

ROSSINI AT GARSINGTON AND WILDBAD

La Pietra del Paragone – 13th June: *Il Viaggio a Reims* – 17th and 19th July:
Matilde di Shabran – 18th July.

Garsington Opera and Rossini in Wildbad both marked their tenth anniversaries this summer, and with such solid achievement behind them this is certainly something to celebrate. Garsington does not, of course, specialize in the work of just one composer, but it has devoted most of its attention to Haydn and Mozart (7 operas each), and Strauss and Rossini (4 operas each, with the British premiere of *Die Liebe der Danae* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* announced for 1999). This year we had *La Pietra del Paragone* in its first professional production in Britain since Glyndebourne's in 1965, and with the same conductor-director-designer team which had made such a success of *Il Turco in Italia* two years ago. Set in a country estate, this seemed especially appropriate to Garsington, and as the overture ended we could indeed see Conte Asdrubale's gardeners working in the real gardens beside and on the stage.

I wish I could go on to say that the evening progressed satisfactorily from this happy beginning but, although the wholly negative verdict of some British critics seems unduly harsh to me, the soufflé certainly failed to rise. The designs and costumes (Susanna Rossi Jost) were crude and garish, and the production (Stefano Vizioli) was in the broad style of a British Christmas pantomime, vulgar and relentlessly busy, verging on caricature, and with an over-emphasis on visual jokes. Charles Peebles conducted a rather lack-lustre performance, with badly positioned timpani giving an exaggerated *à la Harmoncourt* effect. Against such odds even experienced international singers like Charles Workman and Steven Page, although they sang elegantly, with beautiful tone and a complete understanding of Rossini style, could not redress the balance. Patricia Bardon, despite a few strident top notes, also sang well, but some of the rest of the cast did not have quite the vocal resources necessary for the really polished singing which a successful performance of Rossini depends on.

Having said all this, Garsington did manage to put on a "show", and the audience seemed to enjoy it – at least, those of them who did not have their noses permanently stuck in the translation of the libretto which Garsington sells at the door. And here, perhaps, is the chief difficulty. *La Pietra del Paragone* is pre-eminently a comedy of manners, with more of the humour in its dialogue than in its action. In the absence of surtitles, how can a director keep the attention of his audience which does not understand Italian without over-playing the stage humour? It is a difficult balancing act; but more is often less, and in this case the excessive attempts at visual humour were cumulatively leaden in effect. This heavyhandedness was of a piece with that of the decor and the musical direction: what was lacking was a visual and orchestral elegance to complement the sparkling melodic inventiveness of Rossini's first full-length comic opera. Alas!

Amongst its main successes so far, Rossini in Wildbad can count *L'Equivoco Stravagante*, *Sigismondo*, *Aureliano in Palmira* and *Eduardo e Cristina*. The Deutsche Rossini Gesellschaft was keen to mark the tenth anniversary with a special event – but how? The choice fell (happily) on *Il Viaggio a Reims* – appropriately enough set in a spa town. The problem of how to afford ten star singers was neatly solved by inviting Alberto Zedda, who had given a successful master-class concert performance in Royaumont last year, to conduct two similar performances at Wildbad with a cast of young singers at the outset of their professional careers. They performed in evening dress, occasionally reading from scores and occasionally acting, while the orchestra was the Virtuosi di Praga. The result was a triumphant success which must have exceeded the expectations of everyone involved.

With unflinching geniality Zedda coaxed a wonderfully vivid and idiomatic performance from both his singers and orchestra. Amongst the singers Marco di Felice (baritone), Christophorous Stamboglis (bass), and Mario Zeffiri (tenor) were particularly distinguished: I hope that there were talent spotters in the audience, for they already deserve international recognition. Only marginally less impressive was Antonis Koroneos (tenor), while Carmen Acosta (soprano), more secure than when she sang Cristina last year, displayed great technical ability. I have to say, however, that I find her timbre ungrateful, as is her hispanic pronunciation of Italian. Agata Bienkowska (mezzo), Rita Cammarano (soprano), Daniel Fiolka (baritone) and Thomas Ruf (baritone) were all more-than-promising, and only need more experience to develop their talents to a fully professional level. No synopsis of the plot was printed in the programme; no libretti were on sale; and most of the audience were German speaking. But, unlike Garsington, this did not seem to matter. The focus of attention was on the music and the singing, which were so accomplished that the audience was held spellbound.

