

Gaetano Donizetti *Roberto Devereux* tragedia lirica in tre atti, Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester 10 & 21 March 1996 – two reviews

Donizetti's mature serious operas are not obvious choices for student performance, but if they are to take them on, the Royal Northern College of Music is the obvious institution to stage them: their record in attracting and training first rate vocal talent over the past decades has been second to none. I have never believed that Donizetti's serious operas need three or four of the world's greatest singers (what hope would there be for them if that were so?) but I went with some trepidation. I was surprised by two performances, at least, that would have graced one of our professional companies.

Rafael Rojas as Roberto produces real, confident, stand-and-deliver tenor sound – one sat back and enjoyed him filling the theatre effortlessly at moments of climax. His acting is sincere, but embraces only a limited number of gestures, He cannot encompass the tender, either in his singing or his acting – and that is a drawback in Donizetti, but with his sturdy power one has no doubt of his making a career for himself.

Rosalind Martin is a find. Commanding on stage, as Elisabetta must be, she can yet be affecting, has a convincing trill and communicates directly with her audience. In vocal terms she is more a Gruberova than a Sills in this role, but many may find the plangent tones of a Sills out of place for this particular Queen. Ms Martin certainly dominated stage and theatre. Though her Italian was clear she lacks, as yet, any distinctive way with language, any striking use of it for dramatic effect, but that, one feels, will come – so much, after all, has come already. She was the second of the two sopranos (both from New Zealand, a country that is suddenly producing good wine and good singers) undertaking the role. Lucky a college that can have a Ms Martin as its second-string principal!

Vanessa Woodfine was a less complete artist as Sara, but touching nonetheless, and Darrell Babidge was a convincingly middle-aged Nottingham, without having quite the range and heft. Among smaller roles one noticed the sturdy voice of the Belgian Dirk Laplass standing-in as Cecil.

Drammatically things were not so encouraging. Stefan Janski projected the opera convincingly in the big public scenes, using his lusty and brilliant chorus to excellent effect. But this opera proceeds by a series of private confrontations – the duets are its heart. Here, the producer could not persuade his principals to develop their performances to bring out the changing emotions and developing conflicts. Elisabetta sounded every inch the Queen, but the impression she made was more Rita Fairclough than the painted old gorgon Elizabeth was in her last years. Sara was just victim, Roberto just Latin Lover.

*Roberto Devereux* is no *Gloriana* but the interacting private and public conflicts are there, and they were not sufficiently illuminated in this performance, which probably accounts for some lukewarm critical reactions. About the public's enthusiasm, there was no doubt.

Robert Barnard

