

Performances

Giuseppe Verdi *Oberto conte di San Bonifacio* drama in due atti (libretto di Temistocle Solera), Grand Theatre, Leeds 20 and 24 January 1995

It may seem odd that, for their third excursion into little-known Verdi in recent years, Opera North chose *Oberto*. It may be that the motivating force was John Tomlinson, hoping to repeat his success of some years back in *Attila*. Ian Judge, director of that splendidly inventive production, fell at the first hurdle of this production of *Oberto*, and Tim Albery fell at the second. In the end John Tomlinson took on the production himself, as well as the basso cantante title role. The results were unusually interesting, occasionally exciting. He certainly proved that Judge and Albery were wrong to regard the piece as unstageable, even if there were moments when the limp or uncertain stagecraft of the young Verdi were impossible to disguise.

Tomlinson updated the action to circa 1920. Riccardo, the tenor anti-hero, is part of a Fascist clique who have newly taken over the country, Oberto is an exiled scion of an older order, devout, a man of strong, primal feelings, and with strong connections still with the servants of the new order. This all worked well, as did his relationship with his wronged daughter Leonora, seeking revenge on her seducer Riccardo, and with the woman, Cuniza, who is at the beginning of the action destined to be his bride. The action of the first half of the opera is measured but involving, but the second half has some miscalculations (a chorus which seems functionless and misplaced, and a final ten minutes which has one crying out for the brevity of *Trovatore's* conclusion). On the other hand, the first half brings often to mind the music of Bellini and Donizetti (the wedding scene from *Lucia*, for example, at the concluding ensemble of Act I), while the second half has moments, notably the quartet before the fake "reconciliation" of Oberto and Riccardo, one of the last-written parts of the score, in which one can hear, almost feel, the emerging confidence of a great composer.

Tomlinson was craggy, impressive, hypnotically watchable in the title role. He was also very loud, as if he had lost the ability to sing softly. His opening recitative was close to rant, where it should have been moving. As his daughter, Rita Cullis had a voice too wiry to be ideal, but she certainly gave a performance, albeit in the stage-uniform of the betrayed woman: frump dress and cardigan. Cuniza was sung by the more agile and beautiful voice of Linda Finnie - a warm, moving performance, though both women were a shade mature for their parts, especially as Riccardo was sung at these performances by a young stand-in, Gordon Wilson. I seem to spend my life, as a subscriber to Opera North, attending performances for which David Maxwell Anderson is announced but either fails to turn up or is described as indisposed. When he is well and appears he sings and phrases like an angel, so that one regrets that his visits are similarly angel-like: ie few and far-between. Wilson improved enormously between the two performances, but there is a slight bleat to the voice that reminded me of certain 'fifties tenors who recorded with Tebaldi and Callas when there was no one first-rate around.

In short, not a new addition to the standard Verdi repertory, nor even its fringes, but an opera that repaid performance by a professional company.

Robert Barnard