

## Bartoli dazzles at Berkeley recital

By Sue Gilmore  
STAFF WRITER

**I**THOUGHT about giving you the highlights of renowned Italian mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli's recital in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Sunday afternoon, but I honestly couldn't come up with any. Trying to identify the standout moments among the 90-plus minutes this supremely talented artist gave us was like looking for a needle in a whole flashing haystack of needles — and all that silvery glitter was in fact pure gold.

For her sold-out return engagement at Cal Performances, Bartoli fashioned a tribute to Maria Malibran, the legendary 19th-century mezzo-soprano whose brief but brilliant career was cut short by a tragic riding accident when she was only 28. Music in the Romantic bel canto tradition by Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti that Malibran excelled at thus

filled the program, fleshed out by some especially delicious concluding numbers composed by Malibran herself, by her famous sister Pauline Verdot and by her father, the celebrated Spanish tenor Manuel del Populo Garcia.

It was a canny selection of arias and songs that allowed Bartoli to traverse an entire spectrum of human emotions, from the girlish excitement and ardor conjured up in the "La regata veneziana" trio by Rossini, to the swaggering, extravagant defiance of Garcia's "Yo que soy contrabandista" to the heartbreakingly poignant reflections in "Amore e morte" by Donizetti. This meditation of a dying man on the love he hopes will endure beyond his passing emerged in Bartoli's exquisitely expressive treatment with unornamented, flowing phrases in crystal clear purity of tone, each gathering radiance as it unfurled.

All the soldiering elements in the trademark Bartoli armament reported for duty Sunday — the crack accuracy of pitch, the superhuman breath control, the impossibly agile maneuvering though the most demanding, heavily ornamented passages and the finely calibrated phrase-shaping that wedded her music uncannily true to text in each and every instance.

Bartoli uses more than her amazing vocal powers to give life to a piece; she is a whole-body singer whose

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consummate commitment to and understanding of her material allows her to thoroughly inhabit a song. Those overtly physical elements, the grimaces and facial tics, that used to excite so much com-



CAL PERFORMANCES

**MEZZO-SOPRANO** Cecilia Bartoli performed in recital at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall Sunday afternoon.

ment are now an anticipated and welcome aspect of her performances — I heard one young man exclaim "Good! We can see her face!" as he found his way to his seat.

So for the deprecating humor invested in Donizetti's Neapolitan song "La conocchia," we watched the transformation unfold: Bartoli's eyes widened, the famous eyebrows arched, the smile broadened to a beam, the shoulders swayed and the voice darkened to a wry snarl just as the moment of self-confession was reached.

She became "La grande coquette" in the Rossini piece by that title, by turns peppery, piquant and flirtatious, shrugging and snickering (who knew you could actually sing a snicker?) and pouncing on those rapid-fire short notes with astonishing precision.

It was a tour de force performance capped by a scruffily animated, woodpecker-on-speed rendition of Malibran's "Rataplan." The song emulates the rattling of



a snare drum, complete with burrs and rollings of the R's, with Bartoli providing the appropriate arm and hand motions in lock-step time.

The singer was well-served throughout her program by the elegant ministrations of fellow countryman Sergio Ciomei on piano. Following an immediate standing ovation, the duo returned for four encores, including a fiery turn with the "Seguidilla" aria from Bizet's Carmen and an intensely fervid account of the beloved De Curtis song "Non ti Scordare Di Me."

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