

Imelda de' Lambertazzi

melodramma tragico in due atti, libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola
Auditorio Radiotelevisione della Svizzera italiana, Lugano
19th February 1989

La figlia del reggimento

melodramma giocoso in due atti, libretto by St. Georges and Bayard (Italian
version by Calisto Bassi)
Teatro Comunale, Bologna
21st February 1989

Poor Imelda's valedictory cry of anguish '*nell'ultima ora...non...mi...
sccaciar...da...te!*' could never have been less necessary than in this
performance, the audience had been hanging on her every word from the
first notes. Given in concert form in the diamond-shaped auditorium of
Swiss radiotelevision, *Imelda de' Lambertazzi*, a Donizettian *Clorinda*
or a *Tisbe* to the *Angelina* of *Anna Bolena*, suddenly emerged as a princess
in her own right. The opera had scarcely survived its Neapolitan *prima*
in 1830, revivals had been few (Venice; Senigallia; two Spanish revivals):
only three copies of the full score seem to have been preserved, one
of them the autograph upon which this Swiss performance was based. The
vocal score was never published in full and not much of the music was
re-used by the composer in later scores. I used to think that this latter
implied that the music was rejected by Donizetti, after *Imelda* I am more
inclined to believe that the composer wished to preserve his score intact,
as a worthy product of his pen, and not discarded as a theatrical failure.
But *Imelda de' Lambertazzi* had indeed failed. Probably the casting was
to blame, Tottola's libretto would appear to have asked for a conventional
vocal profile but Donizetti, with one real star only at his disposal,
had elected to make Antonio Tamburini the romantic lead (instead of the
villain, which as a baritone should have been his lot at this date) thus
throwing all the *agro* on two insufficient tenors, the (then) inexperienced
Giovanni Basadonna, and the exhausted Berardo Winter, as Imelda's father
and brother respectively. No doubt this upset audiences unwilling to
warm to a '*basso*' as hero, no matter how beautiful his voice, but also
unnerved the rest of the cast - at the *prima* Antonietta Galzerani as
Imelda was out of voice and stayed so for the solitary repeat the opera
obtained that year, the following year Luigia Boccabadati got a much more
encouraging reception when *Imelda* was revived for four performances only.
The *censura*, too, made hay of the text, this Lugano hearing was certainly
the first time Tottola's libretto was heard as he intended, Marc Andreae
and Ellen Taller had extracted the original text from the autograph manu-
script to its infinite enhancement and to Tottola's unexpected credit.
The music had benefitted from the same reappraisal, discarding alternative
music in the two copyist scores; with a composer like Donizetti (as we
know well from such operas as *Poliuto* or *Maria Stuarda*) first thoughts
were often best thoughts and the presence of *puntatori* seldom leaves
a score in better shape. At Lugano the orchestra sounded wonderful, exp-
ressively shaded and harmonically very sophisticated, especially in the
abounding *recitativi stromentati* underpinned by a wide variety of dramatic
devices to which this opera owes its sustaining pedal. The score offered
surprise after surprise beginning with the *Introduzione* which described
the widest of arcs ending with a tripartite *stretta* with both solo and
unison sections. The *concertati* were not placed like goalposts at the
extremity of each act but occurred apparently spontaneously with an ease
which the composer did not invariably achieve until his last years.
Somehow, without presenting them as the proverbial cherries in the cake,
Donizetti managed to supply a fabulous succession of *cabalette* and *strette*
to the huge joy of the listeners. Rhythmically, melodically, and express-
ively we heard an outstanding score, not the *Anna Bolena* to come, but
Parisina or *Pia*.

It is impossible here to underestimate the contribution of the Conductor/ revisore Marc Andreae whose grasp of the music was total and by whose good graces Donizetti, for once, got the committed performance he always expected, I hope we shall hear more of him in this repertoire. As Imelda, Floriana Sovilla (who I last heard as Maria de'Rudenz at La Fenice) displayed a voluminous soprano, well-sustained at the top but with all the chest notes the maestro demanded. She has a *déshirant* role in this opera, hyper-emotional, not long, not full of passage work, not even lyrical except fleetingly (and Sovilla made the best of such moments - with a honeyed *subito dolce*); Imelda is not in the same tradition as Bellini's *Giulietta* but in that of Vaccai's earlier *Giulietta*, vehement not lachrymose, but here set to music that leaves Vaccai sounding *sorpassato*. To Lugano's credit the two tenors (neither of them inexperienced nor exhausted) were well-contrasted and made the most of their confrontations (the opera abounds in duets). As Orlando Lambertazzi, Fausto Tenzi offered a clean emission, but his role is pure cardboard: as the mindlessly vengeful brother Lamberto, Diego d'Auria - a newcomer to me - displayed a fresh-sounding tenor, eloquently spinto, a voice of real promise. Andrea Martin's Bonifacio, though no Tamburini (he was both bumpy and rough) compensated by being engagingly musical and patently *macho*, with the result that he sounded dramatically credible for once. The coro was splendid. For the very first time in my life I wished that the *bando sul palco* had more (rather than less) to play, I don't think I have ever heard such an expert ensemble assembled to perform so little and to such admirable effect. A large audience of *donizettiani* from all over Europe cheered this opera to the echo, especially Sovilla whose *finale ultima* carried the evening to triumph.

