



## ...and on view in Bologna *Dom Sébastien*

Where does this French opera of Donizetti stand in the gradual unfolding of the romantic idiom that was to thrive in Paris for the rest of the nineteenth century? More prophetic than Meyerbeer? Less doubting than Thomas? More guts than Gounod (less fortunate than *Faust*)? Like a frieze of "machines" - because this is the [rude] word that was used to describe the outsize history-paintings that hung edge to edge in the Louvre of the day - this Bolognese staging sought to recover, both physically and vocally, the very manifestation of *grand-opéra* as it was understood at the time of the Bourgeois Monarchy, inflated by histrionic gestures and huge rhetoric, set against an immense cyclorama in which a glamourised parade of semi-mythical personages rose and fell [and danced]. Not a cumulative plot but string of situations, each one more-or-less self-sufficient, and orchestrally depicted as never before (or again).

Astonishingly, and no composer is more astonishing than Donizetti, this ultimate opera breaks new ground continuously, sobriety contrasted with enthusiasm, violence, concentration and force. Few "reminiscences", a new energy, a renewed ambition, a new vision that was never to be "fixed" in the lens. A Gallic Donizetti - the French seductress to the fore "...tout entière à sa proie attachée" of course, but affording him the same generous expansion of resource as already witnessed by Cherubini, Spontini, Rossini and (partially) Bellini.

All of this benefitted by the exchange of venue from Bergamo to Bologna, a wider stage, a smaller house (less seats), and an acoustic sensitive to the slightest nuance. This encouraged the long and opportunistic ballet with the phenomenal Carla Fracci, even if it was stylistically dubious with its c1890 Russian-style *divertissement* and c1920 Ziegfeld Follies of a *corps*. To be welcomed, anyway, as an authentic touch, and better than none-at-all for even the most ungenerous balletophobe (Miss Fracci reminded us that the real popularity of *grand-opéra* depended entirely on the prima ballerina and she, with perfect justice, upheld the authentic tradition). But the singing, here at Bologna, dramatically came into its own with magic results. I had the impression, sitting in my stalls seat, that an entire cast was putting-on the performance of a lifetime. There were moments on the evening of 6 December 1998 which would remain in my memory for ever as the very apex of the operatic experience. Nothing has ever been more breathtaking, in my view, than the battlefield duet in Act II, opened by Zayda (Sonia Ganassi, in towering form) with the initial statement of a formal *grand duet* as it has come down to us, capped, if this is the word, by Sébastien (Giuseppe Sabbatini) with the tiniest thread of a voice, a moment of such exquisite sensitivity, gathering strength little-by-little, that the despair, weakness, hope and love of the defeated king were made manifest without need for scenery or costume. It was a demonstration without parallel in the long history of this magnificent Teatro Comunale, of both the grandeur and intimacy of opera and of the power of great singers to turn art into life. This wonderful scene, a gem set in a wonderful act, marvellously conceived, with its terrible contrast of slaughter and generosity, was wonderfully staged by Pier Luigi Pizzi and with an economy as perfect and pure as the singing of Sabbatini, illuminated by the simplest of means to evoke a moonlight reverie, ghastly with the corpses of the dead soldiers but replete with the angelic mercy incredibly offered in their place. Both these great singers displayed an imagination in their assumption of these roles as never before, Ganassi formidable and authoritative, Sabbatini introspective and baffled by destiny. A propos Sabbatini, there is no need to invoke Gilbert-Louis Duprez. No-one knows what Duprez sounded-like, Sabbatini always has his own ideas about the interpretation of any role he is singing (*Gennaro*, recently, in the unjustly reviled La Scala staging, was an excellent demonstration) and invariably takes a path of his own devising. In this opera he sounded a Sébastien of his own. There can be no more praise than this. He held the house, often enough, on the edge of each note, intuiting emotion into the rapt ear of everyone in the house.

Praising all the cast would not be inappropriate, Robert Servile (hobbling, meaningfully - an accidental addition to the staging?) was a sonorous *Camoëns*, if not quite ideally warm he too took advantage of the acoustic to colour his voice: Nicolas Rivenq, as *Abayaldos*, looked and sang like a North-African angel (oddly, this Frenchman's diction seemed to me to be less clear than that of some of his Italian colleagues!), his big duet with Zayda was wonderful: the scheming *Juan de Sylva* of Giorgio Surian (whose music had been fully restored in this edition) demonstrated that he too was singing one of the performances of his life. It would be invidious to name all the smaller roles but everyone rose to the occasion,

fine singing and acting. The new critical edition of the score (by the American musicologist Mary Ann Smart) brought an orchestral freshness to this music which too was evidence of an authenticity worthy of the millennium. Here, the intervention of the Casa Ricordi with the Comune di Bergamo and the Fondazione Donizetti, brought forth fruit of the very highest quality. The conductor Daniele Gatti, who rehearsed and conducted this vast opera, was worthy of the same praise. The decors were superbly over-parted, only the very last scene in Act V, deprived of sight and sound of the sea, missed the necessary tang of a horizon beckoning - withdrawn by bloody conspiracy and betrayal (shades of Rosine Stoltz).

Will this splendid *Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* be recorded? Will it appear on video? We shall need the Maestro's intervention from above!

**Alexander Weatherston**

(These two articles are prefaced by rehearsal photographs [Courtesy Teatro Comunale di Bologna] of Sonia Ganassi and Giuseppe Sabbatini in the Act II battlefield scene of *Dom Sébastien*, and followed by the *Pas de Trois* with Carla Fracci, Roberto Bolle and Gheorghe Iancu in the ballabile of the same act )

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El Rey - :-

The above is the concluding section of the letter written by Henrique, King of Portugal (*Dom Antonio* in Donizetti's opera) to Philip II of Spain announcing that all hope that his nephew Sebastian has survived the battle of Abd-el-Melek has had to be abandoned and "*he has felt obliged to become the next king*". Henrique had been made Grand Inquisitor in 1539 and Cardinal in 1545. He was a weak king and died less than two years later on 31 January 1580, the addressee promptly seized his throne. Scribe's libretto compacts all this, but the end result is much the same. This letter passed through the London salesrooms in 1984