

Double - and other - trouble

The double-bill presented by the Guildhall School of Music, together with the forthcoming double-bill at Bergamo, invites all sorts of questions. And not just because the pairing of Donizetti with Puccini is at issue; it is simply that most of us thought the marriage of *Cav and Pag* had ended in divorce!

Is it really such a good idea to try to match two short operas and hope to do justice to *both* ?

At the Guildhall with the highest vocal and performing standards for young voices Donizetti's *Il giovedì grasso* and Puccini's *Gianni Schicci*, performed in this order, made novel items in an op-up menu - tasty companions in a musico/gastronomic recipe that used to be so familiar. Both were enjoyable, both were fully consumable fare - delectable operas - especially when so well-presented, but this does not mean - as a logical corollary - that eating the soup and the sweet together is such a good idea. The flavour of both is compromised and indigestion is almost inevitable. Donizetti's early farsa *Il giovedì grasso* (1829) [the soup] was his only truly frivolous score at a time when his mind was in overdrive towards the hyper-romantic tragedy which was to be his greatest achievement, *Anna Bolena* the following year pays full tribute to this; Puccini's late Trittico (1918) [the sweet] of which his *Gianni Schicci* was the only really successful component, represents a not-quite valedictory summation of a mature series of quite unforgettable scores. The first opera to be heard on this 9 March at the Guildhall was written almost at the very beginning of the nineteenth-century apogee of Italian *opera buffa* - the second opera was composed at its very last gasp in the following century. Attempts were made to link them thematically by invoking *commedia dell'arte* but this was just a condiment I fear.

The impact of Puccini's opera upon *Il giovedì grasso* - sung in English and called "Carnival Thursday" - was debilitating, what came over mostly was charm and a certain brittleness. The well-worn outline of a Rossinian farsa was pitted against the overripe decibels of truly awesome Puccinian accomplishment. In this opera the latter composer had all the advantages of hindsight; behind his fine score were long decades of development including the Donizettian contribution to the flowering of Italian comedy: *Il giovedì grasso* was written even before the Bergamasc's own thematic evolution - into sentiment (*L'elisir d'amore*), or irony (*I pazzi per progetto*), or satire (*La romanesca*) - not to mention the conflation of all three (*Don Pasquale*). And after these important milestones came, for example, the Ricci brother's savage *Crispino e la comare* (1850), a true precursor of *Gianni Schicci*, as well as Antonio Cagnoni's *Don Bucefalo* (1847), Nicola De Giosa's *Don Checco* (1850) and *Napoli di carnevale* (1876), just to mention a few now neglected masterpieces. [Simply because operas are forgotten does not mean that they failed to add anything to the tradition they inherited - there are long lists of comic operas (many of which kept pace with Puccini's own operatic upbringing and which he must have known well) that could throw a light upon his achievement so late in life.]

I personally - if a double-bill was to be proposed between Donizetti and Puccini - would have opted for the pairing of *I pazzi per progetto* and *Gianni Schicci* as is proposed for a staging in the Piazza Cittadella in Bergamo Alta this coming August. Even as early as 1830 *I pazzi per progetto* (composed for the S. Carlo) was a more robust score, had a more challenging plot and offered greater opportunities for provocative characterisation to break out. *Il giovedì grasso* is pleasing, has several attractive roles, moves swiftly and deftly, but is not particularly memorable either for its music or its plot.

This said, the Guildhall put on a good case for it. As always rehearsal standards were

beyond praise, the action was unflawed, boasting so many burgeoning voices of real class - and chosen with a judgement beyond rival on our approximate London scene, the costuming was superlative and the scenic grasp perfectly convincing. There were good voices from all over. In this opera of Donizetti Nina is the prima donna: Sophie Karthäuser had style and poise as well as the top notes, the Camilla of Siân Wigley put on a splendid vignette of another Nina - that of *La pazza per amore* with hilarious results (just shows what you can do with a step ladder!); Sigismondo on this evening was Christian Immler who followed her up the ladder with impeccable enunciation and finesse. All the roles were so well taken (but I must put in a special word for Brandon Velarde whose deportment as Cola was unbeatable - though Sigismondo had a good shot at it - literally). Not one twist of the plot was left to chance. The orchestra and direction were excellent.

My only real complaint was the (very amusing) English translation. I respect the notion that comedy is only funny if you can understand the words, but it isn't true. No one found it hard to laugh at *Gianni Schicci* which was sung in Italian. Audiences at the Guildhall are capable of reading a programme note in advance, a literate audience in fact, which cannot be counted upon at the Coliseum.

But lost in the English translation is the stylised suavity of Gilardoni's Italian, elegant and full of inuendo. I know that even local audiences must have resisted the Neapolitan dialect of the very first production, but this was never excessive and in any case was soon amended for audiences outside that city, Clive Timms did well as translator as well as conductor but the actual accents that Donizetti put into the voices of his characters were lost, some of the meaning was drained away, and with it some of the substance this opera needed to make a mark.

Alexander Weatherson



***Maria di Rohan* at Aachen**

Maestro Elio Boncompagni has himself prepared an important edition of this most dramatic of operas for staging in the intrepid Theater Aachen, the version that was heard in the Vienna Hoftheater on 5 June 1843. This naturally excludes the Parisian additions and ends with the searing *terzetto*. The cast boasts Kathleen Cassello as Maria, Dario Schmunck as Riccardo and Vladimir Stojanov as the Duca di Chevreuse; designed by Karin Fritz, staged by Bruno Berger and conducted by the GMD of the Theater Aachen:

ELIO BONCOMPAGNI June performances:

01 (19.30), 06 (19.30), 10 (19.30), 14 (20.00), 18 (15.00),
23 (20.00), 25 (19.30), 28 (19.30), 30 (19.30)

Tickets: 00 49 241 4784244