

René Swennen DOM SÉBASTIEN roi de Portugal Julliard Paris 1979

A novel centred on 'Don Sébastien', that is on Donizetti's grand opera and not in fact on the historical character, is probably as unexpected as anything in the philistine world of fiction. And this book is fiction, though it concerns real people, in credible situations (mostly), described in careful detail and with a sensitivity to the chapter and verse of the times that is remarkable. Surprisingly the novel opens - this is very odd - with an unfamiliar ingratiating Verdi of all people, in Paris for the production of 'Don Carlos' and with his rediscovery of a theme from 'La Favorite', a 'little phrase' no less, that he finds with Proust-like panache, not when he dips his madeleine in his tea (no doubt Verdi didn't drink tea) but while anxiously awaiting his first forkful of veal casserole. Curiouser and curiouser. Donizetti himself follows in cinematic flashback, back indeed to 1843 and to his arrival by coach at the bar of Paris on his last-but-one fatal, frozen arrival at the capital.

From here, possibly the only real landmark in the narrative, the plot is wayward and drifts leisurely towards the 'Dom Sébastien' that is in preparation for the Opera. M. Swennen knows his period: from time to time - not consistently - it is necessary to remind oneself that this is a novel. Although highly coloured, the melodramatic episodes are not inappropriate to the outsize people described with such care. Donizetti is surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of the Boulevard des Italiens, amongst others by his accessory-gris Accursi, by Giulia Grisi, by M. Pillet and his cantatrice-grise the dreadful Mme. Stoltz. By Horace de Viel-Castel, Nestor Roqueplan, by Alfred de Musset (who turns out to be a bosom friend) and by the androgynous 'Dominique de Vulpien' who personifies the mysterious 'Madame' the dark angel of the composer's disintegration (perhaps).

Unpropitiously for a romance, the theme is death and decay but the sequence of events is taken with lightness and in any case is subject to philosophical light relief so the effect is not gloomy. The mis-en-scène is in many ways simply a vehicle for the penetrating comments on the art of opera - sometimes put into the mouth of the composer but those in fact of M. Swennen himself, and none the worse for that. M. Swennen has thought deeply about opera and his ideas are profound and well-expressed:

'L'opéra semble solide, prospère, invulnérable, et cependant, croyez-moi, il est fragile. L'école germanique répand l'idée qu'il faut un drame musical, au lieu des trilles, des vocalises, du contre-ut, et qu'il faut une action dramatique cohérente, au lieu des bons vieux livrets découpés en tranches par l'alternance des arias et des récitatifs. Ces idées contiennent en germe la mort de l'opéra, car celui-ci est l'art de recul, de la distance. Il y a dans l'opéra, entre la musique et l'action, cet écart que nous tenons dans la vie entre nos actes et la conscience heureuse ou malheureuse que nous en avons.....'

Mon dieu, comme vos paroles m'enchantent! s'exclama Musset'
- as well he might have done.

A slow progression to the actual rehearsals of 'Dom Sébastien', fraught with illness, with anxieties, has scarcely a false note historically (but could Donizetti ever have conducted the 'Symphonie fantastique?'). Even so, in the final analysis I find that the mood of the text with its pervading 'morbidezza' is nearer to my mind to the Belle Époque, to the sad violet tinted passions of 'Adriana Lecouvreur', (and of Proust), than to the sinewy practicalities of the Ottocento. In its sensitive recreation of actual events the novel presents a sympathetic picture mercifully truncated at the end, of the Italian maestro - but how could any truthful account do otherwise? Its concentration not on the externals of the composer's life, but on his thoughts, philosophies and reflexions is an excellent antidote to the commonplace accounts of success and failure that is all the histories so often attain. A glimpse of the fêted/despised, hardworking musician who lived in a creative enclave at the heart of the French capital, struggling bitterly amongst themselves, beating on the closed door of the French musical tradition, making surface exchanges with the aristocracy, with the intelligensia, but remaining fervently Italian - loving and hating their chosen lot in this foreign field - has long been overdue as material for the romantic novel. This, a precursor, has real distinction. Sadly, for French readers only. (One small complaint. Virginia Vasselli Donizetti is buried at Naples - where she died - and not at Bergamo).

ALEXANDER WEATHERSON.



ALFRED DE MUSSET IN 1841,
AT THE AGE OF 31

From the Drawing by Eugène Lami
at the Comédie-Française