

L'assedio di Donizetti

A short stretch of the Thames away from Westminster Abbey with its gilded tombs of Edward III and his Queen as well as from Rodin's aerobic commemoration of the six unfortunate *Bourgeois* who supply the content of this 1836 opera, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama has finally staged Donizetti's *L'assedio di Calais* in Britain, the opera's third production this century and the first to include his ballet (a rare but not unique feature of the Italian opera of his day). The Guildhall School is eminently suited to a *prima* of this importance, with an opera school whose status somewhere between advanced studentship and professional rigor sustains the highest of standards. It offered an impressive production whose shoe-string basis never inhibited a fervent imagination. Two casts alternated (I saw the second), the ballet made its appearance twice - during the *coro d'introduzione*, and in the third act. I hope it does not sound too churlish if I was not very enthusiastic about this balletistic inclusion, the trouble was not the ballet itself but the choreography which simply reduced the serious drama to bathos, all that glitter and prancing did nothing for the tragic tale. Indeed the all-over effect was painfully reminiscent of the "Diddymen" (and if you don't remember who they were, thank your lucky stars!).

A single set behind a gauze provided a suitably claustrophobic framework for the action with its various openings and entries, both for the events inside and outside the beleaguered town. The many *concertati* were admirably handled and lit. The solos were perhaps less so. In my view the opera of the *primo Ottocento* did not scatter its principals round the set - semaphoring for all their worth in the manner of Theda Bara but kept them together in a compact group more-or-less centre stage in an expressive ensemble that owed everything to emotive gesture, a compaction broken only when one or another of the singers came to the footlights to sing a cabaletta.

What trouble these cabalettas give! Denied an apron-stage, ingenious ways to point them are mandatory if the opera is to make its effect. Probably the only feasible way to highlight their brilliance is to use a follow-spot of some kind with the others on the stage "freezing" - an effect I once saw in a Camden staging of Pacini's *Maria regina d'Inghilterra* with admirable results (though the rest of that particular staging was ridiculous), alas a shoe-string budget does not encourage luxury lighting of this nature but when the *coro* crowded together at the footlights something of the same effect was achieved with remarkable simplicity. To try to duck the cabalettas - or to abbreviate them, or deny the reprise its freewheeling ornamentation - is always a mistake, the Guildhall did well in this respect even if ornamentation was not much in evidence, but these cabalettas tended to be uniformly jaunty instead of varied both dynamically and rhythmically as was usually the convention in post-Rossinian melodramma romantico.

Portrayed by very young singers, this drama of self-sacrificing old men achieved a curiously touching quality. The inspired music of the scene where the six victims appended their signatures to the document condemning them to martyrdom in particular was extraordinarily poignant; this and many other of the ensembles ringing dramatically true time and time again. The packed audience seemed to enjoy everything (all four performances were sold out). The newspaper critics praised the first cast, I have no compunction in enthusing over the second; the distaff side did very well indeed, especially Margareta Hillerud as Aurelio (can a *musico* really be described as belonging to the distaff side?), and Jennifer Akhurst as Eleonora too, but all the cast could be described as finished artists (sadly one member of the cast was unwell and his role was sung from the pit on 5 March).

Peter Bording as Edoardo (he sang in both casts) I found most impressive vocally and visually, his imposing stature and resounding delivery made him a noble Plantagenet conqueror (his phlegm when obliged to become "Doddy" to his unheroic "Diddymen" was uplifting to any patriot). The costumes were unexceptionable, though precisely why Queen Philippa had to undress to deliver her plea for clemency evades me (unless the designers had been reading the tabloid press coverage of our own perjured royal family). Clive Timms conducted sympathetically and with attention to style.

On that same evening in Cardiff, Welsh National Opera was staging its *La favorita*, having for ignominious reasons it seems opted for a travesty version of Donizetti's French grand-opéra; also current was an English National production of *Don Pasquale* updated to modern Rome and sung in English. If Donizetti, after recent neglect, is to be under siege in Britain - obliged to submit to the durance vile of travesty productions - then the Guildhall with its responsible production of *L'assedio di Calais* stands out as a shining example of integrity and musical worth.

Alexander Weatherson