

## Maria Padilla at Buxton

20 July, 2003

Productions of Donizetti's lesser-known works are regrettably thin on the ground, so it was a cause for rejoicing amongst Donizetti aficionados that Buxton chose *Maria Padilla* as one of its 2003 Festival offerings, giving the piece its first stage production in Britain. The prospect for me, however, was tempered by consistent disappointment with the musical standards of Buxton productions over the last decade (despite the fact that other interesting Donizetti operas like *Torquato Tasso*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Il Campanello* have featured amongst its off-beat offerings).

In the event Buxton turned in a respectable but unexciting account of an opera which, although it has some noteworthy features (like the unusual subtlety of its orchestration), might well be described using the same epithets. The plot was originally to have culminated in Maria's suicide after the Spanish king, of whom she has been the unofficial wife for many years, renounces her in favour of an official French spouse. Much has been made of the fact that this dénouement was in the event replaced by a happy ending, doubtless a consequence of the official censor's not permitting an on-stage suicide, thereby bucking the trend of the rest of the plot. However, this volte face is no more dramatically incredible than in many other more famous operas – as in *La Clemenza di Tito*, for example.

Set in a simple but handsome, galleried square, the sombre hues of which offset the bright colour accents of the otherwise appropriately dark costumes of the Spanish court – both designed by Lez Brotherston – the action was directed in a clear but not strikingly imaginative way by Adrian Lang. Indeed, the culminating dramatic moment, when Maria snatches the crown from Pedro (the king) as he goes to crown his official queen, was a numbingly anticlimactic, meek and apologetic gesture. Brenda Harris (an American soprano making her British debut) had all the notes for Maria, but seemed to lack the ability to shade them with varied colour or dramatic import, and Victoria Simmons (her sister, Ines) appeared to be more at ease with Donizetti's vocal idiom. Both, however, scored a triumph with their lilting Act II duet 'A figlia incauta' – a hit with the La Scala first night and later audiences, and also at the performance I went to.

Amongst the men, Justin Lavender seemed to be having an off-night as Ruiz, Maria's father, who is assigned that rarest of phenomena – a tenor mad scene. Apart from problems of pitch, he sang with a quavering voice that sounded strained and, however appropriate to his aged and unhinged character, unrewarding to listen to. George Mosley as Pedro gave, perhaps, the most vocally accomplished performance, deploying a stylish baritone well equal to the demands of the music.

The young, sixteen-strong, Festival Chorus acquitted itself well, and

managed to make the stage look adequately populated when a bit of spectacle was required. The Northern Chamber Orchestra, under Andrew Greenwood's *con brio* direction, gave a worthy account of the score, although tutti sounded a little boxed-in by the depth of the largely understage pit. This certainly made for audibility of the English translation of the text by Donald Pippin, which kept the largely local audience in touch with the action. Although this doubtless pleased the opera-in-English brigade, I thought its Gilbertian style made for risible absurdity, particularly at moments of high drama.

For that reason, the obscurity (for most) of an Italian language performance might arguably have been preferable. But not only for that reason. In my opinion, performances in English of Italian opera raise another issue seldom given proper prominence in discussions of the merits of such performances. English and Italian vowel sounds differ, but the vowel sounds, as much as the actual rhythmic stress of Italian, are part and parcel of the composer's over-all musical conception. Change them and you change the character and impact of the music itself. This fundamental point remains, however successful the translator may be at fitting credible English to the music, without the English being strained or the actual musical line being altered, although it often is. While the trade-off in communicative immediacy may be worthwhile in occasional cases (particularly in comedies), performances of Italian operas in English usually lack the spring and fluency they have when sung in their original language.

So, for me, the Buxton *Maria Padilla* was never going to be an authentic-sounding performance from a vocal point of view. Nor was it. English seemed to have the effect of emasculating, and thereby lessening, its over-all dramatic impact. Still, given its rarity, one has to applaud Buxton Festival for having given us the opportunity of hearing it at all.

## Ugo conte di Parigi in Bergamo

3 & 5 October 2003

These performances at Bergamo inaugurated what is intended to be a triennial collaboration between the Teatro Gaetano Donizetti on the one hand, and the Accademia d'Arte e Mestieri dello Spettacolo del Teatro alla Scala di Milano and La Scala itself on the other. All the principal singers (whose nationalities, in the absence of any official guidance, you will have to guess at, like me) were pupils of the associated Accademia di Canto, and were trained by Lelya Gencer. Moreover, the scenery (Angelo Sala) and costumes (not credited) were realized by members of the Accademia, which also supplied the chorus and orchestra in conjunction with the Teatro Donizetti chorus and the Orchestra Stabile of Bergamo. An immense and comprehensive project for the Accademia indeed! Besides this innovation, the occasion of this collaboration was marked by the announcement that it is planned that Bergamo will in future hold a Donizetti Festival along the lines of that at Pesaro, with the general intention of staging operas as they appear in the critical edition being undertaken by the Fondazione Donizetti. One

awaits further information about specific dates and plans with bated breath but, in the meantime, one has the sense, with these developments, that we may be at the start of a new era in the fortunes of the master's operas.

