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Gaetano Donizetti *L'elisir d'amore* opera comica in due atti (libretto di Felice Romani),
Grand Opera House, Belfast, 9 March 1995

Over recent years, Donizetti enthusiasts in Northern Ireland cannot feel completely left out in the cold. One has only to recall the memorable performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Castleward Opera (see Newsletter 60) which despite - or perhaps enhanced by - the limited stage facilities remains such a vivid and living memory nearly two years later.

However, if the Grand Opera House in Belfast does not offer the same rural and picturesque surroundings at the National Trust property at Castleward, the excellent facilities - including a spacious orchestra pit - go a long way as compensation. Here the Northern Ireland Opera production of *L'elisir d'amore* has been staged during March 1995. If, for a Donizetti addict like myself, the number of productions has been somewhat sparse, the quality of the presentation of these two contrasting works has more than made up for the lack of numbers. Apart from anything else, these two operas so clearly demonstrated how completely Donizetti

was the master of both the tragic and the comic, and while in this production of *L'elisir d'amore* the latter predominated, genuine emotion and pathos were present at the moments where it was called for.

A feature in this particular instance were some ingenious touches and innovations, including a couple of sight-seeing tourists who, at certain moments, would silently come on stage - complete with "Box-Brownie" - and take a photograph of what was happening. A risky innovation, to be sure, but introduced in such a way that at no time was there any detrimental effect which could have interfered with the action on the stage. To a strict purist this feature might well have been somewhat disturbing, and it can only be left to individual judgement whether or not such an innovation enhanced the overall effect. I would myself suspect that to the audience as a whole it contributed something extra to, but still in keeping with, the essential character of the performance, and had Donizetti himself been present he might well not have objected. This kind of diversion may also be a necessary concession to the widening of audience appeal in an area where opera lags somewhat behind other performing arts when it comes to attracting much-needed additional public support.

However, in any opera, first and foremost, it is the musical quality that has to be the final consideration. Here, indeed, one would have to search long and hard to find any serious flaws. As in the case of the Castleward *Lucia*, the overall character of the presentation, while unpretentious, was convincing and authentic. While the principal performers, in their solo arias, acquitted themselves, often, with distinction, for me at least it was in the duets and ensembles that the greatest strength lay. At all times there was a delightfully blended balance and harmony that one could gladly experience over and over again, and here the contribution of the Ulster Orchestra under the able direction of Kenneth Montgomery, is deserving of special mention.

One might indeed dare to use the word "magical" to characterise the overall effect, while, so far as setting and costumes are concerned, a certain timeless quality of rural simplicity was achieved which might have been almost anywhere between the nineteenth century and the present day (though Belcore might have been visually more convincing had he not been sporting an "Elvis Presley" haircut!)

As already indicated, opera in Northern Ireland continues to face an uphill struggle to become established on a firm basis and enlarge its public appeal by reaching out to wider audiences. Inadequate funding constitutes a major problem - Castleward Opera in particular, though always fully booked for a four week season in June, financially faces a perilously uncertain future. In the two Donizettian productions I have focussed upon, both singers taking the principal soprano roles, Nicola Sharkey and Mary Hegarty - Lucia and Adina respectively - are Irish born. The fact that in such conditions it has proved possible to stage these two Donizetti operas to a high standard - not to mention others by composers including Rossini, Mozart, Verdi and Tchaikovsky during the same period - suggests a potential not as yet by any means fully realised.