

Maria di Rohan at home (or almost)

Keith Larsen

In the company of a large party of ladies (*Ladies*) and gentlemen, Friends of Castle Sychrov all, I went to the Czech Republic to see the late (1843) opera by Donizetti. I had never seen it before and knew it only from records, one set especially with Zeani.

I have a libretto I treasure, from Covent Garden in the 1850's with Ronconi in his original role of Chevreuse, Alboni, Salvi etc. My only acquaintance with the work.

It had been planned to perform *Maria di Rohan* "al fresco" in the grounds of the superb neo-Gothic Castle of the Rohan family, with a fine cast, orchestra and conductor (the latter familiar from the Nightingale recording). But bad weather intervened and the venue had to be changed. I was taken with some others on a tour of the treasures of the vast house and saw from a window the forlorn canopy of the structure that had been intended to hold the orchestra and soloists. Details emerged slowly, but the change of setting was to be that of the Skoda car factory in a small town nearby. I had visions of us all sitting on oil drums, rather like in one of Tarkovsky's gloomier films.

Not so. An excellent modern auditorium, no confusion over seating, and a fine performance of this amazing opera. The background of the work is well-known and has been analysed in other places, but for myself I was surprised at this forward-looking and economical piece, almost Puccini-like in the elimination of excess material. There was an incandescently beautiful overture, not withstanding the intrusion of a photographer who took six flash pictures and ploughed-around the upper reaches distractingly. The tenor Octavio Arévalo had a sweet and ingratiating tone in his first aria and a fine stage presence. I hope we see more of him. The soprano Victoria Loukianetz lacked weight for such a dramatic role and had almost too-much *rapport* with the genial Elio Boncompagni conducting.

We are used, now, in London to seeing well-presented concert-versions of operas in which modern dress indicates - subtly - facets of character - an example recently was Samuel Ramey as Mefistofele in red socks. Amusing, and apt. Not so here! In the breeches-role of Armando di Gondi an astute producer might have bestowed a black trouser-suit on Claudia Marchi, in fact she looked like Carmen in a plunging top and full cotton skirt, a garb guaranteed to mystify anyone unaware of the sexually indeterminate nature of nineteenth-century opera. The real star was Ettore Kim, rather too benign-looking for the intense Chevreuse but transcending this especially in the last act with his series of arias. He had a well-deserved ovation (I remember a fine Di Luna with the Opera North Company in Nottingham).

What a wonderful four days! Sychrov itself hosted the post-opera buffet and it was fascinating to see so many English supporters looked as though they had strayed from Glyndebourne, in full fig and obviously enjoying themselves. So-much else too. A visit to a Lobkowicz castle near Prague, with several Brueghels and a fine portrait of Mendoza by Anguissola (the Prince Lobkowicz of the day was the second dedicatee of Beethoven's "Eroica").

My thanks to the Friends of Castle Sychrov for organising such a magnificent event. I learned so much from the dedicated people in the party, from their astounding knowledge of architecture and country-houses in general.