



Emilia di Liverpool

Liverpool, 26 and 27 July, 2000

Una Voce, a Liverpool amateur operatic society started in 1996, has just given what must be the first staged performance anywhere since 1871 of Donizetti's *Emilia di Liverpool*, not to be confused with the later *L'Eremitaggio di Liverpool* – although both have been heard in concert versions in Liverpool within the last fifty years. To be accurate, even this was not quite a complete performance, because all the *recitativo secco* was cut and the musical numbers were sung in the context of a playlet in English, using as characters Checcherini (the librettist), Donizetti, and his landlady. Its object was to explain the action of the opera to an English-speaking audience, whilst the musical numbers were sung in the original Italian.

The whole thing was a brave undertaking, done on a shoe-string budget, and I salute the energy and dedication of all those who took part. There were four performances alternating two casts (varying three of the singers), and I heard those on 26 and 27 July. The latter of these was the preferable one, and it is it that I review here.

Dealing first with the staging and production, the scenery was simple but adequate, and the production (by Ian Dunning) was straightforward, although the transitions between the musical interludes and the dramatic ones could have been slicker. The playlet device was a good one, and the anonymous author managed to lace it with some wry wit. Sadly, however, its potential was imperfectly realized (on both nights) because the actors fluffed several of their lines and relied too often on audible prompting. Is it too much to expect that a would-be serious artistic venture should be able to find three actors able to learn their lines?

Vocally, the company's resources were limited and extremely stretched. The chorus, supplemented by about a dozen children, did well, their original male-voice music having been tactfully rearranged for the forces available. Samantha Wright as Emilia had a pleasant and supple soprano voice, sang elegantly, but occasionally lacked audibility. As Federico, her eventual husband, Michael Boe's light tenor was equal to all but the most elaborate decorations given him by Donizetti, and usually made a pleasing impression. Walid Jouri, common to both casts, looked the part of the buffo Don Romualdo, but his rather monotone and wooden delivery was occasionally marred by intonation difficulties. Ian Dunning, a Claudio who was also common to both casts, was the least satisfactory of the principals. Frankly, he had nowhere near the vocal technique required for this role – perhaps the most arduous of the opera – and an (unannounced) indisposition on 26

July made him painful to listen to. The smaller parts were all adequately taken for an amateur performance and, conducted with discretion by Carl Penlington-Williams, the orchestra of eighteen, though thin of string tone and occasionally rather strident at *tutti*, underpinned the performance fairly well. Indeed, Donizetti was perhaps on this occasion better able to communicate with the audience for much of the time by instrumental rather than vocal means.

It is always difficult to review amateur performances of opera, deciding what allowances to make for what are inevitably less than professional musical standards. This production, I have to say, with most of the singers having had to learn to sing their parts phonetically in Italian, was probably over-ambitious. Belcanto opera is difficult enough for professional singers to perform adequately now-a-days, and well beyond the competence of most amateur groups. Seen from this angle, Una Voce at least managed to present a recognizable sketch of Donizetti's opera and, let us hope, may have awakened an interest in the composer in some of the audience. In that sense the company went some of the way to meet the challenge it set itself.

However, this modest achievement has to be kept in perspective. From the programme note, it appears that one of the motives for this project was 'to perform in support of Liverpool's bid for European City of Culture 2008'. To believe that the standards of this performance could be relevant to such a bid would reveal an extremely provincial *folie de grandeur*. In the context of general European culture, where tiny Italian towns a fraction the size of Liverpool frequently mount performances of obscure operas that CD companies are content to record and issue, Liverpool's *Emilia* would, I fear, be laughed and booed off the stage. In such a context this was a performance to set Liverpool's claims back by thirty years, provoking the thought that if Liverpool thinks it deserves to be a European City of Culture why did Liverpool spurn this venture instead of seizing on it as a chance for a wonderful self-promotional coup? Where were all its culture vultures on this occasion? On both the nights I attended not even all the seats in the front row of the dress circle could be filled, let alone the hundreds behind. If Liverpool has such pretensions to cultural recognition, might not civic pride have found some financial backing to help support this venture and enable it, perhaps by hiring some professional singers, to achieve professional standards more akin to the image the city seeks to project? No, apparently not. According to the programme, 'we did not receive funding for such', although a subsidy was doubtless sought. Shame on Liverpool.

Alex Liddell