

Performances

Gaetano Donizetti *Anna Bolena* Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels 6 May 1993

This was the first of two operas seen in relatively rapid succession, both distinguished - if that is the word - by absurd settings. Indeed *Anna Bolena*, a huge success, should have been a failure were it not that modern audiences have got into the habit of ignoring the more foolish notions of designers and producers. This *Anna* was set in a modish coal-mine carpeted in dry ice, with costumes which were undoubtedly luxurious, but as they were the same colour more-or-less of the walls, simply added to the dingy tints. And then the roster of singers was curious, many unfamiliar names - not in any way an unwelcome choice, much the reverse, but daring for a notoriously difficult opera. In fact, a rapt audience with a high proportion of young people, hung on every note.

The compensations were obvious as soon as the Overture began, yes, there was the *Overture*, the opera was given virtually complete, all the da capos in place and duly ornamented; the maestro took his time and shaped every phrase with loving care. *Anna Bolena* more-or-less uniquely in my experience was performed as Donizetti intended, an infallible recipe for success which could well be recommended to others. Someone had taken great pains in planning this production (despite the designer), the *prime donne* were well contrasted, Smeton was given his/her head (and her big aria), Percy was a real character, not the etiolated tenorino bleating his path to the block that we know so well, but a positive element in the plot, most cunning of all, Enrico was a personable and virile lover, no dull dog of a tyrant, thus the opera had a wholly new and wholly convincing change of direction. The motivation of everyone was enhanced and the tragedy was one which may well have been that of the real, and thoroughly dangerous, Tudor court.

The fine conducting of Marcello Viotti involved the greatest risks of all, impeccably phrased but with all the time in the world, ensuring that a long score became longer than ever (it was twenty minutes longer even than scheduled in the programme!), but there were no *longueurs*, nudging the cast gently forward with great skill. Nelly Miricioiu's Anna was well sustained, she sang generously and unflinchingly, reaching a genuine apotheosis at the end as is required, with excellent definition; at times there was a hint of that stifling gargling à la Callas which she happily forgot at moments of stress, which, after all, abound in this score. Martine Dupuy's Giovanna, towering over the disgraced consort, sang with great resonance, not always comfortably, but with poise and grace. Gabriela Popescu's Smeton was a joy, a tiny and endearingly podgy adolescent with some well-observed boyish mannerisms, singing with that kind of contralto seduction that is now so rare. It was her splendid aria, intact and unmutated, that remained in the mind. Donizetti loved (quite literally, it seems) these musico ladies, and like the audience he would have adored this one.

The tenor Donald Kaash - yet another American candidate for fame - proposed a Percy of solid worth, lumpy, bumbling and countryfied as the text demands, but singing with extreme elegance and with the head notes required for 'Vivi tu' which was not perhaps as vividly propelled as Rubini might have sung it, indeed it was too relaxed, but this is also a virtue in music of this kind. Harold Stamm conveyed the menace of Enrico, without the thuggish violence that simply sounds crude in the regal context whatever Donizetti thought of Henry VIII, his love-affair with Giovanna gained immensely and her betrayal of Anna seemed all the more tragic. Rochefort (Enrico Turco), and Sir Hervey (Franco Carecchia) were both positive roles, they were the only Italians in the cast, surprisingly, on such an authentic sounding evening. Altogether, this *Anna Bolena* was a great credit to La Monnaie. If it was available on disc, it would be, in my opinion, the best available of any on the market.

Vincenzo Bellini *Il pirata* Maison de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint-Étienne 16 May 1993

In many ways, what with the stylistic conundrums he poses, Bellini may be regarded as an endangered species. His operas seem to invite grotesque productions (not to mention foolish casting). St-Étienne, for a change, did miraculously well as regards singers, but the setting was frankly an insult. To set *Il pirata* in a lunatic asylum is patronisingly contemptuous rubbish, revealing a painful incapacity to grasp even the rudiments of Bellini's imagination, and thought-up, one can only conclude, at a bibulous evening in the local pizzeria (the nearest to Italy such a production is ever likely to be).

That the cast succeeded in overcoming this hazard is more than a simple compliment. In fact

Denia Gavazzeni-Mazzola had elected to withdraw and her place had been taken by Lucia Aliberti. This notwithstanding, the partnership of the Sicilian soprano with Rockwell Blake was most impressive. Of course the Gualtiero of Rockwell Blake was the great attraction, he lived up to all expectations, managing to upstage the production with a wonderfully stylised presence, eloquent gestures, cloaked and begloved, posturing and extravagant, yet with all the vocal precision the role demands. The ease of delivery and range of colour at his disposal were applied to Bellini's complex text with such panache that you knew at the time that you were never going to hear a better Gualtiero. That species of refined yet passionate extension which the true Bellini tenor must have, every word registering and every dizzy top note sounding as clear a bell, ensured that here at last was an authentic performance. His Imogene was no less impressive. Aliberti was (seemingly) obliged to pay far more attention to the production, thin to emaciation, in full voice, a real presence, neat and confident fioriture, she somehow contrived to pay lip service to the absurd *mise-en-scène* without compromising in the least a vocal portrait that was perfectly valid. Nothing was ducked, her excellent acting, gesture perfect, made an admirable complement to the tenor. The *gran'scena finale* lived up to the highest standards and was in fact quite beautifully and forcefully sung.

Marcel Vanaud, as Ernesto, was nowhere near this standard, voice worn, poor Italian, he wore his absurd Musical Comedy costumes (a sort of Drum Major) with great discomfort and seemed cut down almost to irrelevance. The *Choeurs Lyriques de Saint-Étienne* were admirable, perfectly prepared and rehearsed, in fine fettle throughout, even when obliged to sport idiotic costumes (like the Fascist greatcoats of the warders - what a tired old cliché). As inmates they were (nearly) moving. Goffredo, Itulbo and Adèle (ie Imogene's handmaid) were all up to their tasks.

Once again, there was a really excellent conductor. This was the engaging Patrick Fournillier, a chef who had paid close attention to the score in advance and with utterly revelatory results. To him was owed the great success of this revival which was received with fervour by audiences who knew what fine fare they were being offered.

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