

Elvida's horrid destiny reversed (*Elvida in un'orrida spelonca*)

As far as history is concerned this tiny opera was dismissed by the very first words of its preface:

"Questa breve azione drammatica non ha nulla di storico"

in this way making quite sure that its destiny as a serious offering would be null and void. Donizetti's miniscule music-drama, it seems, would be reduced to tearjerking and ecstatic vocal athletics. Put down, intended as a one-night stand, *Elvida* was a one-off affair to please the Neapolitan Court with sets by Pasquale Cannà, a production by Antonio Niccolini (architect of the San Carlo) and a stage blessed by the best that Naples could offer; its composer too was the best that Naples could offer while the cast - for its part - was the best that the world could offer: there was Luigi Lablache as the villainous Amur; Giovan Battista Rubini as the lusty Castilian, Alfonso; Brigida Lorenzani as the virtuous Moor, Zeidar and the supreme French diva Henriette Méric-Lalande as the heroically hard-done Elvida, obliged to combine gothic despair with the trilling of a nightingale. With a storyline and plot chosen to flatter the generous Maria Isabella of Spain Queen of the Two Sicilies whose birthday it was, Donizetti's *Elvida* was given a gala send-off at the S. Carlo on 6 July 1826. And it was repeated three more times subsequently, not bad at all for a *pièce-d'occasion* in fact. No arduous affair, quite untroubling for those on the other side of the footlights, not very long - in one-act only a simple tale of Spanish conquest among warring countryfolk with a happy ending, no one was too much tested by the evening nor astonished by the results (except, perhaps, the singers). That the virtue and constancy of its sorely-tried heroine scarcely accorded with the somewhat blemished reputation of the birthday lady in question embowered among her handsome young officers in the Royal Box bothered no one at all. Everyone was eager to be enchanted by four of the greatest vocalists of the age.

The moment was fascinating. A key-year, 1826 was a sort-of *black hole* in the donizettian firmament, when the deep-humming which astronomers assure us emanates from such a stellar phenomenon seems to have indicated an overdrive in his compositional gearbox, furiously ejecting scores in all directions: two, three, or even four operas a year for the immediate future. *Elvida* may have been an afterthought, a chip from *Alahor in Granata* - the operatic planet immediately adjacent and itself something of a satellite of the influential *L'esule di Granata* of Meyerbeer (12 March 1822 - and soon too to be revived by Opera Rara) one of a similar constellation of plots circling Europe at that time. Donizetti himself had despatched an exploratory probe with *Zoraida di Granata* at much the same time as this last, with the result that for some years the *tinta esotico-spagnolesca* of *Elvida* had a leading role in his search for suitable plots.

Exotic or not the ingredients of the diminutive *Elvida* are horridly familiar; set in Moorish Andalusia with a damsel-in-distress, her heroic-rescuer, and her wicked-persecutor, its trifling novelty consisted simply of the besotted son of the latter torn between filial piety and his/her love for the unfortunate Elvida. There are several mild torments for the soprano; lots of threats (but nothing foreign to stage decorum); the usual dungeon; a big aria for tenor; a wonderful quartet; magnanimity and a happy ending. Then much applause, lavish hospitality, and a ballet (by another composer). End of evening and oblivion. Until, that is,

Opera Rara took a close look at this elusive music, indeed, no one had ever seen a note of *Elvida*, there was no vocal score and the printed libretto was impossible to find (that in 'Tutti i libretti di Donizetti' of Garzanti is flawed). But this is not to say that *Elvida* completely vanished, as far as our composer was concerned, the steadfast heroine's torments were far from over at the end of the run. A cynical testament (the legacy, maybe, of the punitive contract he had signed with the iron-fisted impresario Domenico Barbaja six months before) appears to have fostered a vein of self-disgust on the part of Donizetti with the result that though this charming birthday offering itself shot back into the black hole bits-and-pieces of *Elvida* promptly re-appeared in a scattering of Neapolitan *farse* for the amusement of those in the know, most notably into *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* and sent-up with a relish that may have combined both sardonic humour and a touch of rancour on his part. Maybe the tight-lipped Mademoiselle Méric-Lalande had got on his nerves (as we know she would do again later) and by naughtily giving some of her music to throaty parody in the person of the monstrous Mamm'Agata (who mentions the difficult diva in her/his cavatina) he was putting two fingers up at the famous star soprano with the supremely angelic voice (Bellini's prima donna to be). This of course is sheer fun. A chunk of *Elvida* also ended-up in the over-the-top *La romanziera* as Ashbrook tells us. We shall all enjoy the game of working out what he did with the rest. Barblan seems to have believed that *Elvida* was devoid of dramatic interest; this is not my opinion at all after listening to Opera Rara's recording sessions, the plot may be fustion but Zeidar's music is not at all without conviction and the fabled quartet 'Invan, superba, invano' leading to the *finale ultimo* - full of infectious foot-tapping rhythmic élan and totally compulsive listening of the best kind - bends each singer to an appropriate vocal profile with a musico-dramatic temperament that belies any facile dismissal. In any case there is something about this fleeting score that is perfectly focussed, small but a gem. The composer's subsequent deprecation (he claimed only to value the incredible tenor aria 'Altra nube al sole intorno' and the quartet above) will not divert anyone from responding to the rest of this put-aside score so astonishingly in our hands at last. It will be offered as a single CD that will soon take pride of place on any shelf.

Opera Rara has a cast that confounds any belief that the golden age of singing belongs to an irretrievable past, it is impossible to believe that Henriette Méric-Lalande could in any way have been able to outsing her *concittadina* Annick Massis whose devastating vocal sheen and Olympian command of even the most terrifying stratospheric challenge to musicality will be a milestone in recorded opera, so beautiful and so expressive; Jennifer Larmore angles her dark voice to a fabulous performance that too would eclipse Brigida Lorenzani (another Bellinian star) finding gold as Zeidar where many rivals could have come away empty-handed, here too the accomplishment of the artist utterly fills the potential of the role; Bruce Ford, as Alfonso, this time in a Rubini role and in immaculate voice, makes some of Donizetti's most hair-raising fioriture seem - not easy - this would be denigratory - but logical, innovative, as perfectly-tuned as the superb instrument of his predecessor and with a lyricism that is out of both his and our worlds.

The last major Donizettian manifestation of real note was probably *Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal*, his longest and most ambitious score; here we have *Elvida*, his shortest and least vaunted. Those who believe that "size counts" will be in for the biggest of surprises.

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