

Antonio Carlos Gomes *Il Guarany* Oper in vier Akten von Antonio Scalvini, Oper der Stadt Bonn
20 June 1994

Lost, up to now, in the impenetrable thickets of the later nineteenth century musical jungle, poor Antonio Carlos Gomes struggled dishevelled and wan on to the Bonn stage, his masterpiece, *Il Guarany*, would have had a healthier complexion if Werner Herzog had not sent it up so unmercifully. Herzog's *faible* for dated exotica, though relished in the back seats, left audiences feeling for their compass. Gomes' trek from Meyerbeer to Lehár, via Verdi and Luigi Ricci, birdcalls, tableaux vivants, mosquito nets, waltzes and lampshade headgear, tested the patience of everyone, even those forewarned (by Mr Herzog's cinematic feats). A succession of japes, plus a plot worthy of Evelyn Waugh ("Brenda becomes Queen of the Hottentots") and a libretto that is a compendium of all the worst verbal clichés of the day, proved a burden too heavy for the white man to bear. There were some mercies, Mr Herzog spared us the cannibalism so tantalisingly offered (the tenorissimo too tough?) [Note: *Le mot barbecue vient de l'indien barbacoa qui signifie "cadre". Les Indiens Arawak, aux Caraïbes, faisaient griller leurs ennemis sur de simples cadres de bois posés sur des braises incandescentes. La chair des Français passait pour être très tendre...et celle des Espagnols, dure*], there were even some beautiful twilights, and the *esplosione ultima* when Don Antonio de Mariz' castle finally blew up was well done.

Not that the above in any way invalidates the pious offering Gian-Carlo del Monaco made to the shade of his distinguished father, *Il Guarany* was more than worth hearing, indeed, if you closed your eyes you could detect the presence of a remarkable score, full of good tunes, admirable ensembles and a far from commonplace orchestral flair. That this overdone opera was so popular in the Verdian shadow can be no surprise, the eclectic nature of the music did not prevent it being piquant and attractive and the intimations of Viennese operetta were perfectly novel (if grotesque in the portrayal of colonial Brazil), Gomes in fact was a resourceful and effective theatrical composer, a bit too lavish and bit too credulous, but in full command of his means.

The score contains at least half a dozen pieces of real merit. The fine *Sinfonia* with its Leitmotiv opening and foretaste of several numbers, including the resounding duetto (soprano/tenor) which ends Act I, Verdian to be sure, in parts, but full of chromatic shifts and open glorious melody, a perfect joy (sung in exemplary fashion by Plácido Domingo and Veronica Villarroel at the prima but less adroitly on the night I heard it, despite an excellent Cecilia in Hasmik Papian); there is also the declamatory aria for the eponymous hero which opens Act II, properly dramatic and surging forward, and a somewhat Donizettian aria for the villain Gonzales, sung both at the prima and on the occasion discussed here, by Carlo Alvarez of splendid voice and potential.

These more than compensated for the ridiculous entrata of the prima donna in Act I (made more so by the absurd parasol/mosquito net under which she was obliged to chirrup), and the appallingly banal accents of the cori. The ballet I enjoyed, but its relevance was nil, undermined by (a) being cut, by (b) being displaced, and by (c) being performed apparently under water! There are two contrasting *preghiere* (one for Christians, one for Cannibals, both equally devout). Yet, at key moments, say, when poor Cecilia is elevated to the rank of Queen Cannibal and her hero is tied to a stake (dispensed with at Bonn) prior to consumption, Gomes produces his finest lyrical flow. It is true that opera is an irrational entertainment; nothing has changed.

Il Guarany is an opera for great voices. With Domingo in the title role it triumphed, the great tenor in almost insolently resilient voice, perfect casting; the projected CD (by Sony) should be a revelation. On 20 June there was a hole in the centre of the score as Domingo's substitute, though commendably valiant, was overparted and made the audience not a little anxious if he could get to the end. The frankly grotesque get-up wished on him not just encumbered his feet, but unmanned all the virility the noble chieftain is supposed to embody, his feathered hat was an insult. His Cecilia sang with great aplomb, faultlessly in fact, with a voice – perhaps too soubrettishly for such a substantial role, but with admirable definition – even in her big aria where she had to compete with a puppet show, of all the silly, tiresome tricks. Hao Jiang Tian, as Don Antonio sang in rather a dry voice (I should like to have heard John-Paul Bogart who took the role on other evenings, he sang for the Donizetti Society in our London *L'esule di Roma* of wonderful memory). The rest of the cast was good; the orchestra rather hollow-sounding; the direction more well-meaning than convincing. Viva Gomes, and this mad but enjoyable music.

Alexander Weatherson