

DONIZETTI BY THE BAY

The San Francisco Opera mounted two of Donizetti's works in its 1999-2000 season, and on the evenings of Oct. 12-13 one could enjoy a Donizetti mini-festival with the opening of *Lucia* on the first night and the penultimate performance of a new production of *La Favorite* on the 13th. Both productions brought some surprises, many pleasures and some disappointment. The biggest surprise in *Lucia* was the substitution of Tracy Dahl for the indisposed Ruth Ann Swenson in the title role. Dahl, who flew in the day before to begin rehearsals for her own *Lucias* later in the season, had exactly one stage rehearsal to prepare for her debut in a dramatically complex production. The diminutive Ms. Dahl succeeded admirably and moved around the stage as if she had been rehearsing for weeks. Vocally, she possesses accurate and seemingly effortless coloratura, even if her top notes do not suggest a great deal of support. She graciously acknowledged the prompter during curtain calls, but if the prompter had been needed, it was scarcely apparent. One has the feeling that in an earlier era Ms. Dahl would have performed most frequently in operetta (she has sung Adele in San Francisco and New York), but in today's world she counts Norina and Marie among her roles, along with Lucia.

Her Edgardo was the excellent Mexican tenor Ramon Vargas, who made us remember that *Lucia* is as much the tragedy of the tenor as it is of the soprano. Vargas can deliver phrases which are poignantly sweet in the manner of Alfredo Kraus (to whose memory the opening performance of *Favorite* was dedicated), and indeed his "Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali" was a model for a tenor "della bella morte." Anthony Michaels-Moore, who will be well known to British opera-goers, was an effective, snarling, and rather violent Enrico. One wondered whether madness ran in the family and rather than being confined to Lucia. Reinhard Hagen did little with Raimondo and the chorus seemed underpowered and static.

Richard Bonyngue conducted what must be his preferred performing edition these days. (He conducted an identical edition in Los Angeles with Sumi Jo last June.) The Wolfscrag scene and Bidebent's aria are in, but generally repeats of cabalettas are out. The bad old days of cuts are not entirely behind us. Incidentally, the Metropolitan Opera is also performing *Lucia* this season, and is publicizing it as the "original 1835 Naples version for the first time at the Met." Presumably this means an unmutated performance, shed of hoary traditions and time-dishonored cuts, which is certainly welcome progress, however late it is in coming to America's most famous opera house.

The curtain in San Francisco rose during the Prelude to reveal a castle courtyard as if it were lying on its side, or as if the audience were lying on its collective back looking up at the battlements of the enclosed courtyard. With Lucia silently silhouetted by moonlight, it makes for a momentary *frisson*, but the unit set remains throughout the opera, and rapidly loses its *raison d'être*. All things considered, however, the production was successful and often compelling, and Ms. Dahl's debut was well received.

This season's new production of *La Favorite*, in French and in the critical edition of Rebecca Harris-Warrick, is another cause to celebrate. It is difficult to imagine ever returning to the dramaturgically much weaker *La Favorita*, or the much different sonorities of Italian poetry when Donizetti himself did not adapt his music to the Italian version, which was much changed from the French original by the censors. San Francisco also generously included the ballet, which was choreographed as if it were a story ballet about a shepherdess, a mozarabic king, a seductress-queen, and a soldier instead of mere divertissements. Perhaps it was all meant to echo the opera's plot, but no matter, it gave the audience the opportunity to hear Donizetti's beautiful ballet music, surely some of the very best French grand opera dance music ever written.

