

'ON THE ORIGINAL INSTRUMENTS' by Alex Weatherston

It has become a truism to point out that the extraordinary vocal impetus that characterised the Ottocento was almost as much to do with the gifts of the singers as with the talent of the composers. Opera were - initially at least - conceived in terms of very specific voices and the extension and range that these voices allowed gave the opportunity for a Bellini, a Donizetti or a Rossini to advance the expressive power of the dramma per musica. In this sense the operas of the Ottocento are even less likely to be given an 'authentic' performance than, for example, the unhappy works of the baroque composers currently being revived.

Even in Donizetti's day the constant rewriting, the punatore, the interpolations, the arie da baulle etc, were a reflection of the need to remake the opera in the terms of a later singer, and unless this person was very remarkable, or the composer was a genius at recomposition, then the end result was very considerably less than the original production.

Bellini in particular was most vulnerable. This is simply because he had the luck to write for some of the most remarkable voices of all time and was never able to resist exploiting their talents to the full. With the result of course that we have almost never heard such operas as Il pirata or La sonnambula fully or even partially as they were written, especially where the tenor roles are concerned. It was Rubini's vaulting tessitura that made Elvino into a flesh and blood character, his fullness and power at the top of the stave endowed this somewhat annoyingly cardboard individual with both pathos and credibility - a much more rounded identity than has ever been achieved in the succession of bloodlessly trilling tenorini to be heard since in the role (and even their strained interpretations have mostly been achieved with a downwards transposition).

It may be that with the present disintering of Rossini's serious operas we shall find ourselves with tenors trained to sing them, in which case we shall at least have a chance to hear Bellini's operas, and the earlier operas of Gaetano Donizetti in something like their original keys, and even possibly some of Pacini's or Mercadante's with the original fioriture.

Even now there are a few names we could suggest, someone in Holland, someone in Sicily perhaps. A name that many more people would be able to suggest would of course be Bruce Brewer. His suitability for the Rubini repertoire has

been well known in operatic circles for some time but, such is the unpredictability of the lyric stage, it has taken his performance at Aix-en-Provence in a hilarious opera seria entitled Porporino to make it clear that this is his particular forte even to the unspecialised circles who seem to run opera houses. One good result has been the two performances of La sonnambula at the Opéra at Dijon in mid-January with Peggy Bouveret as the sleepwalking village maiden, Joyce Castle as Teresa, and Bruce Brewer as Elvino - singing the role in not just the key as written but in Rubini's original version. Dijon is not alas the most accessible place in the world and its cartellone is unlikely to feature in the strange lists of coming performances we get in British operatic journals. For those able to travel however - or for those with sufficiently powerful radio receivers - the following list of works sung, or about to be sung by one or the other of the Bruce Brewer/Joyce Castle team may prove useful:

1980

January 18, 20 Dijon: La sonnambula (Bellini) BB & JC

February 2 Radio France Adriano in Siria

(Pergolesi) BB

March 14-30 Palermo: Otello (Rossini) BB (Rodrigo)

March 26 Radio France Robinson Crusoe  
(Offenbach) JC

November Naples: Idomeneo (Mozart) BB (Idamante)

1981

May 19 Radio France Mathilde di Shabran

(Rossini) BB & JC

The proposed recording of 'Nuits d'été a Pausilippe' with these two artists is still on the books it seems, but although the tapes have been made no precise date for its publication is yet available. Donizettians are of course, used (if not reconciled) to long periods of waiting for their records!

