

## *Maria di Rohan* - Last of the line or a new beginning?

When the summer comes to an end, events planned all that time ago for the coming autumn season seem to arrive with alarming suddenness. It is thus that the coming visit to Wexford for their opening production of *Maria di Rohan* has pressed itself suddenly and insistently upon my mind. After a summer labouring over my other admired musical dramatist, Mozart, it is perhaps natural that parallels between the two composers' final Austro-Hungarian operas should come to mind.

It seems to me that in many ways (but not in their music) Donizetti and Mozart were quite conservative (with a small 'c'). Both tried to function within the institutions and practices of the society and the opera business as it had operated up till then. Both were beaten by it, though weaknesses in their health were the main unanticipated causes of their early deaths. Both chose remarkably traditional subjects for their final operas.

Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*, very persuasively performed under Sir Charles Mackerras at this year's Edinburgh Festival, remains an over-the-shoulder gesture towards Metastasio's frozen stone friezes. I can just imagine Mozart approving the choice: "Yeah, they'll like that." They didn't! Leopold II seemed to have cloth ears and his Empress called it 'porcheria tedesca'; an ironic comment given the opera's subsequent success south of the Alps. None of that detracts from the originality of the changes wrought to tighten the static nature of Baroque opera seria and the sometimes stunningly high quality of the music that Mozart poured into this act of homage.

To call the subject of Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan* 'conventional' is a lazy way of saying that it includes such things as a secret marriage, divided loyalties, sudden reversals of power, a duel and an engineered death off-stage. These are the commonplaces of opera and their historical accuracy and dramatic credibility will as usual become irrelevant once the music starts. So in both cases, Mozart and Donizetti, what is most important is the musical material that is added because that is what we go to opera to experience.

And it is the qualities of the music that, as usual, draw us to Donizetti. We are here at the crossroads between the singer-dominated world in which both Mozart and Donizetti were trained and the world into which the two nineteenth century tyros Wagner and Verdi (or should it be Vaguener and Verdi?) transformed it when the composer as dramatist decides what he requires and the singers have to aspire to it as best they can. Only 52 years separate *La Clemenza di Tito* and *Maria di Rohan* but what a lifetime: longer than that of either composer. However, the performance issues were the same. When Donizetti 'adjusted' *Maria* for Paris it was to suit singers and tastes and the changes dulled the edge of the fleet-footed ariettes or the original. In this modern world second thoughts have not in general proved any happier: I was thinking of Britten as I wrote that but it is also true of some Verdi revisions. But maybe even in 1843 a composer's freedom was still circumscribed: there is the case of the strange codetta in which *Maria* spits venom at her husband when he will not forgive but refuses to put her out of her misery, thus condemning her to live out her days in a social wilderness. It was apparently not performed in 1843; a sign of the inherent

conservatism of the operatic world. The social revolution of *La traviata* when the drama held up a mirror in order to reflect the hypocrisy of society back to the audience was still 10 years away. In Vienna this technique was already well established in Mozart's time. Musically Maria's outburst has a touch of Lady Macbeth about it; an early skirmish in the battle for women being type-cast as the willing victim.

Wexford have chosen to perform Donizetti's original and more revolutionary Vienna version of *Maria di Rohan* rather than the more familiar Paris version. The reason for the choice seems to lie with the conductor, Antonino Fogliani, who assisted Gelmetti with the Venice performance in 1999. Whether the deft sleight of hand with which Donizetti constructed this most taut of his dramas suits the intimate surroundings of the old Wexford Theatre Royal, which enters its redevelopment after this year's season, we shall have to wait and see.

As I finish this short item the news comes through that the Chief Executive of Wexford Festival Opera, Jerome Hynes, has died suddenly just as rehearsals are due to start. Fiction could not have manufactured a more timely reminder that change is never gradual and that the reversals that characterise operatic plots happen in real life sometimes. The legacy of the huge redevelopment plan for the theatre and the Festival will now fall to other hands.

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