

## Parisina d'Este

A Wexford Festival First Night - Thursday 17 October 1996

Rehearsals for this opera began with both the Town and the County of Wexford floating on a top note, thanks to the *Model County* winning the All-Ireland Hurling Championship Cup in a splendid "*prova*" of Hurling as the "*greatest team game in the world*" (a *prova* all the more wonderful in that it featured two amateur teams!).

The Autumn thus having begun "in beauty", as Italian puts it, this writer was convinced that the beauty was set fair to continue with the return of "our Gaetano" to launch the festival after five over-long years. Researches indicated a most interesting work worthy of such an auspicious occasion; a sound librettist in Romani; an opera "*in the definitive Romantic Orientation*" (Barblan) wherein we see a restless composer exploring new pathways - early groping towards a sort of Freudian psychodrama *avant la lettre*. The plasticity with which he moulds his convenienze and so on; but his writing is here ever tempered by the characteristic poetry of his musical writing, not least for the musical halo he imparts to Parisina thereby.

Luigi Ferrari has declared that he wishes to make the early Ottocento a keystone of his artistic policy. Whilst this writer says Amen! Alleluia! to this proposition he is very mindful of the current climate of hostility and downright ignorance *en face* the Italian School in Great Britain these days, which manifests itself in the abjectly bad standards of realisation (and the criticism by "professional" (sic) critics) which is the depressing norm.

Thus, the operatic product needs to be sold strongly as much to the public as to the critics. It was not sold by Luciano Alberti's programme book, the sketchiness of whose Donizettian scholarship as seen here is not : "within an ass's roar" of what the circumstances required. The National Symphony Orchestra under Maurizio Benini regaled us to the full *sinfonia* as transcribed from the Bergamo autograph. Melodic and commendably played, it left us however with the heroic thought that to have cut most of this music so painstakingly researched would have *added* to the impact of the evening...

This musical detour finished, the stage action made us at once aware of that thrilling sensation of assisting at an operatic evening perfumed by Italianate seriousness of purpose and culture, it was exhilarating to see the careful management of stage movement (Director Stefano Vizioli) and the costumes of Ulderico Manani which were a treat to the eye. A treat to the ear, and no mistake, was the Festival Chorus (Chorus Master Lubomir Matl). The choral interventions may be dramatically inert but thanks to full-bodied sound and ductability they were thrillingly alive.

Richard Robson (Ernesto) inserted himself seamlessly, thanks to splendid interpretation and diction, into a largely Italian-speaking cast. Daniela Barcellona (Imelda) was at the height of the situation both vocally (splendidly) and scenically (beautifully). Amedeo Moretti (Ugo), a lyric tenor nicely produced, presented us with an abundance of youthful impetuosity (as well as the death-wish of this characteristically early-Romantic tenor role).

The following criticisms are offered with caution. May we respectfully beg Roberto Servile (Azzo) to refine his vocal technique, the shortfalls noted here seriously compromised his ability fully to impart the pathos intended by the poetry of Donizetti. The stage presence is so imposing, it is a shame to see its impact so blunted. In the same spirit, we beg Alexandrina Pendatchanska (Parisina) to think hard about her choice of roles and to develop the credibility of her stage presentation in order to compensate for her petite physique. She sang her part correctly, but it did not convince as an *interpretation* because this lyric soprano has not the "fine low voice" that Donizetti had in mind in her key sections of the opera.

Applause at the end from a decidedly gelid public saddened this Donizetti fan, as it betokened that which in the composer's own practical vocabulary would have been a fiasco - the London "Critic of the Year" called this staging a "*turkey*". Why? Casting deficiencies we have noted; but to it we add the unusual sense - for a Donizettian night - of *longueurs*. Not just the overlong *sinfonia* either, Barblan does say that this is a "psychological novel" rather than a "theatrical opera". This presentation was as heavy on philological purity as it was weak on theatrical practicability. Luigi Ferrari! You would do well to recall that here in Wexford you depend critically of getting-in paying punters, you would do well to concentrate on putting to us *living* operas...

Phillip G. Gormley

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