

Bravo Gelsenkirchen!

Gelsenkirchen is a town of 295,000 in the Ruhr, whose coal mining past is reflected in its current 22% unemployment rate and the name of its opera house: *das Musiktheater im Revier* or *MiR*.

In pleasurable contrast to this year's unnecessarily violent, arbitrary and ultimately disappointing Wildbad productions of Mayr's *L'amor coniugale* and Rossini's *Ciro in Babilonia*, the *MiR* bravely put on, in repertory, the German première of Donizetti's *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* and a spirited rendering of Offenbach's *Les Brigands* as "Die Banditen".

This was a *Rosmonda* which would inevitably be compared with the London and Belfast versions of 1975 with Yvonne Kenny and Ludmilla Andrew and the (much more challenging) 1994 Opera Rara CD with Renée Fleming, Nelly Miricioiu, Bruce Ford, Alastair Miles, Diana Montague and the Philharmonia Orchestra directed by David Parry. But although the Gelsenkirchen soloists mostly belonged to the regular *MiR* company and must have been virtually unknown to visitors from beyond the Ruhr, all five brought the opera to life in a most creditable fashion, in spite of a few silly gimmicks in the staging. Mark Adler as Enrico is a lighter tenor than Bruce Ford but was convincingly heroic, while Anke Sieloff's Leonora had an incredible range of vocal and acting ability. Claudia Braun as *Rosmonda* is also a gifted actress and was able to sing movingly in the tragic scenes although there was a little straining in her top notes.

Nicolas Karmolsky's bass voice was strong and well up to the standard of Alastair Miles wife Anna Agathonos, "*punished by an impossible wig*" as one German comentator wrote, though not quite on a par with Diana Montague, had resonant mezzo tones, if a little stiff in the top register.

The cast got excellent support from the Neue Philharmonic Orchestra of Westphalia under the confident direction of Samuel Bächli. Altogether, a wonderful evening, worthy of the maestro.

Offenbach's opéra bouffe *Les Brigands* had its première at the Paris Théâtre des Variétés in 1869 shortly before the collapse of the Second Empire. The piece shows a society in decline and the preposterous plot about a robber band is really an excuse to parody the corrupt ruling class of the period. The robbers become involved in a crazy series of disguises and impersonations in an attempt to seize a dishonestly acquired sum of money destined to pay-off the debts of the Duke of Mantua's court so that he can marry the Princess of Granada. The young producer Immo Karaman and the stage director Katrin Kerstin used a 16-metre platform in the centre of the Kleines Haus, rather than the main theatre, with amazing skill, leaving just enough space at one end for the 35-strong orchestra.

Karaman has clearly little time for the romantic illusion which sometimes

pervades Offenbach productions, preferring a Brechtian or occasionally a Grand Guignol approach which even included the voice of a narrator (Thaddäus Zech) to explain the frequent changes of scene. But the whole thing was so full of verve, helped by the spirited playing of the Westphalia Neue Philharmonic under Cosima Sophia Osthoff that the performance of almost two hours with an interval passed with a moment's *longueur*.

Two of the *Rosmonda* principals from the previous day appeared again: Mark Adler - versatile in five small cameos; and Anna Agathanos - very funny in the trouser-role of Fragoletto. The three girls originally kidnapped by the gang (Simone Enge, Daniella Stucksette and Evelyne Wehrens) appeared in many gorgeous costumes like models on a catwalk to match the scene-changes but also sang wonderfully. The whole cast showed marvellous teamwork in the limited space and clearly enjoyed performing so well together. I was just sorry that I could not stay for Anke Sieloff again in *Cenerentola* the following day (she also played Reno in the *MiR* "Anything Goes" this year!)

Next year's season in the *MiR* will include Berlioz' *Benvenuto Cellini*; *Attila*; Monteverdi's *l'incoronazione di Poppea*; revivals of *Les Brigands* and *Cenerentola* plus a Belcanto Gala of Meyerbeer's Italian Operas on 19 June. On the strength of this year, Gelsenkirchen is as much worth a special visit as the better-known German venues - vaut at least a *détour* from Düsseldorf or Köln!



Sam Eadie

Rosmonda Photographs

(Thanks to the MusikTheater im Revier for supplying the photographs, which were not included in the Newsletter article)



Enrico (Mark Adler) and Rosmonda (Claudia Braun)



Leonora (Anke Sieloff) and Rosmonda