

SANCIA DI CASTIGLIA

BY STEPHEN HASTINGS

TEATRO DONIZETTI, BERGAMO 2, 4, th October 1984

The two performances of Sancia di Castiglia at Bergamo's Teatro Donizetti at the beginning of October, possibly the first since the work's Neapolitan première in 1832 (it seems there may have been a revival in Malta some years ago), represented a fine example of how to perform Donizetti on (one presumes) a limited budget. Filippo Crivelli's production was functional; Gianni Quarant's sets elegant, if unmemorable, and the same might be said of Roberto Abbado's conducting. The strong elements were in the cast, made up of finalists of the 'Callas' Singing Competition. In particular, Antonella Bandelli, in the title role, gave an extremely stylish and, in the end, moving performance. The role was written for Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis, who was also Donizetti's first Fausta, Gemma, Buondelmonte, and Elisabetta (Roberto Devereux) and who on all accounts seems to have been a formidable soprano 'sfogato' (she also sang as a mezzo-soprano). Bandelli is, one suspects, much slighter of voice (and figure), yet only in certain descents into the chest register did one feel that she wasn't quite ready for the part. Even smaller of voice was Adriana Cicogna's Garzia, yet she too showed a sure command of Donizettian style; it was refreshing to hear the second verse of her cabaletta so idiomatically embellished.

The male elements of the cast, as is so often the case, were less praiseworthy; their vocalism clumsier, their stylistic models questionable. In the role of the Saracen prince Ircano, written for Luigi Lablache, Franco de Grandis revealed a sure theatrical instinct - his launching of the stretta at the close of Act One was suitably thrustful and exciting - but much of his singing lacked the courtly polish which is necessary in Donizetti even for such a perfidious character. Giuseppe Costanzo, in the admittedly ungrateful role of Sancia's counsellor Rodrigo, seemed ill-at-ease vocally. The RAI chorus was robust and well-prepared; their colleagues in the orchestra in lackadaisical holiday mood.

After the Bergamo performances, there can be no doubt that Sancia di Castiglia, with the right cast, works extremely well as a musical and theatrical experience. The opera was filmed by RAI and the performance will no doubt emerge fairly soon*, officially or otherwise, on video-cassette and record. That will provide the occasion for a considered discussion of the work's musical values. The above is simply an attempt, after a certain lapse of time, to register a single evening's impressions.

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* Transmitted 26th October