The production grappled with the problem of how to solve the lavish scenic requirements of French grand opera on a limited budget, lacking in government subventions. The solution by set designer John Coyne was the same used for another French grand opera in San Francisco—Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* in 1992 (repeated in '97), not to mention *Adelia* in Bergamo and Genoa. Long, narrow, mirrored surfaces surrounded a raised platform playing area and these surfaces served as projection screens for slides of the Monastery of Compostella and the "jardins de Alcazar" as well as reflective surfaces for processional monks and court ladies. A staircase here and a throne or cross there provided the sole elements of three dimensional stage furnishing. This made for a fairly static and simply blocked staging (by Colin Graham, familiar to English opera-goers at the ENO and Aldeburgh). Sonia Ganassi, making her San Francisco debut, sang well, and her smallish voice generally filled the large War Memorial Opera House. Her phrasing was particularly lovely in "O mon Fernand" and in the heartbreaking final duet. She is not afraid of pianissimi, but one looks in vain for deep descents into the lower mezzo range that someone like Giulietta Simionato or even Gloria Scalchi brought and bring to the role with such effect. Marcello Giordani was the vocally effective Fernand. In bearing, looks, and vocal production he is reminiscent of Franco Corelli in the 1960's, though he reminds me too of Flaubert's description in *Madame Bovary* of the tenor "Lagardy" in the performance of *Lucie de Lammermoor* which Emma and Charles Bovary attend in Rouen: "there was a touch of the hairdresser about him, and a touch of the toreador." Nonetheless, Giordani (the Gennaro who replaced the—fortunately for him—ill Giuseppe Sabbatini in the disastrous La Scala prima of *Lucrezia Borgia* with Renee Fleming in 1998) can manage the "do del petto" in the best tradition of Gilbert Duprez, the first Fernand and the initiator of high notes sung from the chest. Giordani is not a subtle singer, but perhaps his is the kind of voice Donizetti had in mind for Fernand.

Kevin J. Langan made a reasonably effective Balthazar, but Vladimir Chernov, with his high, pinched, nasal baritone, his approximation of many of the score's notes and his tendency to slide into the proper key was a disastrously bad Alphonse. And whatever language he was singing it is not among those currently in use on this planet. The conductor, Marco Armiliato, produced a full, rounded sound from the orchestra and the chorus, although he countenanced cuts of repeats in the cabalettas of virtually every aria.

I have seen *La Favorita* and *La Favorite* in a number of productions over the years (notably, Chicago, c. 1965 with Simionato; San Francisco in 1973 with Pavarotti, Bruson, and the hopelessly overmatched Gwendolyn Killebrew; Portland, Oregon, in French using the old San Francisco production in 1995; Rome in 1997 in the critical edition; and San Francisco in 1999). In none of these productions did every element coalesce to make the compelling drama which Donizetti's music so clearly demands and which kept this opera running every season from its 1840 premiere to 1894 at the Paris Opera. Someday perhaps it will all be there. In the meantime we can be thankful that the original version of this wonderful work is now the one being performed and we await the singers and the stage director and the conductor who can show us why Berlioz was at once impressed and filled with jealousy ('Donizetti treats us as a conquered nation'), and why Donizetti truly is, in Andrew Porter's words, "a Shakespeare of the lyric stage."

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The **Annual General Meeting** of the Donizetti Society duly took place under the hospitable roof of the **Gulldhall School of Music and Drama** (three of whose very gifted students gave an admirable recital of Donizettian gems in its wake). We shall be sponsoring a performance at this most prominent of operatic schools of *Il giovedì grasso* in the months to come. It was attended by the usual core of loyal members (enthusiasm in Britain is usually marked by staying away - though *Il giovedì grasso* will probably succeed in overcoming the difficulties of finding a way to Silk Street in the near future), with the happy addition of a few others. The Secretary organised a visit to Drury Lane Theatre as an appetiser which proved fascinating. The massive hydraulic machinery used to raise the stage came originally from the Vienna Opera so we all looked at it appreciatively evoking *Linda*, and *Rohan* and *Dom Sebastian* with the maestro baton-in-hand above and almost within earshot. The Chairman's Report outlined our current plans and prospects as a millennium entity. We await Journal 7 which is imminent. We shall be online, there will be a London Donizettian website to back-up those already in situ "*You shall have Italy, Mario, but leave the universo to me*" Many musical projects are mooted, most of them still under cover, at least one of them sensational. We hope there will be a flood of Bellini to mark his Bicentenary (2001) backed up by a positive torrent of music by his fellow maestri. And we wish everyone everywhere another thousand years of operatic pleasure