



Performances

Gaetano Donizetti *L'assedio di Calais* dramma lirico in tre atti di Salvatore Cammarano. Theatre Royal, Wexford. 30 October and 2 November 1991 (second and third *repliche*).

It fell to an Opera "musick'd" by the Swan of Bergamo to inaugurate this 40th edition of the Wexford Festival in the 40th Anniversary year of its launching. The choice causes one yet again admiringly to reflect upon the innate judgement and good taste of its founder Dr Thomas J. Walsh, to say nothing of the closeness with which he followed the postwar Italian "Old Master" revival. To put on *Anna Bolena* as soon as practically possible after the historic 1957 Scala Callas/Gavazzeni revival, and to couple it with *I due Foscari* in the dark days for early Verdi (1958 - taken as but one case) suggests an artistic judgement little short of genius. This edition, financially assisted by the Peter Moores Foundation, had, one suspects, a provenance more in the Opera Rara recording of 1989 than in the Bergamo revival of 1990. It marked the end of an eight year *fallow period* for the Donizetti opus here that was as sad for this enthusiast as it was inexplicable, not least when he reflects on the amount of badly constructed and often unsuitable works of low quality that have found their way on to this prestigious little stage. For this writer it furnished an occasion to compare and contrast, as he looked back with personal pleasure recalling the "*grand manner*" (Franca Cella's felicitous phrase) of the Bergamo *edizione*, with the added advantage, of course, of knowing the score both musically and dramaturgically.

The conductor Evelino Pidò was to an extent a known quality, having piloted successful editions of such exigent scores as Rossini's *Zelmira* and *Ermione* to signal success in Rome. A fact not entirely surprising, given this young torinese's patrician musical formation within the precincts of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan. Indeed, one may safely say that we were deeply privileged to have such a transparently *first division* young Italian conductor *playing so far away from home* as in this case. The reading of the score here in collaboration with the National Symphony Orchestra (of Ireland) each and every members in the "state of (musical) grace" was an exquisite demonstration of the collocation of our Donizetti as that artistic precursor of Verdi which he is. Not the slightest hint of *rum-ti-tum musik* (need one say!), rather a glorious exposition of the *chiaroscuro* so exquisitely laid out in this well-crafted score. The notably warm and long applause for the Orchestra at their call at the start of Act II suggests strongly that our audience concurred with this view and in unanimity.

Under a *vocal profile*, this edition had strengths and notable weaknesses referable in large measure to the extensive use of inexperienced imported American singers which is such a hallmark of the Artistic Direction of Miss Elaine Padmore. The basic vocal techniques were satisfactory, but it was obvious that there was a lack of appropriate linguistic support - evidenced by fuzzy diction - and of assistance with the demands of the authentically Donizettian vocal style, most notably in a general tendency to operate in a volume band 'twixt *forte* and *mezzo-forte* with all too little of that *play upon the pianissimo* which is the very quintessence of Donizetti's style (and, ipso facto, of all singing). That the final product was what it was, was due in no small measure to the herculean work of Maestro Pidò in this area, starting from a position of near-enough chaos. Our thanks (and our compliments) are due to him.

That said, what a pleasure to recognise two exceptions to these strictures (and both, as it happens, Irish). Alison Browner's Aurelio, perfect in diction and with a display of *chiaroscuro* as lovely as the Orchestra's, was justly and loudly cheered in our final applause. One may cite also a *comprimario*, voice beautifully produced, that was audibly fit for a higher class than *bit parts*, the Pietro de Wisants of baritone Hugh

Mackey.

Realisation was done here with great economy of resource on a bare, gently sloping stage, next to no pictorial representation, apart from banners and colours to indicate which "side" we were on. There was fidelity to the essential spirit of Cammarano's fine libretto and to its historical period, and also a notable respect for the demands of the vocal line in the stage movement. But in the "*fantasia*" applied to the lighting plot this *messa-in-iscena* reached the point of genius, as it was used to point-up the key issues of the plot to an audience for whom, by-and-large, the Italian language was a closed book - the glorious cathartic chorus at the end of Act I, the heart-breaking pathos of the close of Act II, and many, many others.

Audience reaction was without precedent in the history of the Festival (and in these cold, wet *unresponsive Northern climes!*). A twenty-minute *furore* at the *prima* that outstripped Bergamo's best by five minutes. On my last night a stalls audience below me with huge numbers standing unrestrainedly cheering, rafts of applause, banging of feet on floors, a unanimously positive, happy reaction everywhere. And indeed, why not? For after dreary years of *also rans* and *dabblers* we had here a true master of his craft working in his specialist *mestiere*. And as we all know, in that same *mestiere* - as in so much else - for the *best* you must go to the brands carrying the magic words "Made in Italy".

Philip G. Gormley

Footnote. The "*Operatic Scenes*", this year, featured Act II Scene 3 of *Anna Bolena*. The Anna was Nicola Sharkey, a *mere chorister* (sic). She gave us a display of copybook Donizetti style, notwithstanding audible affliction by a cold. Why, one asks, was she performing thus at a grade palpably below her capabilities (and track record) in the face of such general mediocrity elsewhere?

.....