

Roberto Devereux in Paris (*l'amour et la mort à la loupe*)

Child of great distress, the opera marked the true end to his Italian ambitions. Written *in extremis* in 1837 in the terrible weeks after the death of his wife, this detailed analysis of disaster was blessed with one of Donizetti's most fluent scores, paced with an agonised precision that never again was he quite to repeat. After *Roberto Devereux* and the abandonment of his Neapolitan career in 1838, his apartment left empty, the door to his wife's room closed (and unable to cross its threshold) the Bergamasc took the path of exile to Paris and Vienna.

You could say that Cammarano's libretto offered a timely viaticum, in this the last (of his) Tudor operas he was supplied with the perfect embodiment of his grief - a descent, opportune and perhaps relished into a vacuum of anger in which the ironclad Elizabeth I too finds her world in ruins. In a reverse of gender she is the ageing *point-de-repère* of the drama and not her vanished/vanishing lover. The music of the melodramma is semaphored in wide romantic gestures, an Italy open to despair writ-large was at his disposal, but, as in *Maria di Rohan*, an inexorable clock measures the moments to ultimate defeat, two women and two men find their lives destroyed inch-by-inch, cry-by-cry, protest-by-protest by forces beyond reason, like that of the composer himself. It is an opera where Donizetti's infinitesimal attention to detail is paradoxically at its most universal.

As usual the mature Donizetti was able to make convention work for him. The magnifying-glass is turned upon each character in turn. In *Roberto Devereux* each has an extravagant share of memorable tunes, an exposure underpinned - thanks to Cammarano - by reprises and *cabalette* which do not interrupt the flow but intensify the confrontations. And it is this last feature that justifies the choice of *Roberto Devereux* for concert performance whence so many other operas lose focus, it is a real boost to the bitter encounters of this anguished plot that the artists find themselves at last face-to-face with their audience, without the unwelcome intrusion of an orchestra. in-between*.

In this particular concert performance on 22 September 2005 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées it was Evelino Pidò who claimed the principal role. Hardly ever was an opera so well rehearsed. The Italian chef made a virtuoso reading, as if in the city of the composer's predilection (and in the city for which the overture was composed) the case for the music had to be made without compromise, a deliberate martelling of each bar, with pointillistic timing underpinning nuance and colouring with an agonising empathy. *Roberto* had been a wild success from the start (Teatro S. Carlo, Naples 28 October 1837) with tumultuous revivals almost everywhere, for Paris just over a year later (Théâtre-Italien 27 December 1838) he made important changes a modicum of which made a discreet reappearance on this warm Parisian evening as if

to personalise the event. The composer made even further changes for a projected revival at Lyons in 1840 adding a subtly chromatic *romanza* for Nottingham to the suave accents of Paul Barroilhet, whose severely-tested Duke has had second-thoughts about the guilt of his wife. But no one knows whether it was ever performed. It was to have been inserted between the prison-scene for Essex and Elisabetta's terminal peroration and therefore clearly superfluous (but would have been rather apt on this occasion under the aegis of the Opéra de Lyon). Pidò's tour-de-force was the more remarkable as there were two last-minute substitutions: including that of the *primadonna* soprano, the indisposed Darina Takova being replaced by an impressive Maria Pia Piscitelli whose interpretation was very convincing, with faultless control as if rehearsed to the n'th degree, more feminine than the Tudor dragon usually depicted but with a telling half-voice that was quite devastating and a staying-power that carried the score to its appalling climax. All four of the principal soloists were effective. Her special vis-à-vis is Sara - duetless with Elisabetta, as we know of course (Donizetti took pains not to repeat situations that featured so recently in *Anna Bolena* or *Stuarda*); Enkelejda Shkosa, a very expansive (a bit spreading) mezzo-soprano far nearer to the first Parisian Sara, the English mezzo Emma Albertazzi than to the first Neapolitan Sara of *Almerinda Granchi*, proved neither a cypher nor a copycat and whose searing encounters with lover and husband took the audience literally by the throat. Pidò managed to supply cues of such precision to both these duets that every iota of Sara's dilemma was almost tangible. As Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, Stefano Secco was something of a surprise, he too invested in a similar intimacy with the audience, first confiding in them, then confronting them so recklessly in the prison-scene that its jaunty hazards were for once completely discounted. This was a good assumption of an ungrateful role, his not very large voice, a bit dry (I have to say it!) but revealing a communicative potential that earned him genuinely grateful applause.

The poignant instrumental evocation of the Tower of London, empty, echoing only to the sound of water and sea birds, freer than its unhappy occupant (however did Donizetti manage to paint such a searing portrait of this pile so distant from his world) that introduces the prison-scene finds its symbiotic equivalent in Nottingham's loyalty to his empty friend, ill-using him quite as brutally as his wife and his Queen. Laurent Naouri, a Frenchman with a real Italian *morbidezza*, was both pathetic and bitterly self-destructive in his confrontation with this regal spinster. No soft-option, his was a key performance as resourceful as any today.

The chorusses, the weakest point in the opera, were admirably sung. Curiously, the Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon was not always quite up-to Pidò's demands.

But under the magnifying-glass the picture was irresistible.

Alexander Weatherson

* **Note** The forthcoming *Roberto Devereux* at Ancona is now destined to be in concert form too [see Newsletter 96 p34] but not entirely due to purely artistic considerations!