

Un duello *con* Richelieu

(maybe just “con”?)

Attempting to find *one single* word to define *Maria di Rohan* is an exercise in masochism. Should it be purely descriptive? In which case, after a study of the music and text one could alight on ‘*cupo*,’ or *nocturnal* - but both these might prove too banal. From time to time the choice leans towards *hermetic* or *nematic* but the more fusion *prophetic* - though not chic - may well be far more justifiable in that this is the opera that most truly heralds his own tragic *dénouement*. After the recent spate of editions of this, Donizetti’s last and most convincing tragic melodrama however - once believed to be inviolate - one of those masterworks intact and unchangeable, perfect, complete from birth, but revealed to be beset by innumerable editorial conundrums both *genetic* and *mimetic* - it is probably now best summed-up as *disconcerting*...

This, the staging at Aachen recently, readily confirmed. It is as well that I did not select that schoolboy standby *claustrophobic*, as the setting - focussed upon an undulating sort-of carousel packed with a vast mixed-chorus of grimacing courtiers (one brandishing her bare bosom and all got-up in costumes some fifty years or so too late for the plot) was not exactly notable for its *obscurity*, for its *reticence*, indeed, not really *intimate* at all (though it depends what you mean by *intimate*). This chorus - I don’t think anyone can claim that the chorus in *Donizetti’s Maria di Rohan* plays a vital part of the argument - by default I suppose, here in Aachen, was given a starring role (rather like one of those national football teams that now prove such a heartener for incompetent governments) upstaging grotesquely the anguished trio at the heart of the plot. That Maria was obliged to sing her cabaletta ‘Ben fu il giorno avventurato’ (do you think it possible that the producer intended to illustrate her words?) was constrained to sing standing on tip-toe *behind* this mob - hoping to be seen and perhaps heard, gave truly what can only be described as a new slant to the scene. This interesting coro peeked-a-boo from the wings, even dangling their dreadlocks at the side of the stalls for some melodious moments. What a wheeze! And then, it is as well I did not choose *concentrated*. Every comprimario was kept busy acting-away like mad. This meant that Gondi (genitally modified back into a male) could swish-away at his sword like an (unfortunately vocal) Rambo, that De Fiesque and Suze could display their ardour (it is true that they have more to sing than the more usual ‘La cena è pronto’ but scarcely to the extent of rivalling Richard Burton), and that even poor Aubry (those of us with a tender heart always wonder what happened to Aubry after the demise of his employer - yet another comprimario on the dole?) had his tender moment. To cap it all, it is as well I did not choose *historical*. The sinister Cardinal - whose defunct nephew was permitted to appear in a prologue - himself, here at Aachen, was also summoned to bestow his burning glance on the protagonists from time to time, trailing his Cappa Magna from the prompt side. The most ridiculous wheeze of all (should I have chosen *ridiculous*?) his *éminence* was usurped by the bewigged figuranti who tried to envelop Chalais in Richelieu’s long red cape to show that the King had selected him to take the Cardinal’s position of Prime Minister! How silly can you get? (And in view of the tragic fact that the real-life Chalais was beheaded by Richelieu, how desperately frivolous).

I could have chosen *compact*, or *concise*. I could have chosen *moving*. Vocally, I could have chosen *overwhelming*. All these words describe *Maria di Rohan* as composed by Donizetti. For Aachen, Maestro Boncompagni elected to use the original Viennese version but with some conjectural commissions and omissions. This meant that - of

(opposite) Vehement scenes from the Aachener *Maria di Rohan* : Kathleen Cassello in the title role with Dario Schmunck (Chalais) above; with Vladimir Stoyanov (Chevreuse) below.

Courtesy Theater Aachen, photos Ludwig Koefler

course - the changes made for Paris did not feature in his addition, but also that some of the novelties so recently revealed at Venice did not appear either: no cabaletta for Chalais in Act II; and no sign of Dr Zoppelli's newly excavated finale ultimo for soprano. That the opera works in this simpler form is not really in doubt. If I had to choose one word nonetheless, to describe the score of the Aachen *Maria di Rohan* it would have to be *rudimentary*; penny plain, without any extras. Maestro Boncompagni is convinced that the opera we heard in this production is the opera as *actually* performed at the prima. Maybe he is right, I don't see how we can ever be certain. Nonetheless - though I agree that Grisi's improvised cabaletta in Act III after her *preghiera* in the Paris edition dilutes with its fioriture the sustained mood of the original composition, to omit the sad cabaletta 'E tu, se cado esanime' with the same melody in Act II, as sung by Chalais, at once '*cupò*' and dramatically appropriate (it precipitates the writing of the fatal letter which falls into Chevreuse's hands with such dire results, as well as being really memorable) seems to me to be going a bit too far towards austerity - as if some essential grace note has been excluded. And then too, this Aachen version could be described as having been orchestrally (comparatively only, of course) blurred: we know well the mastery of the Maestro in respect of this music, the Nightingale recording alone (not to mention several other performances including that at Sychrov Castle) have fully demonstrated the subtlety of his reading, but the instrumental transparency of the Venice version did not quite emerge on this occasion - maybe as a result of the acoustic, or my seat, or the heat that evening (performance of 6 June 2000). It was a good reading, a bit loud - more, however - like the performance of the trio of artists at the heart of the plot - more concerned with semaphored emotion than with niceties of sound.

The one word to describe the Aachen soloists would certainly be *honorable*. And more than this really as the baritone was quite outstanding, the tenor and soprano both excellent, and all three well within their roles. One should register their names here: Chevreuse was sung by a splendidly resonant and lithe Vladimir Stoyanov, Chalais by an effective Dario Schmunck, and Maria by a very generous Kathleen Cassello.

In respect of the opera I saw, one should not mention the word *suspense*, or even the word *timing*, as neither, in my view, seemed to be in evidence at all, clocks struck - but in vain. It was a staging, a production of a familiar genre typical of a generation of designers brought-up on recordings, who *hear* opera, paradoxically, but do not *see* it, a staging by people who are alien or even indifferent to the visual intentions which went hand-in-hand with the composer's music, who do not know them, do not attempt to approach them, and who believe them - from their position of safety behind the micro - weak and unconvincing. All we can do, we in the audience, like them, is to try to experience these good voices *in vacuo*, as if it is simply a recording we are witnessing. This generation throws everything and anything on the stage as a kind of smokescreen for their incomprehension, pretending that 1843 is *démodé*, that the opera - for our digestion - needs a sugar-coating. Is it a good idea to promote an opera - especially an opera that has been insensately neglected - in what amounts to a fudge? That the human dimension of the plot of this *Maria di Rohan* has been understood is clear from Act III, even if it looked like (and just occasionally sounded) more like the Deep South than Donizetti. We are asked to believe that a romantic melodrama by the Bergamasc, composed a century and a half ago, with clearly defined characters, situations, circumstances, with lives and loves that belonged to real people, however idealised, has no *specificity*! All you need is to throw in a Cardinal. One very rude word is appropriate here....

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