

LINDA goes mad in Bologna

Gaetano Donizetti *Linda di Chamounix* melodramma in tre atti, libretto di Gaetano Rossi, Teatro Comunale di Bologna 27 April 1997

Donizetti (surely no one can doubt it) chose his plots with care, especially for Vienna with its hyper-attentive and musical Court. *Linda* was to strike an oleographic note, full of figuranti villages and villagers, picturesque waifs and feudal obeisance, where the hurdy-gurdy was to be a folkloric bridge between vignettes of mountains, roses round the door, and the interlude of domestic lubricity at Paris, a wonderfully sentimental and touching evocation linking past love and present despair. An opera especially dependant upon its setting, without which it becomes a string of melodies and nothing much more. Except that Chamonix is chilly in the winter, can there be any sensible reason why the opera was presented, in the friendly Teatro Comunale di Bologna, in the visual equivalent of a refrigerator?

We were entertained with horror stories in advance of this production, of fury and incomprehension, of circus scenes and the tenor's underpants, in fact it was the whole setting that was bared to its essentials (not the tenor). Was it a good idea to engage a stage designer who is scared of romantic imagery for this kind of repertoire? If this *Linda* was a success, and it was - because the vocal and orchestral components were exemplary, even superb - it was *despite* the opera we saw with its insignificant costuming, television-type projections and pop-up sofa.

Surely the storyline of this opera - not distinguished by any novel situations - is creaky enough without emphasising just those illogicalities which cause it to fall flat. Surely it is simple perversity to underline just those period clichés which the dotage of Gaetano Rossi failed to resolve dramatically - and then impose a modishly arty sneer in their place. Unless a designer can bring conviction to such a period piece one should look elsewhere.

This is not to say there were no ideas, the *metteur-en-scène* had a thing about insanity, not a particularly healthy thing, but partially redeemed by a gruesome curiosity. The moment of Linda's alienation was well done, the instant bleaching of the stage was almost a coup, but then he went on to bleach the coro too (a silly distraction), to turn the *marchese* into a ringmaster and bring on an admirably rehearsed and presented circus which was to represent (gosh!) the bizarre illogicality of Linda's imagination! What we were expected to think of the illogicality of this view of Donizetti's 1843 bourgeois *melodramma* is another matter entirely. Most of the production was inoffensive, if not dreary. Surprisingly, the singers responded positively to the provocation of the setting, I have never seen Mariella Devia act so well, nor heard her sing so well, with a superlative ease throughout the whole range, giving life to what can be empty roulades in the way divas are supposed to do but which so seldom occurs in front of your very eyes and ears. She responded with inspiration, a quite startlingly virtuoso performance of the very highest class. And then what are we to say about three superlative *bassi* all on top form? I should hate to have to single out any one of them, all three were excellent and well contrasted, Stefano Antonucci's Antonio, Donato di Stefano's Prefetto, and Bruno Praticò's quite irresistibly

good-humoured *marchese* di Boisfleury were the sort of casting to dream about, not to mention their ability to co-exist - even thrive - under such adverse conditions (I suspect that Denis Krief [Regia] must be both persuasive and very personable). Gloria Banditelli was in excellent voice as Pierotto and looked touching and convincing, as for Luca Canonici in the testing role of Carlo - he sang with real conviction, in fuller voice than ever I have heard him before and with a certain elegance in the face of some of Donizetti's most appealing arias and Mr Krief's more predictable antics - in the most extraordinary postures, flat on his back, in bed, and - wait for it - in a *déshabille* that would be the envy of every other tenor on the Italian circuit (and of most other young men). I cannot imagine a more convincing presentation, visually at least.

This opera, a not always consistent one, containing some of Donizetti's most introspective imaginings but uneven, is beautifully orchestrated and anticipates so much that was yet to arrive on the Italian stage. Gabriele Bellini held the whole structure together with a sensitive baton, bringing out the best in a quite remarkable cast. It is interesting to note that such an apparently flawed score should be currently in vogue, with stagings and concert performances all over the place [See **Bicentenary Diary**] (not to mention a recording or two).

In this opera, in fact - something of a compendium like a few of Verdi's mature offerings to the stage - there is a decided hint of a conscious attempt to bring together the more memorable strands of the successful scores of his predecessors while investing them with a force and relevance appropriate to the approaching mid-century. Therein lies a certain weakness. The ideas of the designer had run out by the end of the opera, the final scene was of the utmost banality. Carlo and Linda sat side by side on the pop-up sofa framed by their fellow cast (with a chilly band of cori at the rear: as these coristi were still in their bleached outfits and Linda had apparently recovered her wits - shouldn't they have recovered their normal appearance? Or am I being hopelessly logical?). The situation, indeed, was far from new; Carlo repeated his sentimental tune, Linda was brought back to her senses and the audience sat back to enjoy a long (long) chortle of joy.

An! non giun... I was just beginning to say when my neighbour called out "**Viva Bellini**". I wondered to whom he could have been referring?

Alexander Weatherson



During reorganization of the Royal Opera House archives in 1984, the manuscript of an opera, marked *'never finished or performed'*, was found in a bundle of papers in the cellar. Examined by musicologists, it proved to consist of the first and third acts of Donizetti's lost tragi-comedy *Elisabetta*, written for Paris in 1840 though never staged. Thanks to further discoveries of material for the missing second act in both the Royal Opera House archives and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, it has finally been possible to reconstruct a full score, the world premiere of which - as the first of The Royal Opera's performances at the Royal Festival Hall - promises to be one of the highlights of a season of concert rarities.

Carlo Rizzi, Music Director of Welsh National Opera, conducts a cast of exciting young *bel canto* singers, led by Andrea Rost, last heard in *La traviata* in 1996, as Elisabetta, a young Russian girl who makes a perilous journey from Siberia to Moscow in an attempt to rescue her unjustly accused father, Potoski, from prison. Potoski is sung by