

Pigmalione and Rita at Bergamo

As part of the "150th" celebrations, Bergamo gave us *Pigmalione and Rita* over the weekend of 24-25 October - an interesting combination from the beginning and end of the maestro's career.

Pigmalione was composed by Donizetti in a few days during the early autumn of 1816, more as a "scholastic exercise" than for publication. Its origins can be traced to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's play of 1762, first performed privately in Lyon in 1770. Rousseau was convinced that the French language, "destituée de tout accent, n'est nullement propre à la musique" but several Italian composers set out to turn *Pygmalion* into an opera, including Giovanni Battista Cimador for the San Samuele theatre of Venice in January 1790, to a libretto by Antonio Simone Sografi. This was also the libretto used by Donizetti twenty six years later.

The plot is the legend of *Pygmalion*, king of Cyprus, who becomes a sculptor and falls in love with one of his ivory statues. Much of the single act is taken up with *Pygmalion's* despair until *Venus* finally takes pity on him and brings the statue to life.

The opera owes more to Cimador and Mayr than Rossini and is full of soulfully melodic allegri and larghetti. Mauro Nicoletti conveyed the right sense of classical despair, followed by joy as *Galatea*, sung by Amarilli Nizza, comes to life. Roberto Frattini conducted.

Rita was not performed until after Donizetti's death, first on 7 May 1860 as Rita ou le Mari Battu at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, then for the first time in Italian at Naples in 1876! It was however written in 1841 (or possibly already in 1839) as a result of Donizetti's collaboration with the Belgian poet Jean Nicolas van Nieuvenhuysen, better known as Gustave Vaëz.

Rita had been revived in 1955 at Bergamo but since then has rarely been performed. The plot tells the story of Rita, a French innkeeper who has moved to France believing that her violent first husband, Gasparo, has perished in a shipwreck. She has married Beppe, a timid character whom she beats and generally maltreats. One day Gasparo, who has been told that Rita had died in a fire, arrives at the inn on his way to France where he hopes to obtain a death certificate for his wife so that he can marry again. Beppe discovers Gasparo's identity from his passport and sees an opportunity to free himself from the overbearing Rita. Gasparo however has no desire to return to Rita so the rest of the opera is taken up with various intrigues as Beppe tries to escape and Gasparo makes several attempts to get hold of the only document which could upset his plans for the future - his marriage certificate. In the end he is successful and Beppe is reconciled with Rita.

For the three performances the role of Rita was shared between Silvia Mapelli, Paola Quagliata and Lorena Campari, while Beppe was sung by Alex Magri and Giorgio Tiboni and Gasparo by Dario Giorgelè and Ignazio De Simone. I saw, and was impressed by, Quagliata, Tiboni and Giorgelè, who brought enthusiasm and real acting ability to their parts. Roberto Frattini conducted the Orchestra dell'Istituto Musicale Donizetti di Bergamo with feeling and understanding of the humour in Vaëz's libretto while Francesco Bellotto's set was well suited to the light-heartedness of what might have been an Opéra-Comique production.

Tutto sommato, a most enjoyable and stimulating evening which should be repeated elsewhere.