



Donizetti's star in the ascendent

Last September's concert performances of Dom Sébastien at Covent Garden provoked some interesting reactions in the British press. I don't want to detail the reviews of the performance, which were largely very good with special plaudits going to the conductor Mark Elder, but I think it is worthwhile quoting from them for what they reveal about this great opera, and more importantly, about the current critical standing of Donizetti himself.

Hugh Canning (Sunday Times, 18.09.05) bracketed Donizetti's name with that of Claudio Monteverdi as "two of the greatest Italian composers" and later described him as "one of the masters of the Italian ottocento". He described *Dom Sébastien* as "his last completed "towering opera"" quoting William Ashbrook's phrase in his Donizetti and his Operas.

Rupert Christiansen (Daily Telegraph, 12.09.05) wrote, "Donizetti's last opera, *Dom Sébastien*, really is something special . a flawed but enthralling masterpiece . much of the music is truly superb . there is no doubt that *Dom Sébastien* is a treasure trove", and described Donizetti as "long acclaimed as a master of Italian opera".

Hilary Finch (The Times, 13.09.05) enjoyed "a revelatory evening that I wouldn't have missed for the world . Such was the driving power of Donizetti's convention-defying music, fiercely propelled by fiery ensembles and choruses, and such was the commitment of both chorus and cast, that the processions, battlefields and escapades rose up before our very eyes".

In Opera magazine (November 2005) Rodney Milnes noted "the score's darksome tinta - as expressive as anything in Verdi . This *Dom Sébastien* made not just Donizetti-doubters but also enthusiasts think afresh about the composer's stature . That this should have been his last opera is a tragedy: who knows what he might have achieved thereafter".

The least enthusiastic assessment of the work I came across was from Tim Ashley (The Guardian, 13.09.05) who nonetheless wrote, "The composer sustains a mood of oppression and dislocation with sequences of funereal marches, interrupted arias and broken cadences .It's not a masterpiece - the exposition is too protracted, the denouement too perfunctory. The best of it, however, is both profound and deeply disturbing .".

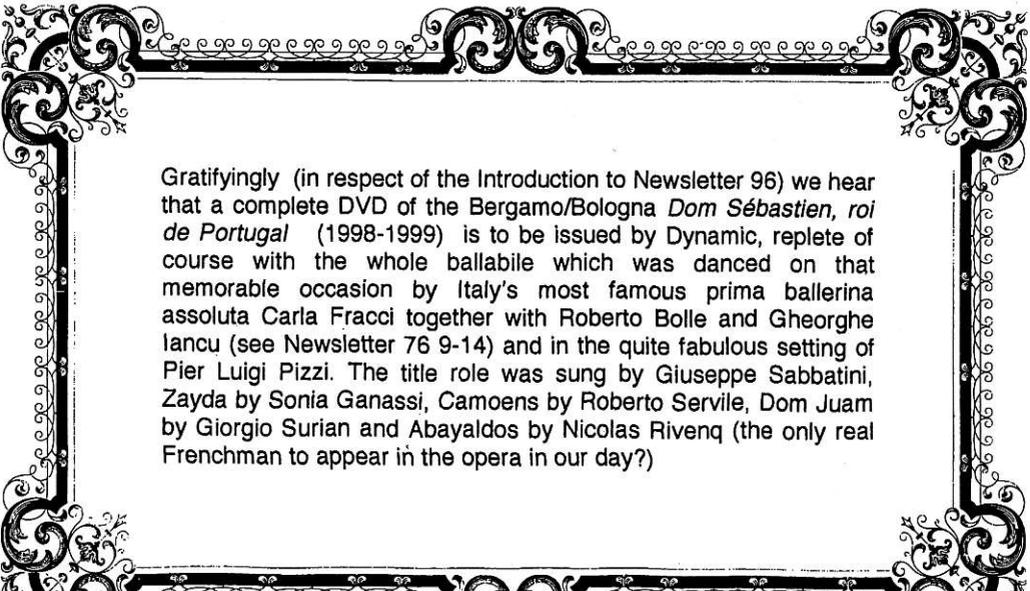
U. Ehrensberger in the German magazine *Das Opernglass* (November 2005) wrote, "That a rediscovery of *Dom Sébastien* had not yet come to pass has probably more to do with long-time cultivated prejudices against

French Grand Opéra than with the musical qualities of the work . one experiences here [Act 4] an unusually weighty, dark side of Donizetti, with the result that one speculates which direction his style of composing would have taken had a tragic illness not put a stop to his work". (Translation: Erhard Meier)

Naturally, Donizetti has not required special pleading from members of this society, and he has long had his admirers among music critics: Andrew Porter, Max Loppert, and Julian Budden are three who have consistently championed him, not blindly, but fairly and passionately. But the near-unanimity of the reactions to *Dom Sébastien* seems to me something new. There were no adverse comparisons with Bellini. When Canning and Milnes pointed out similarities with Verdi's *Don Carlos*, neither found it necessary to write about "Verdi's greater masterpiece" (or some such phrase) as I suspect would have happened had comparisons been made (not necessarily by these writers) a decade ago. Indeed Milnes heard and wrote about pointers to *Traviata*, *Vêpres* and *Aida* as well. Though the special, indeed unique, qualities of *Dom Sébastien* were well brought out, no one sought to disparage the rest of the Donizetti oeuvre in comparison. Significantly, Canning's Wexford Festival report (Sunday Times 30.11.05) referred to *Maria di Rohan* as the work of a "master composer".

Let us hope that opera managements pick up on this new appreciation and that productions of Donizetti's operas continue to appear more regularly than at times in the past. And that the tragic death of Patric Schmid does not delay or, heaven forbid, prevent the appearance of Opera Rara's recording of this Covent Garden *Dom Sébastien*.

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Gratifyingly (in respect of the Introduction to Newsletter 96) we hear that a complete DVD of the Bergamo/Bologna *Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* (1998-1999) is to be issued by Dynamic, replete of course with the whole ballabile which was danced on that memorable occasion by Italy's most famous prima ballerina assoluta Carla Fracci together with Roberto Bolle and Gheorghe Iancu (see Newsletter 76 9-14) and in the quite fabulous setting of Pier Luigi Pizzi. The title role was sung by Giuseppe Sabbatini, Zayda by Sonia Ganassi, Camoens by Roberto Servile, Dom Juam by Giorgio Surian and Abayaldos by Nicolas Rivenq (the only real Frenchman to appear in the opera in our day?)