

## Overture and beginners please



At long last we have a French-language successor to Pougin's primordial volumetto; and just as diminutive; a modern mini-biography of Donizetti in French by Philippe Thanh. We have had to wait interminably (since the last years of the Nineteenth Century during which time dozens of books upon this composer have appeared in far less important languages). Although we are whistling down the wind if we believe that our recent Journal 7 ("Donizetti and France") has made inroads upon the tinitis of a Parisian operatic establishment attuned to obscurantism, are there now cracks in the carapace of indifference especially bestowed upon the Bergamasc composer by the Gallic élite? No, that is going too far, but not only the praiseworthy M. Thanh, the well-known series of "in-depth" studies in magazine format, *Avant Scène L'Opéra*, has recently come forth with its own tardy accolade, a fustion edition (March 2005) dedicated to *Maria Stuarda* trotting-out all the old chestnuts as if they were *marrons glacés*, topped by a Mont Blanc of stomach-turning old myths.

Two tributes to Donizetti then from Twenty-First Century France! Well, Done! We offer our forelock-tugging congratulations. In fact this *DONIZETTI* by Philippe Thanh, the latest in a series of mini-monographs called CLASSICA, crowning a bizarre list of composers: Chopin, John Adams, Monteverdi, Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Leos Janáček, Sibelius and Marice Ravel indigestively conflated by *ACTES SUD*, has its moments. M.Thanh has a nice ear for anecdote and manages to cover most, if not all, of Donizetti's eventful history and works smoothly and agreeably in an emolient way, an antipasto for absolute beginners. Most of the stage works are treated as foreign dishes however, suitably exotic and out of reach as if the hidden ranks of furious *cognoscenti* (who thrive in France, like everywhere else, hidden behind their tottering World-Trade-Centers of rare CD's), did not exist. This offering from a country that repeatedly refused translations of Ashbrook and Weinstock "*as they would be of no interest*" has some retrenching to do. In his tiny book [10cms by 19cms & .75cm thick, vis-à-vis Ashbrook's 16cms by 23.5cms & 4.5cms] the repentant M.Thanh has recourse to the very real skills of a distinguished journalist and critic to get a lot into very little. The style is agreeable, the author is ready to hold your hand through most of the complexities of the Donizettian repertoire - with the exception of the sacred works which scarcely get a look-in. (Shame about the sacred works as first aid for the Bergamasc maestro is to redress the popular notion that he is nothing but a source of plushy arias for demented sopranos - paralleling poor Rossini and his *Figaro/Figaro* perseveration). I certainly don't cavill about anything the author says, the text is balanced and the judgement mature; he is best of course when he touches upon France and Donizetti's Parisian career as you would expect [Chapter V: LE TEMPS DE LA MATURE (1835-1838)] when the insights gather and the ambiance is very skilfully evoked, but there are odd slips later for a French speaker: "Maria di Rudenz" (instead of

Maria de Rudenz) and “Dom Sébastien, roi du Portugal” (instead of Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal) but maybe these are the printing errors we all suffer with gritted teeth, and trifles in any case, but beginners need to start on the right foot don’t you think? We are never sure whether it is Alahor in or di Granata. Other items are more contentious: surely we don’t need to read any more about the Queen of the Two Sicilies fainting during the rehearsals of *Maria Stuarda*? [p72] (Queens in Courts boasting a Spanish etiquette do not attend operatic rehearsals - someone made-up this story); it is not true that “*Ce n’est qu’en 1958 qu’il sera ressuscité sous la forme initiale au théâtre de Bergame*” [p73] this took place a century earlier, in Naples in 1865; the Malibran revival of *Stuarda* in Milan of 1835 was indeed “*défigurée... par les interventions de la censure*” [p90] it was precisely because La Malibran went on singing “*Bastarda*” when it had been eliminated by the censors that the opera was taken off! And then it is best not to reprint letters which might or might not have been written by Donizetti and whose autograph has never been found; the Nineteenth Century is full of indecent forgeries [p80].

Philippe Thanh’s offering to French readers is a pleasant little brochure, well printed and intelligible. He likes Donizetti, which puts *him* in a élite in any case whatever the establishment might think. It does not betray the composer like so many opuscoli do. It is an *ouverture* which will hopefully be followed by the *cavatine* and *gran’scene* which make up his life in depth, for so long disregarded except by those who value an art for all countries and all ages.

**Alexander Weatherson**

## Bass notes

The ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING this year is scheduled for London, and to coincide with the concert of *Il diluvio universale* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane on Sunday 6 November; a meeting to take place in all probability on that afternoon and capped by a pre-concert supper. The venue we shall no doubt propose for the AGM (the Boulevard Restaurant) is 2 minutes walk from the theatre. There is an attractive menu. Further information in Newsletter 96. In this respect it should be noted that booking is already open for *Il diluvio universale* (tickets £50 to £6)

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Alan (Jackson) proposes a second “disc-recital” of a limited-access recording in the not-too distant future, probably in the Spring of next year. Opera to be decided.

Russell (Burdekin) suggests that people might like to meet for a light meal ahead of the Saturday 10 September performance of *Dom Sébastien* at Covent Garden. If you would like to join other members please let him know ( his address is on the Committee Page [p1] of this Newsletter or e-mail to [info@donizettisociety.com](mailto:info@donizettisociety.com) )

A new flyer is enclosed: if you would like further copies for distribution please contact Pip (Clayton).