

Performances

Gaetano Donizetti *Maria Stuarda* tragedia lirica in due parti di Giuseppe Bardari, Teatro Comunale di Bologna, 9 February 1994

There were some very curious contrasts in this production of *Maria Stuarda*, given in the critical edition of Anders Wiklund. Most of them were due to the settings; frankly, a *Stuarda* set in a series of black-stained pine boarded shacks, looking nothing so much like the decor for a ghost town in a second-rate cowboy film of the 'forties and in painful opposition to the sumptuous gilded proscenium of the Teatro Comunale (built in 1763) was hard to take. As for the costumes, they looked as though they might have been snapped up at Oxfam. At the same time the triumphant voices of the cast matched the superb accoustic of the magnificent theatre admirably where even a pearl dropping from Elisabetta's parure might have been heard at the back of the house. Sadly, however, this Queen of England was deprived of all finery, she was a frump, a seaside landlady c.1890, confronting a Maria who had apparently joined the Shakers. Everyone else was dressed in black-out material. Dear me! What torture! (as Janet Baker exclaimed so memorably in ENO days of yore).

The newspapers had made a meal out of the *prima* four days earlier, they too disliked the staging, but disliked even more the two ladies whose performance that night obviously lacked conviction. Everything had changed by the time of the performance under review, as Gloriana, Gloria Scalchi was in splendid voice, bitter sarcasm and all, she had clearly sharpened her interpretation stung by the critics, if she was not yet quite comfortable (she seemed to be singing to herself, and hardly ever made eye-to-eye contact with anyone else even if she was pointing at them - wherever did all this pointing come from? Beverly Sills? Prince Charles?) she was a resounding and formidable antagonist only hampered by her unregal stature and flounces. Kallen Esperian, as the unwelcome guest, sang with great sensitivity and if she too had not much time for acting in Part I made amends in Part II. Both ladies made an admirable impact vocally. Gregory Kunde, in rapid orbit round Italy these days, was constrained to act even when no one else seemed to be bothering, his rather beautiful voice and stylishness made a very good impression, perhaps he conveyed no great personality as Leicester (perhaps Leicester *has* no great personality) sandwiched between two warring women, but he sang with elegance and grace and has a big potential for the future. His duet with Giovanni Furlanetto (Talbot) was a treasure, Furlanetto's huge voice in empathic counterpoint throughout.

The house was absolutely full, the audience attentive and enthusiastic; as always in Italy nowadays the programme was scholarly and informative; the only defect was the brutally cut score. The great Leyla Gencer who I had the good fortune to encounter some days later reminded me severely that *Maria Stuarda* was always *cut* in her day, and indeed it was, but this was a *critical edition* of Donizetti's opera and therefore should have been sung in toto, as written. In 1994 it is simply not acceptable to mutilate operas in this way. Either you sing it as written, or not at all. On this otherwise admirable evening, most of the reprises of the cabalettas and strettas were omitted. The repeat in a cabaletta is a necessity, not an option, no one would dream of cutting Hamlet or Cats, why are operatic audiences shortchanged? Without, for example, the reprise of the "*flagello punitore*" with which Maria scourges both poor Elisabetta and her own newly-acquired reputation as a Saint the opera is denied the ultimate eloquence which is her triumph. I cannot imagine why it was cut, except caprice or arrogance on the part of someone who should know better, Kallen Esperian was in fresh voice, she had moved everyone with her poignant interpretation, neither too showy, nor too veristic. As far as I am concerned, she was not only executed, she was cut off in her prime.

Perhaps the decision was that of the conductor, I have the impression that Daniel Oren is a first rate musician but not especially respectful to the composer's intentions. He was not alone, the contribution of Jonathan Miller (Regia) lacked a certain understanding of what this kind of opera in all about. It is not just a question of scenic illiteracy (Maria addressed the absent France and the clouds it shared with Fotheringay from inside her shack) but of ear for this kind of melodramatic music; for example, the two final chords of the score depicting the implacable blows of Elisabetta's axe found the victim half way up a staircase to...? Mr Miller should perhaps not further explore this territory, a more eager understanding is required, there are plenty of brazen scores at his disposal by other composers.



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