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Ruy Blas (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Ruy Blas. Filippo Marchetti

Ruy Blas: Mario Malagnini Donna Maria de Neubourg:

Dimitra Theodossiou

Don Sallustio de Bazan: Alberto Gazale

Casilda: Sylvia Marini

Don Pedro de Guevarra: Stefano Consolini

Don Fernando de Cordova: Roberto Nencini

Donna Giovanna: Elena Marinangeli

Don Manuel Arias: Alfio Rosati

Usher: Giovanni Brecciaroli

Orchestra Filarmonica Marchigiani

Coro Lirico Marchigiano "Vincenzo Bellini"

Daniel Lipton, conductor

Filippo Marchetti (1831-1902) was among the handful of Italian opera composers who came to maturity during Verdi's lifetime (Ponchielli and Boito were the others) and still managed to attain a certain amount of success. He was not a very prolific creator. After writing three operas that went virtually unnoticed, his fourth (*Romeo e Giulietta*, Trieste 1865) was well received in Italy and held its own for a while even against Gounod's universally acclaimed treatment of the same subject. It also assured its composer a premiere at Milan's La Scala in 1869 for his next opera, *Ruy Blas*, the very year when the revised version of Verdi's *La forza del destino* was introduced at the same august theater. After two more operas of limited success, Marchetti withdrew from composition in favor of academic life.

Ruy Blas is the adaptation of Victor Hugo's 1838 tragedy, which enjoyed instant and considerable European fame. (Mendelssohn wrote a great concert overture and some incidental music for the play in 1839, even though he professed no sympathy for it.) Even Verdi, a great admirer of Hugo, was seriously considering setting it to music at two junctures; however, fearing censorship problems, he chose *Un ballo in maschera* and *Forza* instead. Needless to say, he chose wisely. Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, dealing with that author's customary indictment of corrupt and tyrannical rulers, was a complex, wordy, and quite farfetched play, and Marchetti's librettist, Carlo d'Ormeville, had his work cut out for him. The resulting opera may be called a partial success. Although in four acts, the work is not long—yet Bongiovanni's bilingual libretto reveals several cuts in this performance. These frequently involve the streamlining of certain ensembles or repetitious passages, though some of the cuts appear unnecessary. (The missing passages are indicated in the booklet by a vertical line alongside the texts.)

Here, briefly, is the opera's story. The action takes place in 1698, toward the end of the Habsburg dynasty in Spain—the dynasty that produced such Verdian heroes as Charles V (*Ernani*) and Philip II (*Don Carlos*). A powerful Spanish grandee (Don Sallustio), exiled from court, resolves to take revenge on Queen Maria de Neubourg.¹ As an instrument of his vengeance, he chooses his valet, a handsome and honest commoner named Ruy Blas, knowing that the young man is infatuated with the queen. Sallustio introduces Ruy at court as his cousin, a titled nobleman. In the second act, as Ruy reveals his diplomatic skills **[End Page 302]** at court, he incurs the wrath of several corrupt aristocrats, among them Don Guritano, who is also in love with the queen and regards Ruy as his hated rival. In act 3, a conspiracy among the nobles is unearthed by Ruy, for which the queen (by now quite taken with her young admirer) bestows a high honor on him. Suddenly and ominously, Don Sallustio returns from exile and—like Silva in Verdi's (and Hugo's) *Ernani*—prepares his revenge by accusing Ruy Blas as the queen's secret lover, and a commoner, to boot. In surprisingly short order, Ruy disposes of both his enemies, restores the queen's honor, and, like Ernani, commits suicide—but not without remaining alive long enough to hear the queen's love confession.

Marchetti handles these dramatic ingredients skillfully but unevenly. His orchestral writing is not particularly inventive, and the first two acts in particular lack the color and variety Verdi, or even Ponchielli, would have provided. The opera's second half improves greatly, reaching its climax in the third-act love duet, with its...

Ruy Blas. Filippo Marchetti

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| <i>Ruy Blas</i> : Mario Malagnini | <i>Donna Giovanna</i> : Elena Marinangeli |
| <i>Donna Maria de Neubourg</i> : Dimitra Theodoridou | <i>Don Manuel Arias</i> : Alfio Rosati |
| <i>Don Sallustio de Bazan</i> : Alberto Gazale | <i>Usher</i> : Giovanni Brecciaroli |
| <i>Cavilda</i> : Sylvia Marini | <i>Orchestra Filarmonica Marchigiana</i> |
| <i>Don Pedro de Guermm</i> : Stefano Cevolini | <i>Coro Lirico Marchigiano "Vincenzo Bellini"</i> |
| <i>Don Fernando de Cordova</i> : Roberto Nencini | Daniel Lipton, conductor |
| <i>Don Garitano</i> : Gabriele Manici | Bongiovanni (distributed by Qualiton Imports) CD 2237/38-2 (2 CDs) |

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