

Teatro La Fenice4th and 7th January 1981

In his book on Donizetti, William Ashbrook, after describing the opera's lack of initial success, says "It is difficult to believe that Maria de Rudenz will ever see the stage again!" On December 21st the Fenice Theatre handsomely proved him wrong with a production in the grand manner, making fitting amends to a piece which first saw the light of day at the same theatre in 1838. A score which showed itself as being vintage Donizetti inevitably aroused the question of why it should have vanished so completely from the opera house after 1854.

The usual explanation offered is the story, which Desmond Shawe-Taylor called "a gory gothick plot of spectacular improbability". Certainly the vengeful Maria does not engage our sympathies in the way that the hapless Lucia does. Which is perhaps the same as saying that Scott was a better writer than Anicet-Bourgeois and Mallian.

Musically, as has been suggested above, the score represents Donizetti at his most inventive and fluent. The striking introduction to Act II, played by a solo bass clarinet accompanied by a harp, regularly drew a round of applause. The extended ensemble at the end of Act I some of which later found its way into Poliuto, compares with Donizetti's finest ensembles, and the finale itself is launched by a splendidly energetic theme which has a truly Verdian drive and vigour.



The Fenice had assembled a cast worthy of the occasion. Katia Ricciarelli gave of her considerable best as the much-wronged heroine. The villainous Corrado (the only survivor at the end of the opera) was sung by Leo Nucci, who, it may be remembered, received such a splendid ovation at Covent Garden a few years ago when he stepped in as a last-minute replacement in Luisa Miller. The tenor, Enrico, was sung by the handsome and youthful-looking Alberto Cupido, who was also heard a few years ago in Boheme at Glyndebourne.

On January 7th the second cast took over. The new Corrado (Andrea Martin) and the new Enrico (Carlo Tuand) were competent and adequate, but their voices did not have quite the quality or edge of their predecessors. The new Maria however (Floriana Sovilla) was excellent and really matched up to Ricciarelli. Indeed, as regards ease of production and voice control in the upper register, she was if anything superior. She had a most enthusiastic reception, and the flower-throwers were out in force. 4