

Gioacchino Rossini *Otello* melodramma in tre atti del *marchese* Francesco Maria Berio di Salsa. Théâtre de La Monnaie, Bruxelles 5 March 1994.

This fascinating and on the whole entertaining *Otello* turned out to be an important, puzzling production, of an important, puzzling opera, much of the puzzle being due to the inconsequential genius who was responsible for writing it, indeed, it was impossible to avoid the impression that Rossini only decided to write a serious opera at the beginning of Act III. Furthermore, his first two acts are a mess: Otello makes only one desperately testing intervention in Act I, while in Act II he is hardly ever allowed to leave the stage. Rodrigo has a perfectly conventional role (if high-flying), everyone else either makes do with dramatic non-sequiturs, or is supplied with a matterhorn of indigestible material and tried vocally to the absolute limits. That the opera has always been – and was now here in Brussels – an indisputable success, is simply because the wonderful final act carries the rest up like a balloon.

In my opinion, in the first two acts there are not so much *characters* as caricatures – with the possible exception of Desdemona: Luca Ronconi did not duck the challenge, if anything he simply underlined each and every quirk in the score. Needless to say, he risked pleasing no one, his *mise en scène* alternately annoyed and amused, but was never boring. The main defect of his setting was a lamentable neglect of sight lines from the house, too often the artists were invisible to half the spectators who had to put up with voices only; the gliding platforms that escorted groups of *comparses* (gondola substitutes) only made their true effect from the parterre and the centre balconies; and there were far too many irritating ladder-like steps which merely got in the way. As far as I was concerned personally, the storm in Act III was visually non-existent as the window in the fatal bedchamber, crossed by flashes of lightning and so on, was totally out of sight, cut off by the splendid gilded statues on either side of the facade of the Royal Box.

I'm not sure that I can really see the point in putting William Matteuzzi (Rodrigo) in a blond wig, unless there was some kind of racial message (which happily remained obscure), but it did make him look quite refreshingly different from usual! Scot Weir (Jago) was fitted-out with a velvet suit rather like that of Bunthorne in *Patience*, no one seems to have much enthused over his performance, but I found him assured and even menacing in this curious guise, as though Rossini – as arch tease – was being sent up in his turn. Lella Cuberli (Desdemona) was an unusually lean and hungry victim, while Chris Merritt seemed to be stuffed into the kind of outfits worn by fleeting South American dictators, pouter-pigeoned, jack-booted, with a complexion due to Belgian Coal. None of the forgoing really mattered, what carried the evening was the music.

Happily, my seat also allowed me a splendid view of Gianluigi Gelmetti whose absolute command of the stage and the pit I found truly impressive. It was a very pointed reading of the score, rhythmically very defined, and cued to perfection. The woodwind solos impeccable. The balance between following and leading which so often goes awry, here was certainly outstanding. If this *Otello* somehow missed complete conviction it was no fault of the orchestra, the staging, or the direction, it was because the voices of the three principal protagonists refused absolutely to blend together. This opera – like most of those of Rossini's day of course – asks for diversity of the most pointed kind in the arias but for integration in the ensembles – particularly in the shared introspective moments of the plot. There was some perfectly extraordinary singing from Chris Merritt, some most affecting and extended vocal anguish from Lella Cuberli, and a series of tremendous *tours-de-force* from William Matteuzzi, but somehow there was a failure to find a common ground. Huge effort went into the Act II ensembles but without avail. Some of it was due to sheer dynamics; Chris Merritt now requires to sing with voices as large as his, perhaps if Ronconi had disposed his artists more sympathetically in his amusing settings he might have prompted a greater accoustic tuning, but often they were spread too widely or too summarily and the effect was disconcerting – as if several equally valid interpretations were being offered at the same time. For this reason no doubt, Act III, with its focus upon only two of the central trio, proved as impressive as it must be, both tenor and soprano in top form, enabling everyone to take note that the Rossini we have learned about so recently, the Rossini of *Ernani* and *Maometto II* for example, the poignant and moving Rossini to come, was only waiting in the wings. The audience was attentive but rather cold. Or perhaps simply puzzled by an *Otello* so disorderly in its construction and so challenging to listen to, in a production that was stylish and sophisticated but too ingenious by half, – half comic-book and half punning a play within a play.