



Alahor in Seville (II)

Donizetti's early work from 1826 had its première at the Teatro Carolino in Palermo to no great success, to be followed by other productions in Naples and again in Palermo in 1830

and which demanded great florid singing from the protagonists. Then it fell into oblivion, superceded by Donizetti's structurally and musically more stringent operas. Giuseppe Cuccia - the energetic artistic director of the Teatro de la Maestranza - chose this opera for his season's opening, Seville being not too far from Granada and 1998 being the year for various anniversaries in Spanish history. The absolutely gorgeous, sumptuous, production by José Luis Castro, in Ezio Frigero's and Franca Squarciapino's stunning sets, costumes and gold lamé hangings, dutifully evoked the spirit and the architecture of a Moorish Granada with its arches and splendours, even if the *mise-en-scène* left a lot to be desired: standing-down-centre and arm-waving was the general department of chorus and soloists alike, Pizzi's notoriously monolithic positioning of characters seemed like a frenzied action-drama against all this immobility!

The music is difficult to assess, definitely early-Donizetti and definitely post-Rossini, in fact very-much Rossini and with quotations from *Don Pasquale* (by the same librettist - if 'M.A.' does in fact indicate the same librettist), *Elisir* and *Emilia* effectively mixed together. The long (!!!) recitatives in the first act lead to standard entrance arias and to the *concertati*, as to be expected. But there are many delights, such as the mezzo's and Zobeida's *cavatine*, the *sinfonia*, and, of course, the final *rondò*. The rest seemed a little perfunctory - at least here in Seville. And then there are difficulties with the material, with some changes. The action is easily recounted; Good Old Alahor bears a grudge against Hassem who is in love with his sister - because he is made to believe (by the treacherous Alamar) that the latter has killed his father, which is of course not so. That takes up all of Act I. Act II brings the usual comings-and-goings and misunderstandings, which are cleared-up - after many tears by Zobeida - when Hassem's magnanimity and Alamar's villainy are exposed and Alahor can give up his hatred of the mezzo. He kills Alamar and there is general rejoicing which culminates in the soprano's wonderful (and strangely well-known) *Donna del lago* style *rondò finale*.

Seville had engaged the best available singers possible but then that really does not say much these days. Simone Alaimo, it is true, sang with an abundance of (a little-too-general) style and bass-baritone voice, lending a rare stage-presence to the slightly incredible title role. He might have done better with a little more characterisation. That also goes for the very flexible Vivica Genaux in the trouser-role of Hassem, in which she looked really gorgeous and which she tackled with considerable aplomb. But again, hers was a rather general approach and the voice, to my mind, too soft and too feminine (very much in the von Stade mould) to make such a heroic character credible. It was Juan Diego Flórez in the part of the treacherous Alamar who really showed the vicinity of Rossini to Donizetti in this piece, his voice has matured incredibly over the last months with a nice baritone register and an effortless top, as well as with recitatives which mean something. A great bit of singing and a most promising talent in progress. The second tenor - Ismaele - was successfully taken by Ruben Amoretti with a very pleasing voice as was the small part of the *confidente* Sulima by the attractive Soraya Chaves - a young Argentinian mezzo on the way up. And the lady in question? Zobeida? Patrizia Pace has neither the timbre, nor the vocal means, for this taxing, serious bel canto heroine. Her small unpleasant and brittle voice suggests an ambitious *soubrette* making a stab at some goods hanging too high. A Susanna *travestita*. Most notes above the stave and above *mezzo-forte* became shrill, ill-placed and off-pitch (which, for a basically high-lying *soubrette*-voice is amazing!) She nearly ruined the show...sorry...this was not pleasant and one can only hope that the Teatro Massimo will decide against her when this show is revived in Palermo. All in all, a most interesting evening.

Stefan Bauer

(p3 One of the stupendous scenes from the Seville staging of *Alahor in Granata*: Muley Hasssem (Vivica Genaux replete with turban and whiskers) surveys the tearful Zobeida (Patrizia Pace), while her brother Alahor (Simone Alaimo) looks on in fulsome satisfaction)