



Alahor in Seville

This was a very prestigious production; lavish, well-rehearsed, well-sung, and the music probably the most consistently interesting of the Maestro's "unearthed" works to come to light over the last twenty years. Donizettians should not fail to catch this *Alahor* in Palermo in the summer of 1999 or in Barcelona in 2000. My sincerest congratulations to all concerned at the Teatro de la Maestranza for this wonderful revival.

Falling, as it did, at the same time as the Wexford Festival, familiar Donizettians were significantly thin on the ground throughout the first three performances. Four performances were given on alternate nights and I attended the second and third. Composed in 1825 shortly after *Emilia di Liverpool*, this opera seria in two acts was first performed at the Teatro Carolino in Palermo in January 1826 during what William Ashbrook describes as Donizetti's "uncomfortable year" there. The librettist still described as "M.A" it was given again in Naples that summer as a vehicle for Méric-Lalande and Lablache. Apparently it had little success in either city, and after another Palermo staging in 1830 the music was partially recycled.

THE CAST

ALAHOR	Simone Alaimo	(bass-baritone)
ZOBEIDA	Patrizia Pace	(soprano)
MULEY HASSEM	Vivica Genaux	(mezzo-soprano)
ALAMAR	Juan Diego Flórez	(tenor)
SULIMA	Soraya Chaves	(mezzo-soprano)
ISMAELE	Ruben Amoretti	(tenor)

The time is the Moorish occupation of Southern Spain. The late Chief of the Zegri faction, Aly, has killed all of the rival Abencerrages except for Alahor and his sister Zobeida, he has fled into exile but Zobeida has remained because she is in love with Muley Hassem who has succeeded Aly as leader of the Zegri. The honourable peace Muley Hassem has negotiated with the Spanish seems a

betrayal to the fiercely patriotic Zegri and Alamar plans to overthrow him. Meanwhile Alahor returns in disguise to avenge the death of his father, he joins Alamar's conspiracy and attempts to kill Muley Hassem. Zobeida recognises her brother, learns of the plot, and warns her lover. The plot fails but Muley Hassem pardons Alahor. Alamar tries again to assassinate Muley Hassem but this time is prevented by Alahor. Alamar is escorted off in shackles and Alahor, Zobeida and Hassem live happily ever after. And why not...

The score first came to light in the form of a copyist's manuscript at Boston in the USA. An autograph may not have survived despite many reported sightings, a situation furnishing both joy and despair of a thoroughly operatic nature. The production's first backdrop was a view of the Alhambra Palace which seemed to be based on an 1832 painting by David Roberts which was reproduced in the programme. Subsequent settings all appeared to represent parts of the Alhambra interior; scene changes were so smoothly accomplished one hardly noticed them happening. There was a judicious use of patterned "see-through" curtains giving the idea of looking into the harem. Costumes were lavish and totally in period (**Deo gratias! London Coliseum are you paying attention?**) and the principals seemed to have inexhaustible wardrobes. The chorus numbered eighty, and I must mention especially the well-chosen harem maidens - no geriatrics or couch-potatoes here! Crowd scenes were well-handled, including a live horse which munched supper while the mezzo was singing astride him. Simone Alaimo was in very fine voice. The ubiquitous Juan Diego had all the top notes - I had just seen him in *Semiramide* in Turin and see that he has three further roles lined-up at La Scala; one hopes that at twenty-five he will not sing himself out and perhaps someone will curb his old-fashioned operatic gestures. Vivica Genaux in the "trouser role" hails from Atlanta though her family originated in Basel. She is advantageously tall and although the voice is not enormous, modern acoustics were on her side, the sound pleasing and the technique good. Patrizia Pace was suitably diminutive in contrast and her voice smallish, but she *paced herself* well. I thought she sounded tired on the third night but it is quite a "big sing" and the performances were too close for comfort. The smaller roles were most competently sung. The brand-new *Treato de la Maestranza* is helpful to audiences and singers alike; acoustic, sightlines, all are excellent.

The orchestra was in good form and the *sinfonia* included some impressive piccolo trills and some Rossini-reminiscent violin passages. The four protagonists all led-in with lengthy solos, followed by a feast of duets for all combinations of voice. The only uncharacteristic sounds came in the final soprano aria - two swooping whoops which sounded pretty ugly; one could imagine only Dame Joan Sutherland being able to get away with them, indeed the redoubtable Dame came frequently to mind throughout this wonderful evening.

Marigold Mann


