

Performances

## Rinascimento rossiniano in Belgio

Gioacchino Rossini *Il barbiere di Siviglia* melodramma buffo in due atti di Cesare Sterbini: Raul Gimenez (*Almaviva*), Enrico Fissore (*Bartolo*), Alison Browner (*Rosina*), Vladimir Chernov (*Figaro*), Laszlo Polgar (*Basilio*), Marianne Hirsti (*Berta*). Orchestre Symphonique et Choeurs de la Monnaie, cond: Carlos Kalmar

4 February 1992 Théâtre de la Monnaie/De Munt, Brussels

Tavola rotonda 6 February 1993 with Philip Gosset, Sergio Segalini, Alberto Zedda

*Rossini! Rossini!* 6 February 1992 Film by Mario Monicelli with Philippe Noiret in the role of Rossini

Gioacchino Rossini *Adelaide di Borgogna* opera in due atti di Giovanni Federico Schmidt: Hyejin Kim (*Adelaide*), Joo Hyun Chang (*Ottone*), Reinaldo Macias (*Adelberto*), Constantin Dumitru (*Berengario*). Orchestre et Choeurs de l'Opéra Royal de Wallonie, cond: Alberto Zedda

9 February 1992 Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège

La Monnaie has earned a certain reputation in recent years, attracting a stream of *glitterati*, kowtowing critics, and the *tout ennuyé* of central Europe to its predictable repertoire of well-played and well-sung versions of operas everyone knows by heart; interrupted once or twice a year by an indigestible goblet of "New Music". I suppose *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is worthy of this sort of audience, but at what a cost! Italian *opera buffa*, founded on immediacy, on eye-to-eye contact with its spectators, on brio, on the *ad lib*, is reduced, under these conditions, to a sacred monster, dull, truffled and tasteless. With its vaguely surrealist décor, with its rundown imagination (poor Rosina is obliged to sing her *cavatina d'entrata* on the top of a wardrobe), with its cast of well-intentioned artists, all well-prepared, this new production of the opera was simply a bore. Rossini a bore? Excellent orchestra, efficient direction, dutiful attention to the requisite vocalità, and not funny at all. Everything fell flat (including Bartolo's house), the voices equally imposing and unremarkable, everyone (except perhaps Laszlo Polgar - a pipe-cleaner Basilio) drained of character. Only the *concertati* gained a flicker of authenticity. Not one single note of the music remained in the mind once outside the portico of the great theatre among the concrete pots and cigarette ends.

Nor did a wayward *tavola rotonda* on the maltreated composer add much to this non-event, or to the known distinction of its contributors. The audience was equally baffled; apparently unplanned, aimed at ill-informed teenagers as far as could be deduced, it too undershot its target dismally. The gala film *Rossini! Rossini!* which brought the Monnaie experience to a head could not fail to be an improvement on all this. But even its felicitous images and nice feeling for the period could not evoke Rossini. We got his biography in flashbacks but reduced to a feuilletton of beddings with *prime donne*, some enchanting interiors of minor Italian opera houses (where?), a convincing picture of the claque conspiring the failure of *Il barbiere* at its *prima* (La Monnaie needed no such claque), and a complete inability to throw any light whatsoever on his personality, his wit, his cynicism, his charm, his generosity, his despair, his ill-health, his philosophy, his courage; in a word - his life. It was a pleasant film, I enjoyed it, but I hope that someone, somewhere, someday, will attempt to portray the great composer in the round in the splendours and miseries of supreme genius.

Could it have been in contrast, only, with the above that the Liégeois *Adelaide di Borgogna* made such an impact? I think not. Here we had everything missing in Brussels: live music performed with utter faith in its merits and an audience more sophisticated than anything La Monnaie can hope for. This concert performance was a revelation. What is it they say of *Adelaide*? Rossini's weakest opera? At Liège we heard a score without any weaknesses from beginning to end. Far from failure, we heard a Rossini of insolent accomplishment, putting to one side the silly intrigue which

was all that remained of Italian medieval history after Schmidt had finished with it, the maestro elected instead to write a seamless score of beautiful arias, duets and trios, not one of which is even ruffled by thoughts of the battles and imprisonments the librettist mentions in passing. Rossini took a backwards step in composing this *opera seria* of eighteenth century import (*recitativo secco*, *deus ex machina* and so on), but made a massive stride into nineteenth century orchestration. This *Adelaide di Borgogna* abounds in seductive woodwind writing which intertwines with the twinned fluting of Ottone and Adelaide irresistably. The result is nothing less than a delicious plotless masterpiece.

Even more remarkably, this rare opera was given in Liège with virtually prentice singers. It is to Alberto Zedda we owe its successful outcome, he brought the orchestra and chorus, as well as the singers (some of whom are or were pupils at the Accademia d'Arte Lirica e Corale d'Osmino at which he teaches) to an impeccable, idiomatic and assured conclusion, no ragged ends, no stylistic misdemeanors of the kind the Grand Boutiques of opera like La Monnaie feel obliged to impose in order to bring old operas to a modish gloss. The leading ladies were both Korean, both handsome, both with ravishing voices who rose to Rossini's frightening challenges without demur, Hyejin Kim was affecting and generous as the widowed Adelaide in the clutches of the dastardly Berengario, Joo Hyun Chang supplied a sunny Ottone and sang his/her final rondò with a rhythmic perfection. As the rejected lover Adalberto, the Cuban tenor Reinaldo Macias proved both confident and very accomplished, his big Act II *scena* delivered with an extraordinary finesse, including some *fioriture* which must be among the most difficult the composer ever threw at an intrepid artist, which he rose to breathtakingly and Zedda monitored with supreme skill. These three singers all have a big future, all - and this shows how well the opera was prepared - acted-out their roles even in the rugby lineout conditions imposed by a concert rendering. *Adelaide di Borgogna*, not surprisingly, received a standing ovation which went on interminably. The music was performed in a critical edition realised by Gabriele Gravagna and Alberto Zedda for Ricordi. Let us hope, now that *opera seria* is no longer shunned, that we shall soon see *Adelaide* on the stage, and even quite often, when singers and direction like this can be found.