

Donizetti's *Il Castello di Kenilworth*

Donizetti Festival, Bergamo

Charles Jernigan November 2018

The other rarely done Donizetti opera this year was *Il castello di Kenilworth*, sometimes known as *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (seen Nov. 24). It was Donizetti's first attempt to transform the Romantic vision of Sir Walter Scott into an opera and a model not only for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, another Scott-based work, but also the three "Tudor" operas which have become repertory pieces in the last 25 years—*Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux*. Thus *Il castello di Kenilworth*, which premiered in Naples on July 6, 1829, to a libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola, is an important transition piece. Musically, it seems to me, it is a sort of tryout for *Lucia*, while the plot certainly suggests the characters in the Tudor operas of the 1830s.

Leicester (tenor), who lives at Kenilworth, has secretly married Amelia (Amy Robsart in English history) (soprano), but he wants to use Queen Elizabeth's attraction to him to his advantage in advancing at court. When Elizabeth announces that she is coming to Kenilworth, Leicester has Lambourne (bass) hide Amelia in a subterranean part of the castle in hopes that the Queen won't discover his marriage. Amelia falls into the hands of Warney (tenor), who desires her for himself. When she refuses his advances, Warney vows revenge. Amelia escapes from her prison and meets the Queen, explaining that she is married to Leicester. The Queen is furious and orders her arrest, but further confusion occurs when Warney declares that Amelia is married to him. Amelia laments happy times gone by and her grave disappointment in her less than chivalric husband in the opera's best aria, "Par che mi dica ancora..." Meanwhile, Elizabeth becomes truly regal and gives up her own love for Leicester; she forgives the couple, and the opera ends happily, sort of. The unusual thing about the libretto is that the tenor-hero is a disgusting person, willing to imprison his new bride to foster his ambitions, and then he blames her! The production certainly emphasizes this because it makes it clear that the couple is hardly reconciled at the "lieto fine." As Elizabeth urges Leicester to "hug your bride," in the production, they look tentatively and sadly at each other. Can they really reconcile after what he has done? Also, when Leicester has Amelia sent into hiding (against her will) the production puts her in a kind of cage-prison. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is left alone at the end, in a 'prison' herself, a fact emphasized in the production when a grid rises from the stage, placing her on one side and the others beyond her. In deciding to act as a sovereign, she has isolated herself emotionally, forever

Musically, Amelia's aria, "Par che mi dica" and its cabaletta, "Fuggi l'immagine," is accompanied by glass harmonica, certainly the model for Lucia's Mad Scene, for which Donizetti wanted a glass harmonica as accompaniment, although he was forced to settle for a flute. We also have Donizetti's ability to create immediately memorable melodies on full display in this opera, although sometimes the tunes seem more generic rather than directly connected to the character or the circumstance.



Amelia, Leicester

At Bergamo, the production (by Maria Pilar Pérez Aspa) was traditional in faithfully following the story, and costumes (by Ursula Patzak) were Elizabethan. The stage set (by Angelo Sala) was very simple—a bare, raked stage with a blank background. The only accents were done with lighting (by Fiammetta Baldiserri) and tapestry-rugs which were rolled out on the bare stage.



Amelia, Elisabetta, Warney, Leicester

The cast was very strong. Jessica Pratt looked wonderful and sang better as Elisabetta, especially in her final aria “È paga appien quest’anima.” She acted well and varied her cabaletta repeats excitingly. Equally good was Carmela Remigio as Amelia (Amy) di Robsart. She is a powerful singer and her duet with Elisabetta was splendid. Xavier Anduaga was also in good form in the thankless role of Leicester. He looked every bit the handsome young man that Elisabetta might swoon over, and his singing was much more secure than his arias in the Gala Concert. His best music comes early with an aria and cabaletta followed by a major scene with chorus. I was impressed with his well-projected light tenor. Stefan Pop was a menacing Warney. His tenor, quite different from Anduaga’s lighter voice, was also powerful and well used. Dario Russo and Federica Vitali played minor roles.

Riccardo Frizza, who is the Musical Director of the Festival, conducted the orchestral forces (about 50 strong) expertly. The Opera Donizetti Chorus was good too. Frizza is emerging more and more as the inheritor of Gianandrea Gavazzeni, the great Donizettian of years past and Bergamo native.