

ROBERTO DEVEREUX - *tragedia lirica* in 3 acts by Salvatore Cammarano,
music by Gaetano Donizetti.

New production by Alberto Fassini, scenery and costumes by David Walker. Teatro dell'Opera, Roma. Friday 1st April 1988

This was an apposite choice of opera, in view of the fact that its 'prima' fell on Good Friday. The elegiac poetry of Cammarano and the sombre pathos of Donizetti's score seemed entirely in keeping with the mood of that evening of "liturgical desolation".

The Donizetti Society was well represented, the new Artistic Director of the Rome Opera is Honorary Vice-President Bruno Cagli, and by the presence of the Secretary and assorted Society members who were in Rome for Easter. The attendance that evening was further graced by Professor Philip Gossett as a 'refugee' from the Teatro San Carlo, closed by an orchestral strike.

The Orchestra of the Teatro dell'Opera was conducted by Julius Rudel. Both rendered a consistently fine account of themselves all evening, allowing one to contemplate with great pleasure the strength and density of the orchestral score, allied to its capacity for 'sweet pathos' of quite heartbreaking beauty. Indeed, one's dominant recollection of this score is of the degree to which, like Verdi, the composer communicates the drama through the score, even without the need to refer to the fine poetry of Cammarano.

In analogous fashion, the 'convenienze' on which Cammarano's plot and Donizetti's music are built are here strongly moulded in a dramatically credible way. To take but one case: the cabalettas are by no means as glaringly obvious as they can be in a less well-thought out work.

The 'Messa in iscena' and theatrical preparation of this opera were of the very highest standard, with perfect fidelity to the intentions of the poet and the composer. The 'Elisabetta' was, for example, made up just like the contemporary portraits of the Virgin Queen. The chorus was a model of theatrical discipline. Every scene was prepared with the most minute care and attention to detail, with no little touch of 'fantasia'. One thinks of the Act II scena with Devereux and Sara: the 'starlight sky' effect received a well-deserved round of applause on the opening night. One noted also the discreet use of stage curtaining (a feature of the entire evening) to affect swift, beautifully co-ordinated scene changes. One might reasonably liken this theatrical preparation to a jewel, to be studied and to fascinate, from whatever angle one looked at it.

But the success or otherwise of a Donizetti opera is, as always, predicated on the vocal standard of its cast, as well as on its theatrical execution. Rodolfo Celletti has likened his scores to 'medical bulletins' on the singers for whom they were written. This is not a Donizetti score for 'tenorini' and suchlike, rather it compels every member of the cast to submit his or her voice to a vocal 'dissection' quite as ruthless as any surgeon's scalpel.

This was a cast entirely of the very highest standard, both in terms of acting and singing. The clear impression given was of careful matching of each singer with his or her role, and of how well everyone sang, with no loss of 'centre' in his voice.

But *Roberto Devereux* has, as its dramatic fulcrum, the character of *Elisabetta*, Queen of England. The role is taxing in the extreme, requiring as it does, a chiaroscuro of mood and vocality, yet all the time maintaining the smooth vocal emission that is the *sine qua*

non of the opera of this epoch.

To Raina Kabaivanska fell this most exigent part. She gave a Royal account of it in every respect, communicating both vocally and by her affecting acting, the gamut of emotions that go to make up this role as she moved from declamatory queenly authority - through the soft fragility of unrequited love - through the neurotic confrontations with Sara - to her final tragic abdication. One marvelled too, at Signora Kabaivanska's conservation of vocal resources, so that the long, exposed, phrases of her final scena were as finely sustained as the exacting declamation earlier on.

With justice was Signora Kabaivanska accorded a '*trionfo*' that evening. Her interpretation of the part put *Elisabetta* firmly in the front rank of great operatic tragic heroines and postulated her as a worthy inheritrix of the mantle of Leyla Gencer in these brutally demanding soprano roles. Not least of the pleasures of that evening was of participating in an evening of musical theatre of the very highest standard throughout.

It augurs well for the fortunes of the Teatro dell'Opera under Bruno Cagli; indeed, if this standard of presentation is maintained, the city of Rome promises to become as compelling a city for operatic as for religious pilgrims.

Philip G. Gormley