

NOT VERY LONG ago a desperate producer (at the New York City Opera, I seem to remember) castigated *I puritani* as an "awful" opera. After hearing the 'Malibran' version* he is going to have to change his tune.

The 'Malibran' version? No doubt Bellini had intended to write one version only - to be staged at much the same time at two different theatres in two different countries, that for Malibran adjusted slightly for her lower voice. But nothing in the operatic world is as easy as this, the two casts - for the San Carlo in Naples and the Théâtre-Italien in Paris - were not compatible. Paris prided itself on Grisi, Rubini, Tamburini and Lablache, while Naples (had the performance taken place) would have been able to field Malibran (a veritable Halley's comet of a star) as Elvira; Gilbert-Louis Duprez (but with his *do del petto* still to come) as Arturo; Francesco Pedrazzi (the first Gennaro) as Riccardo; and Carlo Ottolini Porto (who was singing many of the roles associated with Lablache) as Giorgio. Nor were the two theatres in any way comparable. The Théâtre-Italien for example was not quite the Mecca we have been led to believe, there was something about the leaden routines there, the horribly protracted rehearsals, and the spiteful relations between singers which soured every initiative. Few scores passed such an acid-test unscathed; Paris may or may not have been the 'Musical Capital of the World' but it did not always bring out the best in Bellini's Italian contemporaries, listening to *Moisé et Pharaon*, *Le Siège de Corinthe*, *Jérusalem* and even *Macbeth*, sometimes makes this painfully clear. Neither *I briganti* nor *Marino Faliero*, both staged at the Théâtre-Italien, could be counted amongst the happiest experiences of their respective maestri.

Despite his brilliant success, Bellini's own experience of working there was not without its problems, his score was first cut then expanded. Why? Friedrich Lippmann lists three sections which were dropped from *I puritani*, a trio just before the Act I finale (using part of a rejected cabaletta originally intended to follow 'Casta diva' in *Norma*); an *andante sostenuto* in the Elvira/Arturo duet in the second half of Act II; and the final vocal flourish 'Ah! sento, o mio bell'angelo' which concludes the opera. The expansions were even more contentious: Bellini's letters make it clear that the so-called 'Polacca' ("... pezzo brillante che ho fatto per la Malibran...") was written 'su misura' and it is by no means certain that this famous 'Son vergin vezzosa' was intended to be sung in the Paris version at all, quite possibly it..contd next page,

was only conceded on second thoughts (and as a *douceur* to Grisi?). Incontestably added was the rousing duet 'per due bassi' which is not sung in the Malibran edition. This begs a formidable question (left unasked by Pastura and Lippmann). Would Bellini in fact have preferred a tenor or a baritone Riccardo? A tenor Riccardo could never have sung his part in this duet, and even if he could have done - with the words somehow adjusted to satisfy the Neapolitan censura - the effect of the duet would have been lost. Bellini himself commented that the Neapolitan singers could not do it justice and seems not to have attempted to have it sung there. Rumour has it that Rossini suggested its inclusion in the Paris score, if so, paralleling his proposal that an organ should accompany the preghiera in Act I, Rossini's intervention did nothing for Bellini's opera, the duet is a show-stopper and the last thing *I puritani* needs is a hole in the middle. In my opinion, losing 'Suoni la tromba' is a gain for the opera. In the Malibran version Riccardo's tenor timbre makes him a more credible rival to Arturo; in Paris - whether the great Tamburini was singing or not - his baritone puts him on a par with (and in, apparently, the same age group as) Elvira's uncle, Sir Giorgio.

The effect of these changes - as was immediately clear at the Barbican concert - is not to the advantage of the Paris version they subvert the flow of the music and have turned a ridiculous plot into a producer's nightmare. But Raffaello Montecarlo now has come to the aid of these beleaguered producers, his edition of *I puritani* reveals an opera 'all of a piece', a kaleidoscope has been shaken and the familiar ingredients have taken on larger forms and a bolder definition. The initial impact, indeed, of the Malibran version is that of a much more Italian opera, an opera in two acts (*instead of three*), which ensures that 'Act II' of the Paris edition - notable only for its 'standing and singing' - is now fully integrated into a dramatic sequence and forms a prologue to a much grander Act II in which the *tempesta* takes on the function of an intermezzo. The whole opera benefits. Act I of the Malibran version has neither the quirky stop-go action it had before, nor is the audience left patiently waiting for something to happen. The effect is that of a cumulative climax beginning at the Prelude.

