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Audio Review

Pedro António Avondano: *Il mondo della luna*. Naxos 660487-88, 2021.

Performers: Susana Gaspar (Clarice), Carla Caramujo (Flaminia), Carla Simões (Lisetta), Fernando Guimarães (Ecclitico), João Pedro Cabral (Ernesto), João Fernandes (Cecco), Luis Rodrigues (Buona Fede); Os Músicos do Tejo, conducted by Marcos Magalhães

A new name here, even for many of us who like to think we're somewhat familiar with the roster of eighteenth-century composers! Pedro António Avondano (1714-82) was an Italian working for the court in Portugal. This is the world-premiere recording of his setting of a well-known libretto by the renowned Carlo Goldoni: literally, "The World of the Moon." Record collectors may know operas by Galuppi, Haydn, and Paisiello that use some version of this libretto. The rich cultural associations of the text, and thus of the various settings, are authoritatively revealed in an important book by Pierpaolo Polzonetti: *Italian Opera in the Age of the American Revolution*.¹ For the plot, see Polzonetti's book, *Grove Music Online*, or the *Wikipedia* entry on Haydn's setting. Galuppi's and Avondano's settings get briefer *Wikipedia* entries.

Avondano's opera based on this Goldoni libretto was performed in 1765 in the Royal Theater of Salvaterra (during carnival season), rather than in the "luxurious Casa da Opera, also known as the Opera do Tejo, which was completely destroyed by the Lisbon earthquake of November 1755, just seven months after its inauguration." (I quote the helpful booklet-essay by Jorge Matta, who also prepared the edition of the score used here.)

Avondano was one of seven musicians by that name—including his father, son, and four other male relatives—who were active in Portugal during the 1700s and early 1800s. Pedro António played violin in the royal chapel and composed ballet music for operas as well as music for balls at his home at which he welcomed foreign dignitaries. Three volumes of "Lisbon Minuets" by him (for two melody instruments and continuo) were published in England at the time. Symphonies and violin concertos by him survive in manuscript, as do some sacred operas and oratorios.

The present review is a lightly revised version of one first published in *American Record Guide* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2021): 15-16. It appears here by kind permission.

1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

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Only one (non-sacred) opera survives, and here it is, using a significantly abbreviated edition commissioned in 1994 by the Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, in Lisbon. “Some scenes, arias and recitatives are omitted,” though the omitted material is, alas, not indicated in the libretto. The most significant omissions are a chorus and six arias.

The result would, I think, make for an entertaining evening in the theater, especially given the comical shenanigans that are inherent in the plot. Briefly: various characters persuade a pretentious guy that he has flown to the moon while asleep. When they reveal the charade, he is at first angry. But he then realizes that he should be less strict, and, in the end, allows his two daughters and his maid to marry the men they each love.

The recording is self-recommending for people with a special interest in eighteenth-century comic opera: a skillful rendition of a heretofore forgotten version of a particularly intriguing and—as Polzonetti shows—culturally resonant libretto. The mid to late eighteenth century was, of course, the age of political revolutions and also of challenges to settled social arrangements (such as the frequently abusive control of a household and its inhabitants by the master of the house), as we know from plays by Beaumarchais and from operas (including by Paisiello and Mozart) based upon them.

For the general opera-lover, the pickings are slimmer. The numerous musical numbers are mostly very short and generic, with little of the memorable inventiveness and sometimes edgy imagination of contemporary composers such as Galuppi, Paisiello, and Cimarosa (his oft-recorded *Il matrimonio segreto*)—not to speak of Haydn and Mozart, or French operas from the same time period by, say, Grétry.

The musical numbers proper come across well here, with all the vocalists singing nicely on pitch—a quality that should not be taken for granted!

But listening to the whole recording was a trial for me because of the recitatives. Not that they are any longer or less well crafted than in many other operas of the period. Rather because of an experiment on the part of the conductor/harpsichordist that, to read his description in the booklet, sounds interesting and plausible: the singers have been instructed to learn their many recitatives as spoken dialogue, and then, in rehearsals, to gradually work half-singing into it from the chords that they hear coming from the harpsichord.

So much for theory. In practice, the result is that a character may, say, cadence on a pitch that is a whole-step or a tritone away from the root of whatever chord is being played at a given moment, or may pronounce the syllable in an entirely unpitched manner. The effect, to my ear, is that the harpsichordist is often trying to correct an entirely willful or negligent vocalist. (Something similar happened, famously, in Boulez’s recording of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*, though not because of any experiment.)

The libretto, alas, does not include a translation. Also, it is not available at the public Naxos site.

The performing group heard here is new to me. Its name means “The Musicians of the Tagus.” (The Tejo—or Tajo, to use its Spanish name—is the long river that flows from Spain

through Portugal to the Atlantic.) *Músicos* was founded in 2005 by two harpsichordists, Marcos Magalhães and Marta Araújo. The former plays for the recitatives and presumably did much of the vocal coaching. If so, he deserves praise for getting the all-Portuguese cast to deliver the Italian words so meaningfully and characterfully.

In a way, this may be one of the most period-stylish recordings of a mid-eighteenth-century opera ever to have been released commercially. Or maybe it's an experiment that goes far beyond anything that was done at the time, in turning recitative into often-pitchless spoken exchanges. I hope that authorities on Historically Informed Performance (a.k.a. Period Performance Practice) will pay attention and render their various verdicts. The recording, I should add, has been unstintingly hailed by other record critics. Excerpts from their reviews can be read on the Naxos site

(<https://www.naxos.com/Review/Detail/?catalogueid=8.660487-88&languageid=EN>).

The instrumental ensemble is smallish (fewer than two dozen musicians in the booklet photo), but they play with grace and subtlety. The lovely overture (in four short movements) sometimes sounds like elegant chamber music. I look forward to hearing *Os Músicos do Tejo* in purely instrumental repertory.

I urge anybody interested in performance-practice issues in eighteenth-century comic opera to get to know this recording of a minor but intriguing opera, done in a bold and intriguing manner.

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