

Dom Sébastien brought to life

For some 36 years, Eve Queler and the Opera Orchestra of New York have led the way in New York bringing to the public deserving but rarely-heard operas, generally in idiomatic and exciting performances. Their latest offering at Carnegie Hall, on November 7, 2006, was no exception. Donizetti's final work for stage, *Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* (1843), a sprawling Grand Opera in five Acts, received all the careful attention this fine score deserves in the first performance of the new critical edition in the United States.

Indeed over the years OONY has performed fourteen of Donizetti's 70-some operas, including such rarities as *Parisina d'Este*, *Gemma di Vergy*, *Marino Faliero*, *Il Duca d'Alba*, *Caterina Cornaro*, and, twenty-two years earlier, *Dom Sébastien*. As maestro Queler states in the introduction to the excellent program notes (which admirably include a complete libretto and translation) "*I can never tire of this composer, his gift for melody and his instinctive dramatic way of writing for the voice. His operas are grateful to sing and often take the voice to its extreme limits.*"

To be sure in this opera Donizetti frequently pushes singers into some patches of rather high tessitura. The tenor lead at the Paris Opéra was the famed Gilbert Duprez, whose high C's "from the chest" revolutionized opera; the star mezzo-soprano of the day, Rosine Stoltz (who sings the only female role in the opera), was equally capable of handling the wide-ranging vocal runs. In the recent performance at Carnegie Hall, the fine young Russian tenor Dmitry Korchak indeed had all the notes (including a top D-flat) in "Seul sur la terre" Dom Sébastien's famous aria of despair, which closes the second act. Bulgarian mezzo-soprano Vesselina Kasarova, while effective in her sorrowful aria opening Act II, "Sol adoré de la patrie," was less satisfactory in the long and demanding role of Sébastien's beloved Zayda. Perhaps, with her excessive emotional thrusts, she pushed at the role too much; the mellifluous bel canto style of Rossini, and Donizetti's earlier years, would seem to suit her better. Neither performer erased memories of my only other encounter with the work at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna in 1998, where Giuseppe Sabbatini was breathtaking with his dynamic control and high pianissimos and local favorite, Sonia Ganassi, was more consistent in the wide-ranging vocal demands of the role. And although a concert performance naturally cannot hope to catch the visual beauty and grandeur of that Pier Luigi Pizzi production, complete with full ballet, at least Queler's admirable presentation with OONY captured musically the essence of the work. Her forceful conducting of the well-prepared orchestra and chorus (The New York City Gay Men's Chorus and The Scott Choral Artists of New York) let the bluster and spectacle of this "funeral in five acts" (as the work was once labeled) come to life.

Such an achievement is truly to be praised. The famous Paris librettist of the day, Eugene Scribe, concocted a gloomy, sprawling plot in which death rather has its sway. Most of the principals end up dead, including Dom Sébastien who survives (barely) an ill-advised Moroccan crusade only to lose his kingdom and then his life - as does his beloved Zayda - to the Inquisition. An innovative feature of the aforementioned excellent program was to include (as a guide to the opera) Hector Berlioz' lengthy - and typically tongue-in-cheek review of the first performance of *Dom Sébastien* at the Paris Opéra - newly translated by Berlioz scholar Hugh McDonald. Berlioz' description of the opening of Act V is worth quoting:

Act V - A tower adjoining the Inquisition's prison. This is a deeply serious opera which will make a strong impression on those who enjoy the delights of staying quietly at home by a welcoming fire and not having to get involved with stakes, inquisitors, Moors and death ... Many people (consider)... death to be one of the most disagreeable things in life. But what's to be done? Since the Opera insists on driving it home to us, let's not be too alarmed at its sinister appearance; let's give it a decent welcome. So move on now to a dark tower next to the Inquisition's dungeons. Sébastien and Zayda are going to be roasted, perhaps simply boiled or fried, in any case put to death according to the sacred customs of that age of burning faith and ardent charity.

Indeed Berlioz takes us there, in his ironic way. So did Eve Queler - but with sincerity and passion. In short, the whole was better than the parts; she truly caught the "tinta" of the dark and ominous score. This is not to say the valuable contributions of the "parts" should be overlooked, including the impressive array of low male voice soloists. Foremost was the lyrical baritone Stephen Powell as Camoens, poet and loyal friend to Sébastien, with an eloquently shaped "O Lisbonne, o ma patrie" in Act III (one didn't need the Pizzi's exquisite vision of the Lisbon harbor to feel his emotional tug at the return to his native land). Others included bass Stephen Geertner as the furious Moorish chieftain and basso-profondo Daniel Lewis Williams as the always-grim Grand Inquisitor.

Whether in the great sextet for the principals in the finale of Act III, "De l'espoir et de terreur" (the masterful *largo concertato* which Maestro Queler restored to its rightful position), or in the grand bluster of military marches (trumpets in the balcony, of course) or in the many rousing choruses (complete with offstage effects), the evening kept the audience rapt and enthusiastic. A comforting evening by the hearth might have been nice; I, for one, was glad to have been at Carnegie Hall.

Richard B. Beams

Opera con Brio

Work has begun on Journal 8 of the Donizetti Society, its theme
will be ***'Donizetti nel mezzogiorno'***