

Performances

Parisina d'Este

- A Donizetti rarity in Basle

The performance opens with a little girl skipping playfully about the dark stage, lit only by a beam of the spotlight. Those who have read Felice Romani's introductory notes to the libretto are now likely to think: "Parisina during her untroubled happy childhood?" But if so, where is Ugo, her playmate and secret love? The four tables on the edge of the stage with a carafe from which the girl pours wine into some glasses make little sense either; for the rest of the performance they remain unused, unnoticed as if inexistent. Three geometrically arranged water-basins, into which later on, white roses, a hat, and even a corpse are thrown, as well as three statues standing in one of these, give but a mere idea of the scene described in the libretto as "*Belvedere, pleasure-island of the Dukes of Este in the river Po*". The interior of the castle of Ferrara consists simply of a drawing on the floor. The most striking feature, however, is the position of the orchestra, jutting out like a wedge into the auditorium and high enough for the musicians and their instruments to conceal parts of the stage. It is only after the little girl has vanished and armed soldiers have marched in that the overture is played.

The depressing and hopeless situation, as expressed in the first bars of the overture, is emphasised by the settings: the blueish lighting with an occasional veil of mist, the grey ground, the greyish glassy-looking water and the soldiers clad in black uniforms. The costumes look Victorian. According to the producer they represent the period of the Italian War of Independence, a period which is quite as alien to us as to Donizetti (who was unable to witness it). It does not help the understanding of the plot any more than if the action had been set in its original period (according to the libretto, the XIVth century). Anyway, an updating is not required at all for the expression of human sentiment in its various forms does not need to be invented. However unbelievable a plot might be, it always retains its credibility if performed in its original settings.

The girl reappears on various occasions during the performance. In the second act she can be seen again skipping about the stage, while the music (is this ballet music really part of the opera? - and what happened to the chorus '*è dolce le trombe*'?) is played from loudspeakers behind the stage. She generally appears in company with Imelda, Parisina's lady-in-waiting and her behaviour apparently should make us believe that she is Parisina's daughter. But unlike, for instance, Imogene in *Il pirata* (Romani/Bellini), Parisina's character allows no motherly feelings. However pretty the girl looks, her presence is an absurdity and the stage-director - in his programme-note (so sad that modern producers are obliged to explain what their *mise-en-scène* is supposed to represent)-does not help at all.

The interpretation of the characters is very operatic. For their solos each singer steps forward on to an apron stage and they are virtually left-alone during the concertati which makes their isolation very obvious.

n the more passionate moments, however, the direction is by no means static, e.g. the duetto Parisina/Azzo, resulting in a heated argument; and at the end of the opera Azzo carries the murdered Ugo on to the stage (on the first night only, his weight must have proved too much) and drops him into one of the basins.

As a whole, Werner Schroeter's staging leaves a feeling of indifference, the production does not convince (too many questions remain unanswered), but nor does it cause annoyance (as there is no real provocation). It is in fact Donizetti's thrilling music and the excellent musical interpretation that made the event memorable. Of course Basle was obliged to engage a distinguished international cast to venture the performance of the belcanto opera. The title-role was beautifully and securely sung by Jolanda Omilian, who, in addition to a bright high range, has a remarkable low register, Her voice is well-suited for the dramatic Donizetti as she recently proved in Rome where she sang in *Roberto Devereux*. And yet, whether due to her interpretation or to the role of Parisina, I could not feel with her, she left me rather cold. Dalmacio Gonzales, well known for his Rossini interpretations, was a more convincing Ugo. His voice is sweet enough even if it seems a little thin at times. The part of Ugo (written for Duprez) is extremely difficult in the upper register, and there Gonzales' voice, which sometimes sounds strained, reaches its limits, but he sang the role (not far from the Rossinian tradition) brilliantly and with much beauty and style. The most convincing of the singers was the Italian baritone Paolo Gavanelli who had already attracted my attention at Bergamo where he sang Antonio in *Linda di Chamounix*. In the role of Azzo he could well display his outstanding vocal qualities. Alas, the characterisation of Azzo was a little stiff, probably due to the stage-manager's instructions. The excellent quality of these three protagonists was a little spoiled by the hoarse voice of the bass Roberto Nalerio-Fraccia (Ernesto), but who made efforts to sing well. Martina Bovet was a satisfactory Imelda. The Basle Symphony Orchestra really was outstanding, Baldo Podic's conducting lively and gripping, even a bit rough, but adequate to Donizetti's music. The Chorus of the Basle Theatre, prepared by Werner Nitzer, put on an excellent performance.

We are grateful to Werner Schroeter, not for his unconvincing production, but for his presentation of this rarity on stage. The management of the Basle Theatre has taken a very courageous step in breaking with the traditional repertoire consisting mainly of Mozart, Verdi and Wagner. Without denying the rights of these composers the success of this performance fully demonstrates that the public wants to see rarely performed works. Such a production, however, can involve considerable risks as we could witness of two different occasions: in the second performance, Gonzales - with a cold - was obliged to remain mute on stage while a substitute sang his part: the fourth performance which I also attended was only semi-staged and slightly abridged - Gavanelli had fallen ill and was replaced at short notice by Peter Cox flown-in from London.

This is the negative aspect of a production which, as the management states with some pride, has not been in the repertory of any theatre, world-wide, for over ten years. Let us hope that Basle's example will find followers.

(Performances attended: 6; 13; 25.11. and 14.12.1988)

Reto Müller

(Translated by Nicole Höchli-Baeriswyl)