

Leeds Youth Opera production of *Gianni da Calais* (as "The Buccaneer")

First, a word about the Leeds Youth Opera which was founded in 1971: its aim:- to introduce young people aged 12 to 25 to all aspects of opera. It is a Registered Charity which has to seek sponsorship and receives no regular backing from Leeds City Council. Their seat prices are ridiculously low and their annual deficit is about £30,000.

I asked Jonathan Clift, the Production Co-Ordinator (also responsible for costume design) if he had made a deliberate choice to put on a Donizetti opera for the composer's bicentenary: "Oh yes, of course" he said, and went on to explain that he had met the indefatigable Anders Wiklund (who prepares scores in his native Sweden, for Italy, and for the Rossini Festival in Wildbad) socially, and mentioned that he was looking for an opera for the Leeds Youth Opera with plenty of chorus work; Prof. Wiklund said he had just prepared *Gianni da Calais* and would that be helpful? So it was decided that the Youth Opera would present four performances, a world première in modern times. Preliminary notice was given in Newsletter 70, but as we were given some wrong information by the theatre the first news of the production was given by telephone to interested members and announced at the Annual General Meeting at Bologna. Despite some rather adverse propaganda filtering from Leeds to London, several members attended performances, some from as far away as France, Austria, Germany and Norway, as well as Prof. Wiklund himself.

It is always wise to make up one's mind about amateur productions, and in this case the propagandists were proved wrong. *Gianni da Calais*, the 26th in Donizetti's monumental canon, was composed in a particularly fruitful year: 1827, which also yielded *Olivo e Pasquale*, *Otto mesi in due ore*, *Il borgomastro di Saardam*, *Le convenienze teatrali*, and *L'esule di Roma* (staged in 1828), and immediately before *Gianni* came *La regina di Golconda*. It had its première at the Teatro del Fondo in Naples on 2 August 1828 and was revived in Milan and Paris. The cast included Adelaide Comelli-Rubini (Metilde), Rubini (Gianni), and Tamburini (Rustano); the libretto by Domenico Gilardoni was based on a play "Jean de Calais" by Louis-Charles Caigniez. The best known aria is certainly Rustano's Barcarolle in Act I, an example of Donizetti using a popular Neapolitan song and adapting it for opera. I listened very intently for "borrowings" but

did not note any. However, William Ashbrook tells us that Gianni's ActII aria 'Fasti? Pompe? Omaggi? Onori?' was given later to Tonio in *La fille du régiment* as an aria di sortita. In Leeds the translation into English was made by Jonathan Clift assisted by his tenor Richard Knox. At times there seemed to be a lot of 'No! No! No! No! No! No!' in the arias and duets which would probably have sounded better as "Non! Non! Non!" but this is petty carping.

The cast included:

Richard Knox t. (Gianni); Steven Pascoe bt. (Rustano); David Heathcote bt.(Ruggiero); with Beverley Whittaker s. and Emma Turner s. [*alternating as*] (Metilde).

The fact that Gianni was written for Rubini will indicate the very high tessitura of the title role. Jonathan Clift was either very clever or very lucky to find a natural *spinto* tenor in Richard Knox who has a voice in the Giuseppe Morino mould. The role seemed to hold no terrors for him, his diction was good (in a not over-large theatre), and a tendency to shout when singing forte could be overcome with good teaching. Steven Pascoe (Rustano) has a very promising baritone, good pitch and diction and acted well, he made a fine job of the Barcarolle. Emma Turner (Metilde) has a voice comparable with Sarah Brightman, naturally high and childish with an occasional lapse in pitch. The smaller parts were all well covered and the chorus - some of them scarcely teenage - sang with commitment and enthusiasm. Among the cast, I was told, two were working for Chemical Engineering degrees; another was a graduate; and there was a temporarily unemployed chef! Excellent costumes (made by one lady working on her own I gather), and simple evocative well-lit sets for both the Port in ActI and the Court scenes in ActII and III rounded-off a splendid evening.

Here was an endeavour of extraordinary courage and commitment which deserves hearty congratulations. (I hope that the Committee of the Society will see fit to make a donation to the LYO!)

Marigold Mann

Leeds Youth Opera: *Gianni da Calais* 2/3/4/5 July 1997

First of all I must apologise for any inconvenience caused to our members regarding the above production. I had notice of performance dates which were confirmed when I rang the theatre. As the Newsletter was just being sent out we had a small notice printed to be inserted into those which had not been despatched. *Two days later* I was informed of the correct dates, but was assured by the theatre box-office that any enquiries would be corrected. I do hope that any members were not discouraged from travelling to Leeds because of this error.

Normally I stay away from student/amateur performances, but the chance to hear a Donizetti opera that had not been heard for the best part of 170 years was not to be missed. I went to two performances and so heard both ladies - the men sang all four performances. All in all they were pleasant evenings. The Civic Theatre is plain and functional; good, comfortable seating and excellent acoustics. Both sopranos managed the high bright line of the role of Metilde very well, even if at times to my ears were a little shrill. The tenor carried off the high tessitura for Gianni with great aplomb and was a pleasure to listen-to. The young baritone Steven Pascoe was superb (I am told he is not going to make singing his career), he sang his first act Barcarolle effortlessly and his stage presence was self-assured. There are a number of beautiful pieces in the score, this Barcarolle; Gianni's ActI aria; the tenor/baritone duet in ActII; the extended finale to ActII and the Rondo finale to ActIII. The sets were minimal and depicted the scene to good effect, the lighting was very good (the transition from full moon to dawn well-handled). The chorus - some quite young - sang well and grouped and regrouped without any obvious hassle.

My thanks and congratulations to all concerned in this venture, not least to all the young players in the Leeds Yough Orchestra under the direction of Michael Williamson. Now all that is wanting is a history of *Gianni da Calais* - along with others which are still just a mention in books relating to the recording of opera.

Pip Clayton