

DOMIZETTI AT AIX-EN-PROVENCE : Alexander Weatherson

Aix and the Eighteenth Century being more or less one, its musical defection to the joys of bel canto has come almost by stealth; Mozart still reigns - an impressive and near-British Così fan Tutte flourished this year but another operatic sovereign took the stage by storm. Not that Queen Elizabeth I was in any way a stranger, she very floridly asserted her supremacy under the auspices of Rossini, Caballe and Elisabetta, Regina D'Inghilterra in 1975, but now, two years later, both she and Caballe made a comeback in Roberto Devereux staged within the framework of the open courtyard theatre at the former Archbishop's Palace, very much an improvement on the football ground expanses (and acoustic) of the Theatre Antique at Arles two years before.

This tide towards the Ottocento stems of course from the Director of the Aix Festival, Bernard Lefort, who has stated his intention of moving more and more in this direction: such an attitude is, predictably, not at all to the taste of the adherents of the Paris Opera with its staid repertoire and peculiar productions and the reception from most of the Parisian critics has been notably sour, ranging from a ringing disdain for Donizetti's music to a somewhat prissy disapproval of the enthusiasm of the audiences and for what they seemed to think was a perverse cult of the prima donna. Altogether missing in fact from their tirades was the so-called French logic. They all, it seems, display a very selective approach to the history of music and sensibility extends very readily to the plunks and shakes of Monteverdi for example but stops short of the histrionics which are authentic in the writings of Donizetti and his contemporaries.

It would be hard to deny that Mme. Caballe produces precisely the kind of vocal performance Donizetti had in mind for such a late example of opera seria, where the transports of the diva sum up the last act; the great soprano was in superlative form, the music suiting her (as we know) to perfection, and only some harsh aigus emerged with merit from a situation where most of the reflecting the unwise repertoire she has engaged in at Covent Garden and elsewhere. What was especially impressive was her inventive approach to the score, the performance to dream about under the baton of Rudel, and two performances I saw being quite notably different from one another, very spontaneous not only in their vocal colouring but also in their emphasis on certain words and

gestures; this was indeed live bel canto as opposed to the frigid approximations that pass as 'Music Theatre'.

The title role was taken by Jose Carreras, a wonderfully virile performance but not especially helped by a costume borrowed, one can only presume, from the then not late Elvis Presley. His final cabaletta, although cut into half, showed his sterling ability to transform music that is superficially frivolous into material of real poignancy and resolution. There were two Saras, Janet Coster - standing in for Grace Bumbry - and Suzanne Marsee. Both had their merits but neither in the end can be said to have convincingly overcome the difficulties of this short but queerly defensive role, the first over-acted, the second undersang. Of the two Nottinghams the initial villain, Franco Bordoni, sang stolidly and scarcely acted at all, the second, Vincenzo Sardiniero, though well equipped with an excellent Donizetti style, suffered from memory lapses and was patently ill at ease. The final performance produced an extraordinary lapse on the part of the chorus whose cue, it seems, went astray, the first and only time I remember a chorus being booed. Neither the production nor costumes were of any distinction, rather the reverse, but the playing of the Capitole Orchestra of Toulouse was always impressive and the conducting of Julius Rudel informed and sensitive, if sometimes too summary.

At the other end of the town in the Place des Quatre Dauphins, Il Campanello di Notte made a strange bed-fellow with Cimarosa's Il Maestro di Cappella. Musically the latter had most of the distinction, delicious in the 18th century setting of fountain and trees. Il Campanello was tormented by strange cuts and interpolated arias (from Betty for example) equipped with a double cast, both speaking and singing in mirror formation, and provided with extra characters one of which, a mime, was really superb but nothing much to do with Donizetti. Indeed this entertainment was clearly a pasticcio of sorts, great fun but in the end not much of a performance. Faye Robinson sang with a firm tone and a clear liquid articulation, Stafford Dean and Lajos Miller and humour seemed to have been drained away to their speaking confreres. Elsewhere Rossini's Stabat Mater received a performance to dream about under the baton of Rudel, and the prologue to Boito's Mefistofele soared to immense heights and sonorous whispered depths to the huge and justified delight of the audience in the Cathedral.