

ELISABETTA RIVEDUTA

Incontestably the most fascinating birthday present of all, in concert at the Royal Festival Hall on 16 December 1997, *Elisabetta* winged from her ROH cellar as did the maestro himself from subterranean obscurity 200 years earlier. It was a gift for a huge audience. And what a gift. To discover yet another facet of Donizetti at this late date is an unhopd-for bonus. A composite score? Yes. Unequal? Certainly. A revelation? An understatement, and no doubt about it.

A *demerged* score, as the City would say, *Elisabetta* is a conflation of the first Donizetti with the last; nothing is quite continuous, the voices don't quite match the mood, it is something of a frieze - Maria and Fedora only appear in Act I, Ivano and Alterkan only in Act II, the General and the Tsar only in Act III (Nina - is mentioned - but never appears at all) - Michele sticks out like a sore thumb in such a romantic farago, everything seems rather tentative, and indeed this was probably the case from the beginning and a perfect explanation why this opera remained a challenge from 1827 to the very end of his life. Yet...and its a big yet...the virtues of the music reduce these quibbles to practically nothing at all.

Of course this *Elisabetta* - a tardy assemblage of sections of *Otto mesi in due ore* in most of its various manifestations - is badly in need of editing, the music we heard, painstakingly loyal to the extant manuscript sources, needs the hand of the master himself to make it work. The storyline (a true one in fact) scarcely seems operatically viable never mind credible in this edition, the long long recitatives don't help, the set-piece arias of Acts II and III merely interrupt the action and those of Act III fit oddly together which is a great loss in that the structure of this final act in the French version of 1840 is fully representative of the dramatic gains of Donizetti's last years as far as can be judged by the remaining material. What a shame that the great composer could not take up Roger Parker's kind invitation (in the programme book) to come down and make those last minute changes which would turn so much extraordinary music into an undiluted masterpiece! But what joys there are in this opera. An icy overture (however could Donizetti have thought it academic?), stark and evocative of the Siberia whose mood pervades the first two acts, a shivering orchestration with staccato chords, heartless like the exile which is the true subject of the tale, a species of freezing nullity - surely the most exceptional invention by a composer based in the Naples of the primo Ottocento - all or most of Act I displays a capacity to respond to an alien and exotic setting which puts the famous Bergamasc in a category without rivals.

I personally respond less to a *leggero* soprano heroine than to the mezzo divas who in due course took up the role of *Elisabetta* (divas like Giuditta Grisi and Carolina Ungher); this is because in my estimation the warmth and resolution of their singing adds a dimension to the character and brings her more fully to life on the stage. Andrea Rost sang admirably in this performance, clear as a bell, but had Pauline Viardot sung the role we should have seen and heard - not a charming soubrette trilling agreeably - but a young woman of determination, tailored to the early feminist ideals of her day, a lifelike portrait of the young Russian girl who really did walk for eight months through snow and ice to appeal to the Czar to release her father (she succeeded, later became a nun, and died young). It was not only the lightness of her voice, however, that made problems for the audience on 16 December; both her

parents in this concert version looked younger than she did and her father (a wonderful tenor all of 24 years old) brought a whiff of Latin America which was even more exotic than any of Donizetti's Siberian imaginings. All praise to Covent Garden for this fine replacement for Giuseppe Sabbatini at short notice, Juan Diego Floréz captured the attention of the house with every note (and gesture). If her parents were too young, her Michele was too old. He is supposed to be a boy, not much older than Elisabetta. Probably poor Michele never did look (or sound) credible on the stage, a buffo bass seldom has youth on his side, he is usually an old buffer (a word derived from *buffo*), here Alessandro Corbelli sang very imaginatively but without the necessary conviction and who can blame him; the maestro's 1840 intention to rejuvenate Michele as a tenor *Michel* was shrewd and dramatically feasible I believe (but, alas, never reached the stage).

Ivano, sung by Alastair Miles, brought a real Donizettian rush of emotion to his slightly top-heavy aria and the ensuing duet with the highly-charged Elisabetta was an exchange at the very heart of the plot. Surprisingly (to me that is - but I should have had more faith in the maestro) the *Coro di Tartari* "Tartaro masnadier" which came next and one of the very few items in this opera which had survived from 1827 in every subsequent *rifacimento* (including that of 1840) proved to be sterling stuff, not at all intrusive in its context as I had suspected and was well endorsed by the Alterkan of Jeremy White. The storm music of this second act was impressive but I suspect that this exceptionally moving sequence is one of the portions of the original score which by hindsight would have been retouched had the composer had the chance, like the music of the "Descent" which opens this Act II it proved to be too short to make its effect in concert form - both beginning and end of this act depending entirely upon staging to make them work.

Act III (as I had expected!) was a mess, neither fish nor fowl, neither French nor Italian, it more or less succeeded in betraying both traditions. The big trio (the shining moment of the 1840 *opéra comique*) had little effect, the reinstatement of the General (Roderick Earle), and the Tsar (Robin Leggate) and the tag-team of two big arias capped, in the end, by a waltzing *cabaletta finale* added little to the drama. Here again, the composer's retouching was nothing less than essential. It is not only in the context of this Act III, however, that the romantic potential of this score was not quite fulfilled on this occasion. After all, the original description of *Otto mesi in due ore* was that of an opera romantica, Donizetti certainly intended something more than a romantically far-fetched setting to justify this description, the revelation of this *Elisabetta* was a music at odds with the Rossinian hegemony of his day - which *looked* on paper like that of its great predecessor but had captured a dimension as far away from him as Naples was from Siberia. In which colour, atmosphere and sentiment were at a premium. Carlo Rizzi's conducting was efficient and concerned, attentive, above all, to the singers, but the special care that the composer had taken to engage the sympathies of the listener for his heroine, her father and his tortured betrayer, even for that of the throw-away courage of Michele, came to very little. We heard some wonderful music, tantalising indeed. We need to hear, however, *Otto mesi in due ore* in its original form to judge his originality, and we need to hear *Élisabeth, ou La Fille de l'exilé* to estimate just how much flood water had passed beneath the composer's bridge to appreciate its particular place in the sun.

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