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On song: Bartoli wins the battle of the divas

The Italian mezzo thrills, but a South African star is a close second, says Richard Morrison

classical Bartoli/Gabetta *Dolce Duello* Decca {{{{ Pretty Yende *Dreams* Sony {{{{ Sabine Devieille *Mirages* Erato {{{{ Few recordings this year have brought me as much sensual pleasure as Cecilia Bartoli's unlikely collaboration with Sol Gabetta. And I'm not referring to the photos scattered through the album booklet, in which mezzo-soprano and cellist intimately entwine. If that helps to attract passing trade for a collection of largely unknown 17th and 18th-century opera arias, well, so be it. There's certainly nothing tacky about the glorious music-making.

The arias are by such rarely heard composers as Caldara, Porpora and Domenico Gabrielli (no relation to the other Gabriellis).

Even the Handel and Vivaldi numbers will be known only to connoisseurs. One thing links them: each has an obbligato (solo instrumental) part for cello, which is often as intricate, expressive and virtuosic as the vocal line.

So Gabetta is as much on show as Bartoli - and what a nimble, stylish interpreter of baroque music she turns out to be. The way she matches Bartoli's timbre is uncanny. As for the singer, she is so

much better in this delicate repertoire (deftly accompanied by a period orchestra led by Gabetta's brother, Andres) than when trying to project big roles into big theatres. You also get Gabetta's vivacious performance of one of Boccherini's quirky cello concertos (No 10, if you need to know). A tonic from first note to last.

The sheer joy in making music conveyed by Bartoli and Gabetta is what's missing from Pretty Yende's second solo album. At least, I can't think of any other reason why such a pristine demonstration of coloratura singing should have left me impressed, but not swept away.

The South African sensation has won rave reviews across two continents recently for her interpretation on stage of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, so it's a neat idea to build an album round the mad scene from that Donizetti opera, but also to include other operatic heroines who (in Yende's words) "long for escape, or find escape in their dream lives".

That strategy allows her to sing Juliette's radiant waltz-song from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* and the sleep-walking scene from Bellini's *La son-*

nambula as well as much rarer items, and she delivers even the most florid whirls of semiquavers with consummate lyrical grace. I just wish I could detect more emotion. Clearly, Yende produces it in the theatre; perhaps the recording studio inhibits her.

More coloratura virtuosity on a new recording from the young French soprano Sabine Devieille. She conjures up an imaginative, mostly French programme based on operatic heroines who are from exotic locales (*Thaïs*, *Lakmé*) or not entirely of this world (*Ophelia*, *Mélisande*).

FPThe most fascinating items, however, are not operatic. They are the *Quatre Poèmes Hindous* by Maurice Delage, evoking with remarkable fidelity the modes and instruments of classical Indian music.

All very enterprising, but I can't totally warm to Devieille's hard timbre or fast vibrato. Nor is the balance ideal. François-Xavier Roth's excellent ensemble, *Les Siècles*, is reduced to the status of a (distant) backing band.

Yende delivers the most florid semiquavers with lyrical grace

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