

punchy playing from the Rotterdam Philharmonic. John Osborn is ideal as Cellini, too, dealing with the often stratospheric demands of the role with style, panache and a lovely command of colour and honeyed *voix mixte*. Mariangela Sicilia doesn't offer similar tonal variety as Teresa but sings elegantly and acts engagingly. Michèle Losier is a terrific Ascanio, stealing the show with her brief appearances. The lower male roles are well taken, too.

I have my reservations about Gilliam's staging, then, but Berlioz's first opera is not well served on film, and this film is certainly more recommendable than Philip Stölzl's sci-fi staging at Salzburg (also Naxos). **Hugo Shirley**

Selected comparison:

Gergiev (NAXOS) DVD 2 110271; NBD0006

Bizet

Les pêcheurs de perles

Julie Fuchs *sop* **Leïla**

Cyrille Dubois *ten* **Nadir**

Florian Sempey *bar* **Zurga**

Luc Bertin-Hugault *bass-bar* **Nourabad**

Les Cris de Paris; Lille National Orchestra /

Alexandre Bloch

Pentatone (F) (2) (3) PTC5186 685 (110' • DDD/DSD)

Recorded live at the Nouveau Siècle, Lille,

May 9-11, 2017

Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* was much maligned for years.

Writing in *Le Figaro*

after its 1863 premiere, Benjamin Jouvin dismissed it as a 'noisy orgy', declaring: 'There were neither fishermen in the libretto nor pearls in the music.' Later, George Bernard Shaw thought it 'a waste of time and energy'. Only Hector Berlioz, writing in the *Journal des débats*, found merit in the opera: 'The score for *Les pêcheurs de perles* does Monsieur Bizet credit ... arias and duets full of fire and great richness of colour.'

The initial run lasted just

18 performances before the opera fell into oblivion. It was only after Bizet's death that his publisher Choudens wanted to cash in on the success of *Carmen* by resurrecting his earlier operas. *Pearl Fishers* was butchered about and reorchestrated, with new numbers added (including a trio composed by Benjamin Godard), and an ending tacked on where Zurga is killed. Notoriously, that famous duet was revised to bring back the big tune at the close, a version which – admittedly – sounds

terrific in concert and established it, largely though the Jussi Björling/Robert Merrill recording, as one of opera's best-loved numbers. But as Brad Cohen (whose own edition was performed at ENO and is used on a Chandos in English disc of highlights) points out, the original version's 'intimacy and refinement create a quite different atmosphere from the noisy peroration of the posthumous version'.

The tide began to turn in the 1970s, when Arthur Hammond orchestrated sections of the original score which had since been cut. The 1863 version was recorded by Georges Prêtre for EMI in 1977. The autograph score is privately owned, so the best musicologists can do is refer to the conducting score – written over six staves – to get closest to Bizet's original ideas about orchestration. Swiftly following on from Cohen's detective work for Edition Peters, Hugh Macdonald's 2014 reconstruction was published by Bärenreiter, and this is the version used in this splendid new recording on Pentatone, recorded in concert in Lille in May 2017.

Dramatically, the libretto is weak, its plot of two friends in rivalry for the same woman (now a veiled virgin priestess) hinging on the recognition of a necklace. Happily, we don't have to take these considerations into a recording. Alexandre Bloch conducts the Orchestre National de Lille in a vivid account of the score, with muscular playing driving the faster dance numbers, while finding the necessary delicacy for the opera's heady lyricism. There are fabulous contributions from the excellent chorus, Les Cris de Paris, as the villagers of the Ceylonese pearl-fishing community.

But it's the casting of the central trio of characters where this recording triumphs, with no grit in the musical oyster. *Pearl Fishers* hasn't fared especially well on disc and there are very few that stand up well to scrutiny. Arguably, you have to go back to 1953 for the finest Nadir and Leïla, French-Canadian husband and wife Léopold Simoneau and Pierrette Alarie. Until now, Cyrille Dubois is an outstanding Nadir. He floats his light tenor with honeyed ease in 'Je crois entendre encore', the high B natural at the end exquisitely placed. Easily the loveliest bit of singing I've heard all year. Julie Fuchs's Leïla is no less delectable. Leïla's Act 2 aria 'Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre' is beautifully sung, as delicate as Ileana Cotrubas (for Prêtre) and less 'mooning' in manner than Janine Micheau (for Pierre Dervaux), warmed by gentle vibrato. Fuchs is far from a wilting flower, though, with just enough

steel after her pleas to Zurga to save Nadir's life only to inflame his jealousy.

Zurga is often the weak link on disc, with several woolly baritones on display, the worst of which is the throaty Guillermo Sarabia for Prêtre. Florian Sempey is a superb Zurga here, his lithe baritone strong enough to make him a charismatic leader, shaping his Act 3 aria sensitively as Zurga despairs that his friend is condemned to die at dawn. Sparks fly in his encounter with Fuchs's Leïla. With Luc Bertin-Hugault's sturdy high priest, it's as fine a cast as has been assembled for a recording of *Les pêcheurs de perles* and immediately claims top spot on my shelves. **Mark Pullinger (08/18)**

Halévy

La reine de Chypre

Véronique Gens *sop* **Catarina Cornaro**

Cyrille Dubois *ten* **Gérard de Coucy**

Étienne Dupuis *bar* **Jacques de Lusignan**

Éric Huchet *ten* **Mocénigo**

Christophoros Stamboglis *bass* **Andréa Cornaro**

Artavazd Sargsyan *ten* **Strozzi**

Tomislav Lavoie *bass* **Officer/Herald**

Flemish Radio Choir; Paris Chamber Orchestra /

Hervé Niquet

Bru Zane (F) (2) ES1032 (155' • DDD)

Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



Fromental Halévy (1799-1862): not a name one comes across very often.

But he was a key figure,

with Meyerbeer, in the development of Parisian *grand opéra*: pupil of Cherubini, posthumous father-in-law (so to speak) of Bizet, he composed more than 30 operas, of which the most successful was *La Juive* (1835). Nearly seven years later, on December 22, 1841, came *La reine de Chypre*. Donizetti's *Caterina Cornaro* (1844) covers the same ground and was in fact based on the same libretto. The Caterina of history belonged to a powerful Venetian family with interests in Cyprus. She was married to the French king of Cyprus – who promptly died, almost certainly poisoned by the Venetians; after reigning as a puppet for 15 years she was forced to abdicate, and Cyprus became part of the Venetian empire.

Venice itself is the villain of the opera, embodied in the sinister figure of Mocénigo: he prevents Catarina from marrying Gérard, a French knight, by telling her uncle, Andréa, that the feared Council of Ten requires her to marry the French king, Jacques de Lusignan. The action moves to Cyprus, where – neither man revealing his identity – Lusignan saves