

# Imelda de' Lambertazzi

London, Queen Elizabeth Hall, 10 March 2007

This was a very special evening, one that made the best possible case for an opera not staged, it would seem, since 1856, and only once heard since - a concert performance in Lugano in 1989, preserved on a Nuova Era recording. That recording has been a reasonable stopgap, but this concert performance was something from a different world. What made it so special was the contribution of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment under Mark Elder. This is an opera about conflict between families loyal to warring Guelphs and Ghibellines in thirteenth century Bologna. Imelda, a Ghibelline, loves Bonifacio, a Guelph, to the consternation of her fanatical brother, Lamberto, and their sometimes slightly more conciliatory father, Orlando. The sound of this period orchestra never let one forget this conflict. The rasp of these wind and brass instruments (including a cimballo, a narrow bore tuba), played with huge sophistication of course, produced a threatening effect that made the pleas for peace in the opening chorus all the more relevant and moving. The whole orchestra seemed galvanised by Elder to a precision of attack and intensity of phrasing that was quite exceptional - opera rara indeed. To give just one example: the string figure that accompanies Orlando's "Or sei paga" just before Lamberto drags in the dying Imelda, and that passes almost unnoticed on the recording, stood out, violent and meaningful. The second act has important instrumental solos, for the clarinet in the introduction to Bonifacio's aria "Imelda a me volgea" and for cello in Imelda's final arioso. These were eloquently played and Elder quite rightly brought Antony Pay and Richard Lester to their feet during the applause at the end.

Relegating the singers to second mention may seem perverse in a review of a bel canto opera, but in fact *Imelda* is far from typical. The programme note described it as possibly "the most lean, most closely-written score of his entire career". None of the duets contains a conventional slow section with long lyrical lines and the voices joining in thirds or sixths. Instead there are dialogues, terse and confrontational. The vocal disposition of the male parts is unusual. Bonifacio, Imelda's lover, is a baritone, not the more usual tenor (or even mezzo in trousers). Presumably Donizetti did this to reward the accomplishments of the role's creator, the young Antonio Tamburini, later to become one of the most famous singers of the day and the first Riccardo in *I puritani* and Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*. Of the available singers in September 1830 at the San Carlo, Naples, there were there two tenors, the more senior,

Berardo Winter being given Lamberto and the younger Giovanni Basadonna being left with Orlando, thus risking the impression of a father younger than his son! At the QEH the age relationship was correct, with Massimo Giordano and Frank Lopardo as son and father. Both sang excellently, excitingly. Were their vocal manners those of rather later in the 19th century? I certainly wouldn't want to hear Percy (to take an example from the next opera in the canon) sung like this, but I bet Donizetti would have approved.

Bonifacio was sung by James Westman who lacked impact in Act 1 as though the role lay rather low for him. He opened up more in Act 2, proving much more of a match for the tenors. Commons notes, ". it would be difficult to name a Donizetti score in which there is less fioritura". Well, as regards the title role maybe (though *La Favorite* comes to mind - I haven't counted semiquavers) but in fact Bonifacio has rather a lot of fioritura to negotiate (as befits a Tamburini part). Westman didn't articulate this very well; at least little articulation reached me, sitting a third of the way back in the rear stalls of the QEH. This is something I have experienced there before, so maybe those sitting further forward heard it differently. The hall's acoustic, very immediate without being overpowering as regards the overall sound, may contribute adversely, though orchestral detail remained clear. Westman finished his aria with a sustained high note (an A?) that I thought was in very dubious style, but it received an ovation so I may be in a small minority with my assessment.

The title role was sung by Nicole Cabell. This was adventurous casting as the part is that of a high mezzo who doesn't need much proficiency in florid work rather than a high soprano. Cabell was less vibrant, more virginal than Floriana Sovilla in the Lugano performance, but equally effective (Sovilla is the best thing about that performance), her middle register warm and projecting well. She held her own well against her tenor relatives and was very moving in her death scene. There was excellent support from Brindley Sherratt as Ubaldo and the Geoffrey Mitchell Choir.

What of the opera? "Disconcertingly innovative, groundbreaking and experimental" is Jeremy Commons description. In addition to features already mentioned can be added the lack of an overture and the lack of a concertato in the Act I finale. It sounded later than 1830 in this performance and indeed I overheard audience members who were reminded of Verdi, and not particularly early Verdi at that. That is probably overstating things, a reflection on a score that is individual and atypical of the composer. (Though in the chorus "Si nel cimento l'oste cadra", actually the tempo di mezzo of Bonifacio's aria, I thought I'd strayed momentarily into *Macbeth*!)

One further point. The following weekend I heard the Chelsea Opera Group concert performance of Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*. In this there is

hardly a phrase in recitative or arioso that ends with two notes of equal pitch (I think I noticed two). Bellini, like Verdi, wrote out his appoggiature, whereas Donizetti didn't, leaving it to singers to observe the convention that avoids such blunt endings. In Elder's performance a fair sprinkling of blunt endings remained and to my ears they sounded like wrong notes. Is there really such a difference between the recitatives of Donizetti and Bellini (these two operas are only three years apart)? I think not and that here the appoggiatura convention was just not being observed rigorously enough.

The concert followed recording sessions by Opera Rara and the programme suggests release for February 2008. Hopefully the recording venue will have clarified Westman's coloratura without blurring the overall sound. It is certainly on my must-buy list.

**Alan Jackson**



### **And subversives corner...**

It was an evening overhung with foreboding long before the first brash chords sounded. Not least was the assertion "*Its not one of his best*". There were many Donizetti adherents who had declared themselves unable or unwilling to make the effort. Was I putting myself in some kind of danger under the guise of "original instrument" invitation, I wondered?

But under the robust control of Mark Elder it was never going to be completely unruly no matter what dreadful deeds Guelphs did to Ghibellines (or vice versa). Nicola Cabell as the one unfortunate female in this hideously machismo world rose occasionally to the demands placed upon her by the composer but always looked like submerging in the raw orchestral sound through which her plaintive and reassuring words were never decipherable. Donizetti's taut drama keeps thing moving at a relentless pace whilst never letting the indiscriminate blood-letting quite destroy the need for harmonic structure in the music.

Is it actually feasible to be poisoned by drinking the blood of a beloved skewered with a venomous dagger? Sounds like a faux vampire-lust to me, or an invitation for the primadonna soprano to bare her fangs. In this concert performance Ms Cabell kept her teeth shielded, gently letting slip her red shawl from her defenceless shoulders so that Imelda could coolly manage her dying breaths with impeccable stuttering.

The ultimate triumph of testosterone is that the heroine expires in a radiant transition from minor to major key. It was all too much for one of the audience - someone clapped after the first tonic chord! Maestro Elder's bemused sideways glance silenced the offending (male?) allowing the orchestra to punch the last rough confirmation of having reached home.