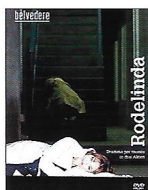


## Rodelinda ★★

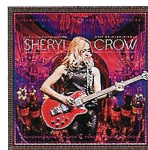
(2011) 2 discs. 189 min. In Italian w/English subtitles. DVD: \$42.99. Belvedere (dist. by Naxos of America).

In the 1960s and '70s, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his original-instrument group Concentus Musicus Wien were pioneers of historically-informed performances of baroque music, but this 2011 production of Handel's 1725 opera suggests that stylistically they have not kept pace with advances in the movement. Here, the orchestral sound lacks transparency, the tempi veer between driven and sluggish, and Harnoncourt's habit of indulging in abrupt pauses in mid-movement (even in a post-curtain call reprise of the finale) feels like a crude affectation. Nor is the singing of the highest quality. In the title role of a medieval queen whose husband Bertarido has been deposed—and presumably killed—by Grimoaldo, who is trying to force Rodelinda to submit to his advances, soprano Danielle de Niese is dramatically powerful but vocally insecure. And while countertenor Bejun Mehta is superb as her (still living) spouse, tenor Kurt Streit (Grimoaldo) is strained by the vocal demands, as are other members of the ensemble (no wonder there are cuts to the score). Adding to the sorry state of affairs, stage director Philipp Harnoncourt (the conductor's son) has transferred the action to what appears to be a seedy cinderblock in a modern slum, turning the characters into dueling factions of a criminal gang who constantly point guns at one another. The set revolves to situate singers in different grimy alcoves, and there is incessant stage business on the fringes that the camera occasionally focuses on while ignoring the principals. *Rodelinda* is one of Handel's greatest operas, but one sees only fleeting glimpses of that greatness in this performance. Presented in PCM stereo, this is not a necessary purchase. (F. Swietek)



## Sheryl Crow: Live at the Capitol Theatre ★★★

(2017) 121 min. DVD: \$24.99 (2 audio CDs included), Blu-ray: \$29.99 (2 audio CDs included). Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

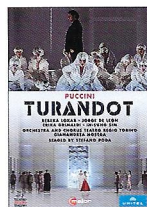


Reviewing *Sheryl Crow: Miles from Memphis—Live at the Pantages Theater* (VL-7/11), I wrote, "While she lacks charismatic stage presence, a distinctive voice, or great chops on guitar or keyboards, Sheryl Crow has nevertheless been delivering bestselling CDs and successfully touring...ever since her 1993 breakout *Tuesday Night Music Club*. The reason for Crow's staying power is simple: like Carole King, she knows how to craft catchy songs that draw from a wide variety of genres, including rock, folk, pop, country, blues, soul, and gospel." All of which still holds true

for this 2017 performance from the Capitol Theatre in Port Chester, NY. Touring in support of her latest CD, *Be Myself*, Crow plays guitar, bass, and keyboards, solidly backed by a six-person ensemble on a generous 21-song set that includes the title track along with four other cuts from the new album. Crow has a deep catalog of hits to draw from and she serves up several here, including "Everyday Is a Winding Road," "All I Wanna Do," "Leaving Las Vegas," "My Favorite Mistake," "If It Makes You Happy," and "Soak Up the Sun," as well as her fine cover of Cat Stevens' "The First Cut Is the Deepest" and a rockin' rendition of the Allman Brothers' "Midnight Rider." Interspersed throughout (thankfully infrequently) are brief interview excerpts with Crow talking about her career. What is most disappointing here is the audio quality: unlike most Blu-ray releases, which offer lossless audio—usually DTS-HD 5.1—this release only features Dolby Digital 5.1 and stereo on both the DVD and Blu-ray releases. While the sound is decent, the Dolby Digital soundtracks are also less full-bodied and noticeably sharp on higher volume. Extras include the expanded interview with Crow, a slideshow, and two bonus audio CDs featuring the entire concert. Recommended. (R. Pitman)

## Turandot ★★1/2

(2018) 115 min. In Italian w/English subtitles. DVD: \$31.99, Blu-ray: \$41.99. C Major/Unitel (dist. by Naxos of America).

