

Gaetano Donizetti *Linda di Chamounix* melodramma in tre atti, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London 6 June 1996

Linda had its prima in Vienna - where Donizetti was hoping for and subsequently received a court appointment - on 19 May 1842. It was greeted with enthusiasm, staying in the world repertory until the end of the century. This Guildhall production ran for four nights with an alternative cast. That of the first night was as follows

Maddalena Loustolot	Emer McGilloway
Antonio	Michael Dewis
Marchese di Boisfleury	Philip O'Brien
L'intendente	Dewi Williams
Linda	Sandra Zeltzer
Pierotto	Jane Stevenson
Carlo	Wynne Evans
Prefetto	Julian Saipe

My previous encounters with *Linda* were, firstly, at the (sadly) defunct Camden Festival in 1973, and secondly, in Trieste with Aliberti and Sabbatini. In some ways Guildhall's production was better than either, operas here are always very well presented but this was a real showpiece and perhaps the Donizetti Society's sponsorship from the Bellingham Fund was partly responsible. The sets were of screens of mountain scenery, at the rear left hand corner of the stage was a raised model of a castle and in the right hand corner a similar model of church and village, both of which lit-up in the night scenes and conveyed the opposing factions of feudal lordship and holy orders. Hackneyed...I hear you say? Well perhaps, but both evocative and good to look at, as indeed were the TRADITIONAL costumes! Point made. In the Paris scene of Act II the mountain scene remained looming in the background but was bathed in a pinkish light, echoed by the costumes. The direction was first-class, especially for the chorus on a small stage. The main liberty that Donizetti took with the original story was to make Boisfleury a buffo role and the Guildhall took full advantage of this, presenting him as a caricature that could hardly be taken seriously - let alone as any kind of threat to Linda's virginity.

The singing was of a high calibre; Sandra Zeltzer - in the title role - comes from France and although her voice was not immediately so pleasing to me personally she proved herself to be such a mistress of technique that it was easy to understand why Covent Garden have offered her a Despina (! *Ed.*) at a future date. Michael Dewis as Antonio has a really attractive baritone and characterised well, I look forward to hearing him in *un ballo in maschera* at the Holland Park Festival shortly. Wynne Evans as Carlo was a little short on stage presence despite his stature! He has a pleasant tenor but began to tire before the end and was unable to sustain some notes - some work needed there; Philip O'Brien sang the marchese for all he was worth giving a good comic relief. All the other soloists gave excellent support and the coro deserve special mention. Conductor Clive Timms controlled singers and orchestra sympathetically and extracted real quality from both, allowing us to hear one of Donizetti's best operas just as it should be heard. This kind of performance can stand-up well beside provincial performances anywhere in Europe and surpass some. Our distinguished *rossiniiano* Reto Müller who had come especially from Switzerland told me that it was worth the *detour* to come to London for one night to hear it.