

Guglielmo Tell

melodramma tragico in quattro atti, libretto by de Jouy and Bis (critical edition by Elisabeth C. Bartlet and the *Fondazione Rossini*)

Teatro alla Scala, Milano

10th December 1988

For the serious follower of Italian opera this was a must. The recovery of the real "William Tell" after that "death of a thousand cuts" which passed for Parisian theatrical practice in the primo Ottocento is one reason: that this recovery should form the most prestigious event in the Italian theatrical calendar (viz the opening of La Scala's season) is another: and the very fact that this opera requires such a large space such as La Scala can command for its full realisation, is a third reason (and not the least).

A dominant memory of this evening is of the excellence of the La Scala orchestra under Muti. Their exquisite orchestral discourse in the soft sections testified to ample reserves of power, unleashed to great effect in the superbly balanced climaxes. The effect was that of a Rossinian "magic carpet" upon which the whole involving evening floated along, so much so that one was never aware - at the musical level - of its long flight (4½ hours, exclusive of intervals).

Vocally, this opera was realised at the very high level one might expect. The ladies all gave an excellent account of themselves and Cheryl Studer's Mathilde was justly rehabilitated. The men's vocal form varied across the field, while voices never lost their centres one felt that some of the artists were under strain. Perhaps it was an understandable tension, perhaps it was due to working at the extremes of their vocal ranges in these *made to measure* Rossini roles where the 'measure' may or may not fit the modern singer.

This observation did not apply to Chris Merritt's Arnaldo, most cunningly tailored to minimise his substantial 'measures'. He seemed comfortably within the tessitura, not least in his staggering passages of fioritura. A hint of heaviness at the bottom end of his 'baritenore' suggests scope for development in this area as the voice continues to mature in this register.

The realisation of Rossini's opera was a sad disappointment, made sadder by an awareness of the excellence and commitment of the La Scala theatrical apparatus, *qua apparatus*. It failed signally to realise the broad theatrical span of the plot, of this drama of a people rising to face an oppressor. This failure was aggravated by the perversity with which the realisation swam against the tide of the opera. Signor Ronconi might beneficially be a client for one of Herr Tell's arrows ...

The fine hard-back programme book of 160 pages set the high tone for this historic evening, but notwithstanding its learned exegesis and the exalted musical and vocal values of the evening the *real* "William Tell", alas, was perceived "through a glass darkly". It requires a similar intelligent rigorous attention to the dramaturgy of this opera to that already applied to the score, for Rossini's masterpiece to be recognised in its full glory, in its own wonderful light.

Elisa e Claudio

opera semiseria in due atti, libretto by Luigi Romanelli
Theatre Royal, Wexford
21st October 1988

In a year in which the Donizetti Society's Journal featured the composer *en face* his contemporaries, it seemed appropriate that the 1988 Wexford Festival should feature an opera by one such. Interestingly too, this year saw the 150th anniversary of the Irish *prima* of the work (Theatre Royal, Dublin 31st March 1838). This Wexford evening was graced by assorted members of the Society from Ireland and other shores.

The overture served materially to reduce any tension induced by the many practical problems to be faced in the realisation of *Elisa e Claudio*, indeed, the first few bars of "sweet pathos" brought tears to these eyes; the exquisite playing of the RTE Symphony Orchestra under the gifted Marco Guidarini remained the foundation for an evening of musical bliss. Any residual tension was banished by the opening chorus, so *alive* both in singing and acting, and by a series of artists all with excellent diction and vocal command, I gladly entered the spirit of Mercadante's opera, smiling, laughing, crying, moaning etc, as the composer and the stage images indicated.

I noted with much pleasure the discreet and intelligent production by David Fielding, especially how it allowed ample space for the opera to work its magic while remaining faithful to the constantly changing moods.

There were mixed feelings about the cast though the vocal and histrionic level was of a very high order across the board. One noted the good standard (and correct singing) of the Elisa (Lena Nordin), the Carlotta (Alice Baker), and of the Silvia (Olga Orolinova). There were two well-projected stage presences in the persons of Celso (Philip Doghan), and Luca (Marko Putkonen). The two children managed to give a mute but eloquent account of themselves (Donal and Evelyn Walsh). The Count (Plamen Hidjov) showed a fine voice, intelligently used. Claudio (Janos Bandi) was vocally well up to his part but one felt that he would have benefitted by not singing at a "big house" volume all the time. There was regret, however, that in a festival which has done so much for the primo Ottocento italiano, there should have been so few Italians singing. It was thus a pleasure that it should fall to a Neapolitan to defend the honour of his country. In the role of the Marchese Tricotazio, the young *basso buffo* Bruno de Simone displayed a clear, well-projected voice, intelligently used, and which coped admirably with the exigencies of a vocal line containing more than the echoes of *rossinianismo*. The acting was of a high all-round standard, not just in the comedy, but responsive to the sudden shifts of mood reflected in the score.

The exquisite opera was over all too soon. We left the theatre on a miserable night but there were happy smiling faces everywhere, ample testimony to an evening blessed in spirit by the sun of the 'bel paese'.

Philip G. Gormley

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