

## Mid-Summer Donizetti

John Watts

This second year of anniversary will show a few more interesting events than 1997, with, rather surprisingly, Rome giving two operas sung in the original French, namely, *La Favorite*, at the main house, and *La Fille du régiment* at the delightful and well-proportioned Teatro Argentina (where *Il barbiere di Siviglia* had its disastrous prima). This theatre is nowadays seldom used for opera and the opportunity of seeing consecutive performances with mainly different casts could not be resisted. The artists common to both casts were Claudio Desderi as Sulpice, and Edoardo Borioli (in *drag*) as La duchesse de Crackentorp; the other singers in the six performances comprised Elena Zilio and Ilya Aramayo as La marquise de Berkenfeld; Paul Austin Kelly and Giorgio Casciari as Tonio; and Laura Claycomb and Cinzia Forte as Marie.

The settings by Fernando Botero and production by Emilio Sargi had previously been used in Monte Carlo, by the Deutsche Oper Am Rhein, in Düsseldorf and Genève. The first act - set in a town square - was dominated by an enormous inflated model of a very large-breasted woman, which, in the second act, was to be seen in reverse outside the rear window of the salon. What this had to do with Donizetti's opera was difficult to make-out, but it seemed to amuse the audience.

In the UK we have been denied this delightful opera since the Covent Garden staging of 1966/67 with Sutherland and Pavarotti. The Daily Telegraph at that time reviewed it in headlines as a "*Deplorable and vulgar display*", which probably prompted the sale of the production to the Met, where it has been revived on many occasions. Though the Rome performances were enjoyable on a rather low level the problem was that they lacked singers of the calibre of Sutherland and Pavarotti. Laura Claycomb's voice, not unlike her compatriot Beverly Sills, lacked charm and brilliance. Likewise Paul Austin Kelly who managed to produce all the required number of high C's but has the wrong kind of voice for this role. Far more successful, vocally, was the alternative tenor Giorgio Casciari but his diminutive figure was rather lost in his uniform! Elena Zilio, now a old stager, was a good Marquise, Claudio Desderi gave one of his familiar buffo performances. The conductor Stefano Ranzani negotiated the score without much distinction.

The second opera to be reviewed here was *Caterina Cornaro* in a concert performance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, conducted by Richard Bonyngue. This originally promised Jenny Drivala in the title-role but she dropped-out some time before the performance on 28 June and was replaced by Julia Migenes (the Carmen to Domingo's José on film).

To someone who attended the opera's first modern revival at Naples (1972 with Leyla Gencer), and (later) in London (1972 with Montserrat Caballé) and Paris (1973 with Caballé), the QEHL performance was dire. For some reason the producer, one Alan Sievwright, decided to semi-stage the work but located it *behind* the orchestra! This meant that those members of the audience seated in the front rows could see nothing, only the legs of the orchestra. Announcement that Chandos was recording the performance for a future CD seemed to have affected the under-sized chorus as they failed to sing at the beginning of the Introduction. This meant that the opera had to be stopped and started again. Migenes got through the work well enough but this was not a *Bel Canto* voice. The supporting singers, including the veteran Richard Van Allan, just about coped with their roles.

The opera was put-on with the assistance of the former diplomat Sir David Hunt and his wife, who have edited a book on the real Caterina Cornaro. Sadly, Sir David, who had contributed a note in the programme-book and who had been present, died the following month...



[opposite]

This is what she really looked like. Queen Caterina Cornaro by Gentile Bellini  
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