

Il furioso all'isola di S.Domingo in Gelsenkirchen

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It is not often that a Donizetti Society Newsletter contains a review of a performance in a series that is still ongoing, but this is the case with Gelsenkirchen's *Il furioso* and I urge anyone who can make the effort to catch it - dates are as in Newsletter 98. The opera is fascinating and moving, the musical performance is mostly outstanding, and the production is carefully thought-through and brilliantly executed. OK - if you insist on the stage picture looking like a Caribbean island and every detail of the improbable plot being followed, then perhaps you had better stay away. But, make no mistake, you will be denying yourself a wonderful evening of music-theatre.

The setting here is a modern asylum; the slaves of the original are patients in the *Sanitorio "Isola di San Domingo"* as are Cardenio and Kaidamà; Bartolomeo is a psychiatrist; Marcella is a nurse. Photo-images in the programme are taken from the film "One flew over the cuckoo's nest" which contributes to the feeling of uncertainty as to who really is mad, and who may be pretending. This all provides a framework for the exploration of what Donizetti's opera a really about : the two central relationships between Cardenio and Eleonora (marital love, forgiveness and betrayal), and Cardenio and Kaidamà (violent friendship and compassion). Yes, there are a couple of loose-ends and inconsistencies but nothing as improbable as the coincidence of Eleonora and Fernando both turning-up on the same island at the same time in their search for Cardenio; the curative powers of a plunge-into-the-sea from a conveniently-placed cliff; or a motiveless gun-carrying errand for a slave.

The musical edition is of particular interest. Gelsenkirchen has based its edition on copies of the score in the library of S.Cecilia in Rome, the Austrian National Library, and Ricordi's piano transcriptions of 1833. The principal reconstruction is to restore the end of the Cardenio/Eleonora duet to its original place. The performances at Siena (1958) and Savona (1987) drew on the 1958 revision of Vito Frazzi placing these pages nearer to the end of the opera in order to give "the happy end a more organic development" (CD booklet accompanying the Bongiovanni recording of the Savona performances). Our Chairman, in his programme note to the concert performance promoted by the Donizetti Society and Pro Opera in 1979 called this "more debateable". Gelsenkirchen proved him right. The duet gains from being given in full and the end of the opera is quite strong enough anyway, at least in a performance as committed at this. Indeed I found Jee-Hyun Kim's Cardenio so moving that I wondered how Giorgio Ronconi, the first Cardenio (and subsequent creator of such roles as Chevreuse, Nabucco et al) could have been any better. Questionable, to my mind, was the decision to cut the cabaletta repeats of Fernando and Eleonora's arias, the

aria finale, in particular, gains by having a second, decorated verse before the fireworks at the end. The Gelsenkirchen website www.musiktheater-im-revier.de has detailed articles (in German) about the opera, the edition, production photos and even the chapters from Cervantes *Don Quixote* which are the ultimate source of the libretto.

The three principal roles were superbly taken. Jee-Hyun Kim launched his opening 'Raggio d'amor pareo' on a honeyed mezzavoce and sang elegantly and beautifully all evening with plenty of power where necessary. Perhaps an Italian baritone would set the words more forward, but I am not complaining. Melih Tepretmez was Kaidamà and impressed through the physicality of his acting - the same sort of athleticism London opera-goers will know from Simon Keenlyside as Billy Bud, Papageno or Hamlet. Kim too is a fine actor and their scenes together were a highlight of the performance; Eleonora was sung by Hrachuhi Bassénz with warmth and, in her final cabaletta, dazzling coloratura. Sergio Blazquez, Deanne Wells and Nicolai Karnolsky as Fernando, Marcella and Bartolomeo completed the cast very adequately. The opera was conducted by Cosima Sophia Osthoff who obtained excellent playing from the Neue Philharmonie Westfalen and Opernchores des Musiktheaters im Revier. Design and Costumes were by Harald Thor and Ulli Kremer. The opera was directed brilliantly by Andreas Baesler who presumably must take credit for the detailed and convincing acting of everyone on stage. The chorus was a band of individuals, each with his (it's a male chorus) own personality and mental illness. Kaidamà's own quirk is to smear his face with black boot polish, which gets round the "Monostatos" problem in today's politically-correct environment. Take your seats early - there is a dumb-show before each act - nothing to do with the main action it's true - but intriguing and part of the show. And lest anyone think that I'm describing the worst type of directorial excess : at no time did the stage-business get in the way. Cardenio's narration to Bartolomeo describing his and Eleonora's history is played as a Group Therapy session with a few other patients present but their reactions are firmly controlled and when Cardenio reaches 'Un mar di lagrime' and launches the great sextet there is nothing to distract from the music and situation of the principals. This gem of a piece, as good as the similarly placed *concertati* in *Ugo conte di Parigi* and *L'elisir d'amore* was rewarded by the Gelsenkirchen audience with rapt concentration and then extended warm applause.

I had better mention that Baesler subverts the expected happy ending, but I don't want to spoli it for anyone who does go to Gelsenkirchen so will just say that something unexpected, shocking-even, happens at the end. But it fits with this production. If you care about opera as theatre, and not just as beautiful music in pretty frocks, I urge you to go to see this *Furioso*.

Alan Jackson