The other main offering at Wildbad was *Matilde di Shabran* getting its second twentieth-century production, but in the Vienna version of 1822 – renamed *Corradino, ossia Bellezza e Cuor di Ferro* – as opposed to the 1821 Naples version used at Pesaro in 1996. Apart from dropping Isidoro's Neapolitan dialect, the main difference is the reinstatement of an aria for the tenor in Act II. There was much to enjoy in this performance. On the positive side, the director (Annette Hombacher) and designer (Sacha Weig) worked wonders. Any opera with a misogynist hero capitulating to a pretty and determined heroine must invite a feminist presentation, and here, with the theme "Die Zukunft ist die ♀", it got it. And it worked a treat. Corradino became a pop star figure who, with his remote control, flicked a succession of pictures of pretty women across his TV screen as he worked out in his gym, while his "castle" was guarded against pro-feminist demonstrators by close circuit television and security lights. The "army" he sent out to deal with the invading army of protesters consisted of PR men in smart suits. I could go on: the clever inventiveness was endless. This was played out

on an elaborate set, with a raised gangway reached from the left of the stage, running along the back of the stage, out over the orchestra and down on to a catwalk in front of the orchestra, completing the circuit back at the steps up to the gangway. The acting area of what would otherwise have been a small stage was almost trebled, and the production made full and intelligent use of its possibilities.

The singing was for the most part excellent, with the honours going to Roswitha Müller (mezzo) as Edoardo and the young Japanese Akie Amou (soprano) as Matilde. Both had vocal techniques equal to their parts, and if Amou sang in a slightly soubrettish way this, like her spirited acting, was dramatically appropriate. Also outstanding was Noé Colin (bass) as Aliprando, while Maurizio Leoni (baritone) as Isidoro sang and acted amusingly. But what is Hamlet without the prince? It was surely a mistake to cast the young Mexican tenor Ricardo Bernal as Corradino. He had all the looks of a pop star, but was simply not adequate to the cruel demands of the part: his runs were only approximations, and latterly his voice sounded wretchedly strained. I sat willing him to get through without breakdown. It was clear that he has a pleasing voice, and within his resources he can doubtless sing well, but he does himself no great service to attempt a part so clearly beyond him at this stage in his career. (Perhaps Zeffiri would have been a better choice.)

The other great disappointment was the conducting of Francesco Corti, who directed a loud, unsparkling performance, inconsiderate of the needs of his singers. He was booed. Last year I commented on the difficulty of the hall, with its lack of a pit, for achieving a balance between stage and orchestra. But Zedda graphically demonstrated that an ideal balance *is* possible, so Corti must take the blame. The performance was recorded for future radio broadcast, and a CD recording (which we badly need of *Matilde*) will be considered: I fear, however, that this may be ruled out by the inadequacies of Corti and Bernal.

So, after the anniversaries, what of the future? Rossini in Wildbad has now run out of Rossini operas for twentieth-century exhumation, and may have to rely for future novelty on finding (as this year) alternative versions of recently mounted operas. Yet another version of *L'Equivoco Stravagante*, based on the autograph, is under consideration for next year. Joint productions with other houses may also offer financial advantages leading to higher musical standards. If the tradition of issuing recordings of performances is to continue there is certainly room for musical improvement – and new conductors. As for Garsington, novelty is not an issue. Its way forward is limited only by keeping the peace with its local council: complaints of noise from neighbours have been a problem which, for the moment, appears to have been resolved. Has Garsington thought, I wonder, of adding Donizetti to its select list of composers. I believe he would be well suited to its resources, and popular with its audiences. How splendid to be able to report in another ten years' time that there had been a tally of seven Donizetti operas!

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