elegance of Donizetti’s writing. He calls for more colour from the orchestra (‘wind and brass should sound like harps’) and for more poetry to be brought to the music-making.

Elder has the first and second violins divided. On the far right is a cimballo – a bass brass instrument common in Italian opera of that period – adding to the orchestral palette. Over tea and chocolate biscuits, the conductor questions the precision of the orchestra with producer Michael Haas. The blend was better on playback through a single speaker in the studio than in the cubicle at the mixing desk. The sound team note adjustments to be made: winds to be brought forward in the mix, a microphone to be brought closer. After the break, everything starts to come together, there’s more life in the playing but still a requirement for a lightness of touch essential to the Donizetti style. ‘Let the light in!’ the conductor exclaims. He’s firm with the baritone, Alaimo, whose notes in a decorated phrase aren’t perfect so Elder himself (drawing on his earlier career as a chorister) sings it to him. The tenor, Thomas, first tackles his high Cs in his introductory aria, and Elder quips, ‘I promise you we’ll only do it once on Sunday!’ (the Barbican concert performance). Haas says:

‘Mark Elder is somebody who gets into the detail of a work like nobody I’ve ever worked with’  
– Michael Haas