The present writer will not enter the dispute as to whether the chopping and changing of the plot which occurred during the composition of *Ugo* were the result of extensive demands by the censor or of capitulation to the demands made by the leading soprano, Giuditta Pasta. However caused, the result was disowned by Romani, the librettist, and it is indisputable that *Ugo* is a shadow of what, dramatically, it might have been. Nevertheless, whatever reservations he had about these changes, Donizetti managed to write a strong score replete with wonderful solos and ensembles. The neglect of *Ugo* has to that extent been undeserved, and Bergamo was surely the right place to give it its first staged performance since (apparently) 1846.

Nevertheless, it was a curious choice as a vehicle for presenting young, inexperienced and (so far as I know) largely debutant singers. The main protagonist of the opera is not, as the title suggests, the tenor role of Ugo, but that of Bianca of Aquitaine - the betrothed of Louis V of France. Written for Pasta, this role offers its singer the full gamut of lyrical and dramatic expression as well as a wealth of opportunities for dramatic acting. In short, it requires a star performer verging on a Callas to exploit its full potential, and one, also, with stamina enough to last its course.

And this was just the problem with the Bergamo performances. Doina Dimitriu, who sang Bianca, is a young soprano of not inconsiderable talent, but she is not yet up to this role. Setting aside her evident nerves at the start of both performances, her technique was under progressive strain, as evidenced by lapses of breath control and her increasing inability to deliver short phrases in a smooth legato, despite having given a beautiful account (at least at the second performance) of the ravishing 'No, che infelice appieno'; the cabaletto of her entry aria, with well-executed trills and runs, and exquisitely floated *diminuendi*. Later, however, as fatigue set in, the unevenness of her vocal production made for an uncertain attack at the opening of dramatically key phrases, and a generally garbled effect as her tone came and went. Nor was the impression she made helped by her very limited range of song-recital gestures, particularly her tiresome mannerism of almost continuously extending her left arm, either to cover her mouth with her fingers, or to examine the palm of her hand (as if she were Lady Macbeth obsessively looking for blood stains). It is surprising that neither the director (Guido de Monticelli) nor Leylia Genger had corrected this. However, all that said, judged as a student performance this was an honourable stab at a taxing role which, at this stage in her career, she was perhaps not properly advised to attempt.

Of the remaining singers, all were - again in student terms - perfectly adequate to their parts, and in one case more than that. Carmen Giannattasio (soprano), as Bianca's sister Adelia - a role created originally for Grisi - gave a well-rounded performance both vocally and histrionically that stamped her as a name to look out for in future. Sim Tokyurek (contralto) as Louis V also made a big impression, as much for the size of her voice as

the controlled way in which she used it, marred only by some slight coarseness in the loudest passages. Milijana Nikolic (mezzo) as Louis's mother, Emma, sang well, although she looked much too young to be a queen mother. Yasuharu Nakajima (tenor) as Louis seemed more at ease singing out, when he sounded reasonably heroic, but less so in his rather hesitant recitativo or when singing at less than forte. Finally, Dejan Vatchkov (bass-baritone) displayed an attractive voice with a distinctly Slavonic timbre, which he used to good, if slightly underpowered, effect as Folco, although a little strained at the bottom of his register.

The young conductor, Antonino Fogliani, adopted judicious tempi, led with precision, and nursed his singers along with only a few lapses of coordination between pit and stage. The chorus was adequate, and the orchestra (apart from some raggedness once or twice) played excellently. The decor, based on Sanquirico's designs for the first performance, was particularly pleasing. Framed in the geometrical perspective of a series of white-edged, black flats, emphasized by perspectival lines on the floor, Sanquirico's designs not only looked very handsome, but gave an air of period authenticity to the whole proceedings - a pleasant relief from the trendy decor with which so much ottocento opera is nowadays afflicted. The production was safe and traditional, with the singers often adopting statuesque poses which looked entirely right against the period setting. But there were several needless deviations from the stage directions. At the end of the first part, for example, Ugo, instead of yielding his sword to the king, snapped it in two over his knee - which suggested it was unlikely to have been of much use as a weapon anyway. (Such gestures are best left to Siegfried testing Mime's swords.)

In the end, I have to say that I had the impression that I was present at two dress rehearsals for the future performances at La Scala. The second (particularly the first part) was much more secure than the first - some singers had been brought closer to the front of the stage - but both performances offered considerable pleasure, even if they lacked the full professionalism one would normally expect at Bergamo. They gave a fair impression of the opera's strengths and weaknesses, without perhaps being eloquent enough to persuade one that here was a wholly unjustly neglected masterpiece.

Alex liddell



pp12 & 13 *Ugo conte di Parigi* in its Bergamo revival after a century and a half of neglect but using the original La Scala sets by Alessandro Sanquirico. Photos courtesy of the Teatro Donizetti di Bergamo.