

IL giuramento

Now let's get this straight: the tenor loves the mezzo; the soprano is in debt to the mezzo (hence the pledge of the title); the mezzo is unhappily married to the baritone but loves the tenor, as does also the soprano (what's new?); the baritone fancies the soprano, so is contemplating murdering his mezzo wife. Other cast members are a loyal maid (to the mezzo) and a conniving little man (for the use of all). The denouement springs from the mezzo taking a death-simulating drug; during its effect the tenor in a fury kills the soprano thinking that she has killed the mezzo, only to discover that the mezzo lives. At this point I become confused because I consider that to be a happy ending and yet the words and the music portray a tragic conclusion. The whole thing happens on Sicily, in Syracuse, rather than the Padua of the source play (by Hugo, no less), but that hardly justifies the confusion of the plot although it may explain the rich diet of character confrontations.

I have summarised the plot because, although I have known the music of *Giuramento* for some time I have never seen it staged before the Wexford performance on 20th October, and it was only when I saw it staged that I realised how artificial the story-line is. Perhaps it shouldn't trouble me-there are many operas with daft stories-but the contrast between the powerful music and predictable characterisation is in danger of turning a pleasant listening experience into a rather ludicrous theatrical one. Only the musical transformation of the pivotal confrontations into believable emotional catharses can redeem the experience from bathos. Luckily *Mercadante* rises above the mundane and produces some wonderful passages in a score that often presages early Verdi as well as harking back to *Bel canto*.

For a post-Verdian listener the revelations come early in the opera because the short opening chorus has some of the tang of the Macbeth witches, even if the festivities being depicted are of a less hellish nature. The following tenor cavatina (addressed to his 'bella amorata incognita') is the first of several pieces enriched with concertante instrumental accompaniment-in this case a choir of cellos-the mezzo gains a flute and the soprano a quite indulgent cor anglais. The main drama evolves mainly through ensembles thus easing the pressure on the tenor who in the first performance omitted both his solos and even after that indulgence took until the second week to hit his vocal stride.

The militaristic tone of the opening scene (reinforced by the appearance of the soprano, Elaisa, in confusingly masculine attire) gives way to a conventional boudoir scene for the unhappy mezzo wife of the baritone. But in this case there seemed to be a main thoroughfare running through Bianca's boudoir as the number and variety of intruders increased to include the conniving little man dragging with him the tenor followed separately by the soprano. She discovered that her pledge had been made to the mezzo before almost the whole cast faced up to the husband who had lost confidence that their presence was all pure coincidence. Capping that the climax of this act was a quite amazing revelation that the room was also in close proximity to a squadron of ships ready to sail to nearby Agrigento to sort out a revolt there. The compromises inherent in staging this opera on such a small stage had here reached their apogee.

Act 2 brings the news that the conniving little man is now dead, thank goodness! The remaining drama resides in the closer confines of rooms and vaults, but even with the benefit of the despatch of the source of most of the confusion harmony is unable to reign. Act 2 is crowned by glorious soprano/mezzo duets, and the Romeo and Juliet-like crypt scene of Act 3 is a tenor/soprano singer-fest. The beautifully touching *Del suo tiranno a piè cadea* of the tenor carries more than a whiff of Anna Bolena's *Al dolce guidami* but perhaps missing the some of the ironic poignancy. The staging used a common trick by marking the death of the soprano by her dragging a white drape down to reveal scarlet-it sounds corny, but it worked in the rush to the final curtain.

Wexford has been criticised for its dependence on the artistic resources of Eastern Europe and the casting of operas with no consideration for the musical style nor the dangers or original language opera without fluency in pronunciation. No such grounds here. In *Serena Farnocchia* an Italian soprano of real class has appeared, and the mezzo Hadar Halevy made a wonderful balancing sound. *Serena Farnocchia's* lunchtime recital confirmed that here is a voice of great beauty-let us hope it develops well.

This is a ladies' opera, so the men have little reward in the end. As I mentioned earlier, Manrico Tedeschi was recovering from bronchitis during the early performances. By the time of the broadcast on 29th October he was in good voice and able to match the sound of the baritone Davide Damiani. The lesser roles were sung well by Alessandra Panaro and Simeon Esper, although the latter could not make much of his conspiratorial activities when there was nowhere on stage to hide.

I'm glad I've seen *Il Giuramento*. It's a wonderful opera to listen to when the two leading ladies are as good as these, and when the tenor is healthy. But convincing staging is clearly a problem. The sky in scene one was lit in orange shading into blue-maybe a sign of rushed last minute decisions-but for me too reminiscent of Oklahoma!

Douglas M Bennett

