

Little-known Meyerbeer and Bizet at Dordrecht, September 1999

The Dordrecht Belcanto Festival, which last year welcomed the Society for its AGM and gave us Il Borgomastro di Saardam, put on three performances in September of Meyerbeer's "Gli Amori di Teolinda" and Bizet's "Don Procopio", fortunately with ideal late summer weather for the outside staging in 't Hof. Meyerbeer's "monodrama" was written in 1816 when the composer (then aged 22) was visiting two old friends in Verona: the clarinetist Heinrich Bärmann and the soprano Helene Harlas, who had connections with the Hoftheater in Munich. The piece was thus a vehicle for the two musicians to demonstrate their virtuosity.

Teolinda is a shepherdess in love with the shepherd Armidoro, who is represented by the sound of the clarinet. Teolinda's despair when her love is not reciprocated is portrayed not only in her challenging arias but also through the clarinet, so anticipating the use of wind instruments in later belcanto operas. Yvette Dekker sang Teolinda with feeling and the clarinet was played superbly by Karin Fierloos.

Bizet composed Don Procopio at the age of 20 during a stay in Rome; he wanted to escape the influence of Gounod and decided to write in the tradition of Cimarosa, to a libretto by Carlo Cambiaggio. In a letter of January 1859 he wrote: "Sur des paroles Italiennes il faut faire Italien; je n'ai pas cherché à me dérober à cette influence". In spite of the sparkling music and appealing humour - and the composer's subsequent efforts in Paris - times had changed by the 1860s and the opera was never performed in Bizet's lifetime: it had its premiere in Monte Carlo in 1906.

The plot has echoes of Don Pasquale and is the story of an old man (Procopio) planning to marry the much younger niece (Bettina) of Don Andronico, who approves of the match in spite of some opposition from Donna Eufemia. Bettina however is in love with the young Odoardo who, with the help of her brother Ernesto, eventually persuades Procopio that Bettina is only interested in the old man's money. The success of their efforts of course results in Procopio abandoning his project and leaving the way clear for Odoardo to marry Bettina, finally with Andronico's blessing.

Although the plot is simple, Bizet's music is full of delightful melodies, charming duets and lively ensembles. Both operas were under the inspired direction of Massimo de Bernart, well-known for his part in belcanto revivals such as Caterina di Guisa. Most of the singers were attending the Dordrecht summer school, which arranged master classes with de Bernart, William Matteuzzi, Michael Aspinall and other maestri as well as giving several excellent concerts during the Festival. Of particular note for

their acting and singing ability, I felt, were Maria Luigia Borsi as Bettina, Alessandro Codiluppi as Odoardo, Donato di Gioia as Ernesto and the young Dane, Kristine Becker Lund (who was also due to sing Teolinda on another evening) as Eufemia.

The Dordrecht Belcanto Festival was again a delight, thanks in great part to the enthusiasm of the musicians, singers and their teachers.

One can only hope that it survives, especially if plans - still tentative and dependent on support from sponsors and friends - go ahead to stage a Donizetti double bill next year .

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