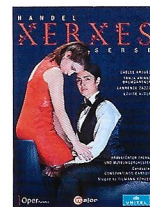


In one important respect, conductor Gianandrea Noseda's 2018 performance of Puccini's final opera at Turin's Teatro Regio hearkens back to Arturo Toscanini's at the 1926 La Scala premiere. Eschewing the completion of the third act by Franco Alfano (or the more recent one by Luciano Berio), Noseda stops abruptly where the dying composer left off, with the lights going down and the curtain suddenly falling in the middle of the lament over Liù's death. One suspects that Noseda's incisive treatment of the score also resembles Toscanini's. Otherwise, however, this is a thoroughly modern—or post-modern—*Turandot*, one as baffling as the riddles that the cruel titular princess poses to her suitors under threat of death should they fail to unravel them. Stefano Poda's staging sets the story in a sterile white box, in which virtually everyone either wears white or is painted that color, except for a few cast members garbed in black—notably Calaf (Jorge De León), who is fascinated by Turandot despite the misgivings of his father, and Liù (Erika Grimaldi), the slave who loves Calaf and eventually turns the tables on Turandot, at which point other figures dress in black as well. In the first scene, Turandot (Rebeka Lokar) appears in a striking red gown, but afterward she practically disappears, with

secondary characters lip-synching to her singing. What all of this is intended to mean is unclear, but it is certainly eye-catching, and the principals sing well. Overall, this is a *Turandot* that is intriguing but ultimately unsatisfying. Presented in DTS 5.1 (DTS-HD 5.1 on the Blu-ray release) and PCM stereo, this is a strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)

## Xerxes ★★★

(2017) 180 min. In Italian w/English subtitles. DVD: 2 discs, \$46.99, Blu-ray: \$41.99. C Major/Unitel (dist. by Naxos of America).



Handel's 1738 opera was an abject failure in its day—indeed it was instrumental in prompting the composer to abandon the form in favor of oratorio—but its successful revival in the 20th century helped to spearhead a renewed appreciation of his works for the stage, partially because its ravishing opening aria, "Omnia mai fù," had become famous in a purely instrumental guise as "Handel's Largo." The plot is a romantic roundelay typical of baroque convention: Persian king Xerxes falls in love with Romilda and abandons his wife Amastre, who disguises herself as a soldier to be near him. Romilda in turn loves Xerxes's brother Arsamene, who the king exiles. Her sister Atalanta is also enamored with Arsamene, and unsuccessfully encourages Romilda to marry Xerxes. After all the characters bemoan their misery at length, Xerxes issues death sentences against several, but relents after Amastre threatens suicide and everyone is forgiven, including Romilda and Arsamene. This 2017 production from the Frankfurt Opera exhibits some odd textual choices, clumsily transferring several scenes from the end of Act II to the beginning of Act III. But the playing of the Frankfurter Opern- und Museumsorchester under Constantin Carydis is admirable (apart from a few slow tempi), and the vocalism of Gaëlle Arquez (Xerxes), Lawrence Zazzo (Arsamene), Elizabeth Sutphen (Romilda), Louise Alder (Atalanta), and Tanja Ariane Baumgartner (Amastre) is exceptional. And Tilmann Köhler's staging, with characters in modern dress around a long dinner table, at least has the virtue of elegance. Presented in DTS 5.1 and PCM stereo, this is recommended. (F. Swietek)

## 4K Ring

Naxos of America has released a 4K edition of the opening opera in Richard Wagner's Norse-mythology-inspired Ring Cycle, *Die Walküre* (4K: \$41.99), a 2017 production staged by Vera Nemirova for the 50th anniversary of the Salzburg Easter Festival.

