

Donizetti's "Pazzi" revived at Barga

I pazzi per progetto was never intended to be a serious piece of work, and Donizetti, one imagines, would be quite surprised to find it being performed over 150 years after his death. The opera was written in the winter of 1829-30 as part of a benefit evening for the composer while Donizetti, under contract to Domenico Barbaja, was awaiting the première of *Il diluvio universale* at the Teatro San Carlo. The librettist - Domenico Gilardoni - was the same as for *Il diluvio* and most of the imposing cast were the same too - Luigia Boccabadati for the principal role of Norina, Maria Carraro, mezzo-soprano as the seconda donna, and the great bass Luigi Lablache as Darlemont.

The slight story can be traced to a comedy from the Scribe factory called *Une visite à Bedlam*. It takes place in a lunatic asylum in Paris run by Norina's uncle Darlemont, and concerns a Colonel Blinval, who is married to Norina, but loved by Cristina. Norina and Blinval, who is something of a rake, have not seen each other in some years, and he has assured Cristina that he will marry her when Norina, whom he claims to be sick, dies. To make it brief, these characters and several others show up at the asylum and pretend to be mad - the 'pazzi per progetto' or 'crazies by design'. The opera ends with the happy reconciliation between Norina, who is very much alive, and her husband, Blinval.

It is all quite confusing and mostly the basis for jokes on the insane, or on people pretending to be insane. William Ashbrook found it "in rather doubtful taste." Nonetheless it contains a good fund of Donizetti melody and it burbles along tunefully. It was a success at its première and was performed for several seasons in Naples and in Palermo. Then nothing, until Bruno Rigacci revived it at Barga in 1977. From that time until now it has occasionally been heard, and there is a recording, familiar to Donizetti aficionados. This year is the 40th anniversary of Opera Barga, and the management decided to revive some of Barga's earlier successes, starting with *I pazzi per progetto*.

If William Ashbrook was offended by the general drift of the story, he would be doubly offended by the current production, which exaggerated the insanity angle. There were even four mutes, who are not in the libretto, who appeared every now and again mugging and acting "crazy"; one even had a plastic doll hanging from her nether regions. The "crazies" mostly stood or sat in bathtubs, one of which moved back and forth across the front of the stage to no apparent purpose. A sketch in the program book indicated that the original intention was to have the word "Idrobagno" inscribed on the green brick walls of the bathhouse, but it

was evidently eliminated. I suppose that the idea was some kind of hydrotherapy for the nut cases. Because most of the characters had similar costumes and heavy black makeup around the eyes, it was difficult to keep some of them straight, although they were identified by exaggerated hats. The idea, I think, was to play for laughs through broad exaggeration.

Since Luigia Boccabadati was the original Norina, that role is quite demanding. Norina gets both an entrance aria and the rondo finale, and both are well decorated. The honors went to Elizaveta Martirosyan, who has sung other Donizetti roles, included productions at Wexford. She has the technique and an attractive stage presence, but I found the metallic edge of the Georgian soprano's voice grating sometimes, especially in the louder and higher passages, and especially in the tiny Teatro dei Differenti. Maurizio Leoni, who has sung Rossini in *Wildbad* (*Mathilde di Shabran* and *Turco*), has a pleasant baritone voice, but he could not keep his eyes off the conductor, no matter to whom he was supposed to be singing on the stage. The conductor, Marcello Panni, seemed to fall asleep after a particularly long passage of recitativo secco, and temporarily lost the place in the score. Lucia Mastromarino was funny as Cristina and Alessio Poetestio, in Lablache's role as Darlemont was excellent. The Orchestra J Futura of Trento played with verve. The stage direction by Michal Znaniecki did not do much to clarify the goings-on.

Barga has been good to Donizetti over its forty years, and produced the rarely heard (at that time) *Il campanello* in its second season (1968). In 1977 *Pigmaliione* accompanied *I pazzi* and in 1980 there was *Olivio e Pasquale*, not to mention the more famous *Pasquale* in 1975. But one would also dearly have loved to see Pietro Raimondi's *Il ventaglio* (1978) or Rossini's *Demetrio e Polibio* the following year. Barga is a lovely hill top village north of Lucca in the Garfagnana. There always seem to be a lot of English tourists there (and not only for the festival). One can only hope that they will see fit to do more early Donizetti.

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