

The maid of Balfe

The riot of ornament sprawling over the Victorian theatre found plenty of space among its curlicues for Michael William Balfe, an utterly reliable Anglo-Irish purveyor of appealing melodies ready and willing to offer his bewhiskered compatriots a transcendental vocal experience at the drop of a hat. An opera a year was the rule - more-or-less; polyglot music - I dare say; a part-operette/part-Musical mode - at his apogee; and utterly confident of success from beginning to end. Very well educated on the hoof at home and abroad with a high-profile early career that took him from singer (light baritone), to composer, to conductor on some of Europe's most imposing stages, he became a key figure in London at the mid-century whatever the neglect he endures today. He was a catalyst and quite indispensable to its musical health. Baton in hand he shared with Sir Michael (Michele) Costa the honours of the capital - he - embodying the honourable tradition of the ballad at the heart of English music - his friend - the most recent example of the honourable tradition of the peripatetic Italian descending upon Albion to polish its blazon anew. Both essential figures at a major cultural hiatus (which has its parallels today) *Oil and water* you might think; in fact it was nothing of the kind. Both took charge of the greatest London theatres, both were ready to compose anything-whatsoever, both were belcantistic to the core, both resisted Verdi and Wagner, Costa threw Meyerbeer out of Covent Garden (quite literally), and both fiercely defended the reactionary virtues of formulaic music to the very end. But never excluding cross-channel exemplars (the "Continent was never completely Isolated"). Balfe's last opera was staged after his death by Costa with great acclaim. Maria Malibran called Balfe "*The English Rossini*"; he was more credibly an "*English*" Auber with frequent recourse - at key moments - to Bellini, the more accessible Donizetti and a wide variety of others. He was adroit, orchestrally very skilled and operatically very experienced. He knew just what his audiences wanted. This current first recording of the last warhorse for Malibran - written months before her sad death and hugely to her taste it would seem - admirably displays his gifts. Prepared with musicological exactitude from rudimentary archives it has taken a great deal of courage on the part of its sponsors to get together (and takes a certain amount of courage on the part of its listeners where some of the singing is concerned!) but it *is* quite fascinating - is not the opening chorus a pair to that of Lauro Rossi's *Il domino nero* of more than a decade later? And what good tunes. They stick in the mind despite Mr [Hot-Cross] Bunn's horrible (and endearingly politically-incorrect) text (we can thank our lucky stars that the spoken dialogue is missing - G&S owe almost everything to Balfe and Bunn) and even though sharing its lapses with faceless passages, Andrew Lloyd-Webber never comes up to its charm.

Kay Jordan does very well indeed with a title-role straight out of the Guinness Book of Records, the beautiful sounds she makes truly evoke the glamour of its unique progenitor and would have justified this project even if the orchestra and conductor had not been so good. In fact both are excellent. The presentation of the recording, its packaging, its sound quality, its notes with complete libretto, all are first-rate. As an example of resource, of clarity, of sheer resilience, Victorian Opera from its Northern fastness shows the inert Metropolis what can be done with modest means. Is it too much to hope that the latter will one day learn some lessons?

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