Bologna was in stark contrast. Not so much musically - the vocal ensemble could scarcely have been bettered - but of audience: I was sitting in an expensive *platea* seat, the generous gift of the *Ufficio stampa*, entirely surrounded by old ladies who stared coldly at Luciana Serra, William Matteuzzi, and Enzo Dara giving their all in the service of Donizetti's opera, not one of them clapped or showed any response whatsoever either to words or music. When the boxes and galleries behind them burst into applause they were inclined to turn-round and glare at these intemperate intrusions. At the end they filed out chillingly with an occasional bow at another old lady. And there were queues of enthusiastic opera-lovers outside longing for a seat! It reminded me of Ghent where all the grandmothers of the city went to *matinées* simply to scoff cakes in the interval. At Bologna they subscribe to the opera (it seems) simply because it is even more boring at home.

If their complaint had been about the version of Donizetti's opera, I could perhaps have forgiven them. *La Fille du régiment* is both hopelessly inflated and diminished in this Italian translation. Fulvio Lo Presti complained about its removal from the Tyrol to Switzerland (thus enabling some flattering references to Savoy - now superfluous), I complain about the bulging vocal distortions this translation imposes on Donizetti's feather-like settings, jokes lost, timing betrayed, whole characters misinterpreted. In the original this was an *opéra-comique* whose partly spoken text supplied an entire dimension of comedy here missing. *La Fille du régiment* asks for an intimate theatre where the *ad lib* could thrive and where the sometimes altitudinous vocal line did not threaten the future careers of the singers; in the magnificent Teatro Comunale (cream-and-gold with pale blue velvet upholstery) *La figlia del reggimento* sounded thin and the comedy stretched to its limits. As usual the production was of 'international' standard, that is, at odds with the music. Whole sections were fluffed simply because the designer wanted to make his mark. The *reggimento* consisted entirely of aged men, this was a good idea as it made Marie's filial allegiance the more credible, but in the opening scene - when the dragon of a *marchesa* was supposed to be tremblingly awaiting a French army of rapists (whose antique appearance would have made an excellent joke) - the designer had seated her centre-stage, fanning

herself like a windmill (the back of her neck in particular), seated in a kitchen chair, and backed by *contadini* in meringue-coloured outfits. There was no sign of the soldiers. In the lesson-scene, Marie had her dancing lesson *behind* (a) a piano, and (b) serried ranks of Louis XVI chairs so that no one could see her (these chairs descended amusingly from the skies like a cloudburst at the end of the previous act, but no one I dare say, except me and the old ladies (who were not amused), could see them as they stopped short of the proscenium). Cardboard rocks made curious entries and departures, even peeking coyly into the *marchesa's* salon, heaven knows why.

Musically, this was a fine performance, orchestra good, conductor (Bruno Campanella) skillful, coro excellent, indeed super-excellent. In the title role was Luciana Serra, already an expert Marie rattling her own drum and singing with the value-for-money for which she is renowned. She is such a major artist, is so generous with her singing that I don't want to cast any cloud here but I wonder if this is a role that should be repeated indefinitely; the travesty is only funny when the heroine is downright vulgar, Madame Serra is incapable of vulgarity and I would rather she did not have to sing flat-out in an attempt (even though largely successful) to make a delightful miniature into the stuff to fill one of the grandest opera houses in Europe. I was most taken with William Matteuzzi, engaging acting, pleasing stage presence (it is a long time since we have had a Tonio who could sing all his *acuti* and present a suitably youthful contour), inventive and charming he possesses the *legato* which was the *sine qua non* of the primo Ottocento. Enzo Dara, magnificent voice still, wonderful comic timing, was underparted as Sulpizio, the role is too small for him. These three stellar voices enjoyed themselves hugely. I make no complaint about them, they did admirable justice to Donizetti's score, neatly articulating the tricky duos with sovereign command. But all the ensembles I found to be too fast even if sung faultlessly. Was I the only one who thought the celebrated trio did not quite come off?

The costumes were either banal or absurd, nothing in-between. Indeed, if the production could be described as bungled, the costumes and accoutrements could only be described as desperate. The *marchesa di Berckenfield* (Monica Tagliasacchi) was hollow-sounding but this is seldom a rewarding role; her major-domo Ortensio (Giancarlo Tosi), though got-up like Lord Foppington with a quiff, sang with resolution and style. The opera was received with loyal cheers but the comic Donizetti needs some stooping in order to conquer. What about staging *Imelda de' Lambertazzi* at Bologna? She could be reborn there in all her rediscovered glory. (This is not a joke, the Lambertazzi were a *Bolognese* family).

Alexander Weatherson