Arturo makes his presence felt even at the start and does not erupt absurdly like a Magi bearing gifts in a mini procession as at Paris, *Enrichetta's* arrival is the dramatic focus instead (perfectly logically) and she precipitates the first finale with her departure under Elvira's veil.

The rivalry between Riccardo and Arturo is a real one, and in the restored trio (Enrichetta/Arturo/Riccardo) they effectively contrast their potential as a candidate for Elvira's hand. Arturo here has a sweet tenor, contrasting with Riccardo's more incisive timbre, neither of them is impelled into the stratospheric *acuti* which has made Rubini's Arturo such a difficult one to follow.

Act II of the Malibran version is a revelation. This is a splendidly confident sequence, more conventional than that of Paris, but, with its focus entirely on Elvira, able to concentrate the attention of the audience on all those Bellinian things - dying, swooning, and despairing with her - instead of merely taking note of her irritating dottiness as at Paris. (Bellini is not polite about Parisian audiences in his letters to Florino, he calls them "the idiot public" and comments that as they do not understand the Italian language - they can be fobbed-off with ravishing music; this he certainly supplied, but as the Malibran version confirms, Italian audiences require rather more). Although a certain wilful asymmetry is lost, the gains are considerable. The biggest coup at the Barbican was Elvira's vocal dominance of this act, especially the end of it. After a vivid duet with Arturo she transforms the former quartet into a solo (singing 'Qual mai funerea' while Arturo's 'Crediasi misera' vanishes), and then caps the whole thing off with the cabaletta ('Ah! sento, o mio bell'angelo) complete with coro in the tempo-di-mezzo and a full reprise. The effect is that of a gran'scena finale in the Rossinian tradition, but with Bellini's incomparable pathos. This final cabaletta is not new to admirers of Joan Sutherland, nor was it new to Italians in the nineteenth century. Almost certainly it was sung at the Paris *prima* (as a *stretta* 'a 2' with Arturo) but was cut immediately afterwards. It must, however, have been included in the scores of *I puritani* sent to Italy (that is, those copies of the Paris version that were distributed there). A handful of contemporary libretti reveals that four out of five stagings of *I puritani* in Italy included this triumphant envoi, though none of them that I have seen includes a gran'scena finale, nor have I been able to trace any with Riccardo sung by a tenor.

As for the performance at the Barbican: the orchestra was excellent and for once we could hear that Bellini had become an expert orchestrator (thus dispelling one persistent libel). But Maestro Monterosso drowned his soloists consistently throughout Act I and they had to struggle to be heard. One of the comprimari need not have bothered to there at all, we saw his mouth open from time to time but that was the sum total of his efforts. What a shame

a conductor cannot be placed where all the soloists can see him, no wonder Riccardo missed a cue, but this did not vitiate a cleanly-sung performance by Bonaventura Bottone. The singers seemed on edge, not simply because of Suzanne Murphy's indisposition - everyone knew that as a well-schooled professional she would husband her resources - but because vocally the work seemed under-rehearsed; this notwithstanding, Miss Murphy's 'little-voice' interpretation was a real one, and credible, even if something other than Bellini intended (it is a wonderful boon to *know* all the stage implications of the words when singing in a concert performance). Bruce Brewer put on a real performance, no compromises here, but the Arturo of this version asks - in my opinion - for that kind of artlessness which dispenses with precisely those spinto graces for which he is justly famous. Ian Caddy's beautiful voice went to waste in rushed ensembles; 'Cinta di fiori' went at a spanking pace and was certainly not improved by a vulgar coro, at full belt, and not understanding a word of what it was bawling. Fiona Kimm revealed (when the orchestra let her) a good quality sound and was provided in this version with opportunities far superior to the measly music which Bellini gave Enrichetta in Paris.

The Opera will undoubtedly be performed again - and soon I imagine - in Monterosso's splendid edition. In a properly rehearsed performance Bellini's opera will at last come into its own for modern audiences. Even with modern producers.

(C) A.W.

* World première at the Barbican Centre, London with the London Symphony Orch. conducted by Raffaello Monterosso on 14th December 1985.

FOR REFERENCE 1) Maria Rosaria Adamo/Friedrich Lippmann VINCENZO BELLINI ERI Turin 1981
2) Philip Gossett *Introduction* to the two-volume full score of *I puritani* in the Garland Publishing "Early Romantic Opera" series.

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Domingo pulls out of opera

By David Hewson
Arts Correspondent

He is to be replaced by Gabriele Adorno, who will fly to London from Rome tomorrow and go straight into rehearsals.

Shouldn't he be coming from Genoa !!!

