

IL FURIOSO ALL'ISOLA DI SAN DOMINGO(Donizetti)
LA GAZZETTA(Rossini)
13th/14th/15th November 1987
Teatro dell'opera giocosa, Teatro Chiabrera, Savona

"Il multiforme Donizetti" was how Pacini described him. And truly no other score demonstrates quite so clearly the huge theatrical resource of the Bergamasc composer, how much variety he could induce into a familiar formula while turning vocal parabolas into pure gold. What an opera this *Il furioso* is! This hearing at Savona confirmed the belief that it is certainly the most integrated of his *semiseria* scores, where patter, instead of intruding, actually points-up the tragic dilemma of the crazy outcast who has taken to the jungle in ragged pants, frightening the natives, hairy, weeping, angry, pathetic, and unapproachable.

Much indeed of the opera's real success in the nineteenth century was due to the plot, not only were librettist and composer in perfect accord but the opera was based on no trivial tale; derived from Cervantes *Don Quixote*, Ferretti's incandescent libretto has moments as touching and tragic as the Spanish masterpiece itself. To add to this, in 1833 Donizetti was in full and glorious control of his audience, the composer actually succeeds in seducing the theatre quite as irresistibly as Eleonora (apparently) seduced Cardenio's friend. His sequence of beguiling tunes, his delectable orchestration, sometimes echoing the voices, sometimes underpinning them, sometimes mocking them; his ability almost to paint a stage picture with two bars of music, supplying a deft touch to fleeting emotions while never losing sight (or sound) of the story itself, in this opera, is quite overwhelming.

You may then ask, why has *Il furioso* not been one of the jewels in the composer's crown? The reason is that the opera is frighteningly difficult to bring off. Not only is it difficult to cast (required are a transcendental baritone; a tenor of outstanding vocal range; and a prima donna who can rival Trazzini) but the opera is an exercise in stage brinkmanship where theatrical credibility teeters dangerously on the edge of kitsch, where sincere emotion courts not so much ridicule as a belly laugh and complete dismissal.

How happy it is to report then that the Savona staging not only found an incomparable trio but that a masterly production actually managed to manipulate the audience in the way Donizetti required. Almost everyone resisted the jokey notions producer Virginio Puecher inserted, the coro posing like the Zeigfeld Follies or the principals exiting in a Marx-brothers soft-shoe-shuffle, but a cunning intelligence had shaped this strategy and when real emotion arrived (Cardenio alone was spared farce) it struck home with an agonising finality. Eleonora (Luciana Serra) revealing herself to be a complete mistress of comic timing, arrived on stage, half in Offenbach parody, half soubrette, displaying a cynicism which simply laid the ground for an emotional *volte-face* in Act II. It was the artificiality of Eleonora's Act I which made Act II a real tragedy. For once, producer, costume-designer and cast had understood the bitter-sweet nature of *opera semiseria* and found a way of recreating it without cheapening it or betraying its nature.

For this staging, the opera giocosa had managed to assemble a young cast as romantic in appearance and voice as the authors could have wished. In the title role Stefano Antonucci made his romantic credentials clear from his *romanza d'entrata* (delivered in fact from the top of a palm tree). He is a real discovery, personable, a good actor, with a suave and touching delivery and excellent projection. Luca Canonici as Fernando brought such a breathtaking accomplishment to his two terrifying scene that

one really began to believe that Italian tenors of good schooling were once more a reality. A beautiful *mezza-voce* and unusual agility together with an ease in the top register ensured that this singer has a wonderful future, especially if he keeps away from Verdi in the next few years.

The *buffo*, Roberto Coviello, was most accomplished (his acting improved hourly) and the supporting cast were most honourable; the coro - alternately required to be zombies and American Marines - sang and gaped with equal aplomb. As for the prima donna, Luciana Serra supplied a peerless account of the role, funny, pointed, anguished, taking her ferocious slides and trills not only with ease but with love. For once, in the *aria finale*, one could actually sit back without fear, marvel (as one can only do elsewhere at home with unscary recording) at the superb voice, the breathtaking divisions, rock-solid *acuti*, and perfect intonation which left the audience in that state of exaltation which the great stars of the nineteenth century were last to achieve. This *furioso* was a *furore*. The OTOS version had been modified somewhat, some of the *recitativi* cut but without loss, the coro pruned. The orchestra was well paced by Carlo Rizzi, a piano continuo was perhaps too Lisztian but amusing and far from secco.

The immaculate Teatro Chiabrera also staged Rossini's 1816 *opera buffa La Gazzetta* with its prima between two *furiosi*. This was an item of some curiosity as it was his only comic score actually written for Naples where his *opera seria* reigned supreme. Alas it turned out to be a compendium of *pezzi celebri*. Prizes could have been offered to the person who could manage to supply the source of the most of the *pezzi*. For once I found myself uninterested in a Rossini score. No information was supplied about the manuscript sources nor of the nature of the *revisione* but we were asked to believe that the great pesarese was really off-form when he authorised this opera. Savona, in contrast, put on a most persuasive staging, elegant settings, imaginative props and costumes, a smooth production. The cast were well-rehearsed and included some very accomplished artists who too were very young and personable, but whose efforts to breathe life into this concert-in-costume with a non-existent plot were received with gratitude and warmth by a huge audience. If all the opera houses of Italy were as imaginative as the Teatro Chiabrera, the musical scene there would be irresistible.

Alexander Weatherson

Les Cinglés du Bel Canto

Paris will be the scene of a concert of Ottocento rarities late in February 1988. This is one of a series of concerts with admirably adventurous programmes in the French capital which have already attracted huge audience and critical acclaim. The full programme is given overleaf and can hardly fail to attract droves of enthusiasts...