# GLORIOUS BALFE

The National Concert Hall, Dublin is a forbidding slab of battleship-grey granite that exudes no hint of Irish warmth. Luckily building and contents can often be at odds: that was certainly the case on 25th September when the bicentenary of Michael William Balfe's birth was marked in his home city, at last reborn, emerging from being dubbed something like the 'Victorian Andrew Lloyd Webber' (was such a person ever needed?) into a fully-fledged composer of full-bloodied Italian romantic opera (although the contemporary title of the *"English Rossini"* seems hardly to fill the bill).

It is the possible title of 'Verdi *avant la lettre*' that proved most intriguing: *Falstaff* had been released from his Shakespearean thraldom as the plaything of those Windsor harridans long before the 1893 of the Boito/Verdi version. There really was no need to raid the Henry IV plays to flesh out Falstaff, or to build up Ford/Brook into a pallid shadow of Iago. Here Balfe and his librettist Maggioni show there was quite enough flesh on the old codger for the voices of an A-list cast to bring the frustrated Elizabethan adulterous frolics back to dramatic life. Even a hint of 'A life on the ocean waves' didn't break the enjoyment; it only served to remind listeners that Ottocento attitudes to the ownership of a good tune were then more flexible (and rewarding) than now.

Generous praise, then, to the RTE/Opera Ireland team that brought this single performance (and recording promised by end-October) together in such a short time. A Gallic Falstaff (Marcel Vanaud); stiff Ford (Sam McElroy); stridently youthful Fenton (Barry Banks); and dominantly Cockneyesque Mrs Ford (Majella Cullagh), the whole cast rose to the challenge of the demanding vocal writing. The evening was kept on track by the inspired controlling baton (at one point flung by mistake among the soloists) of Marco Zambelli. This proved a *concertato* of Euro-fare, cooked *al dente*.

**Douglas M.Bennett**

Basil Walsh, whose essential biography **'Michael W.Balfe. *A unique Victorian Composer'*** appeared last year [Irish Academic Press 320 pages. illus. hardback €39.50/£35.00] tells us that work has already begun work on the next opera to follow the great success of *Falstaff*. This will be *Les quatre fils Aymon*, premiered at the Opéra Comique in Paris on 15 July 1844 with a livret by Adolphe de Leuven [pseud. of Count Adolf Ludvig Ribbing (1765-1843) one of the assassins of Gustave III] and L.L. Brunswick which had an extensive German-language circulation (prima Vienna 1844) as *Die vier Haimonskinder* and was given at Her Majesty's in London in 1851 as *I Quattro fratelli* starring Sofia Cruvelli and Italo Gardoni (Walsh op cit 199. 208-9 & 213) The full score is in the British Library.