SCENA E ROMANZA
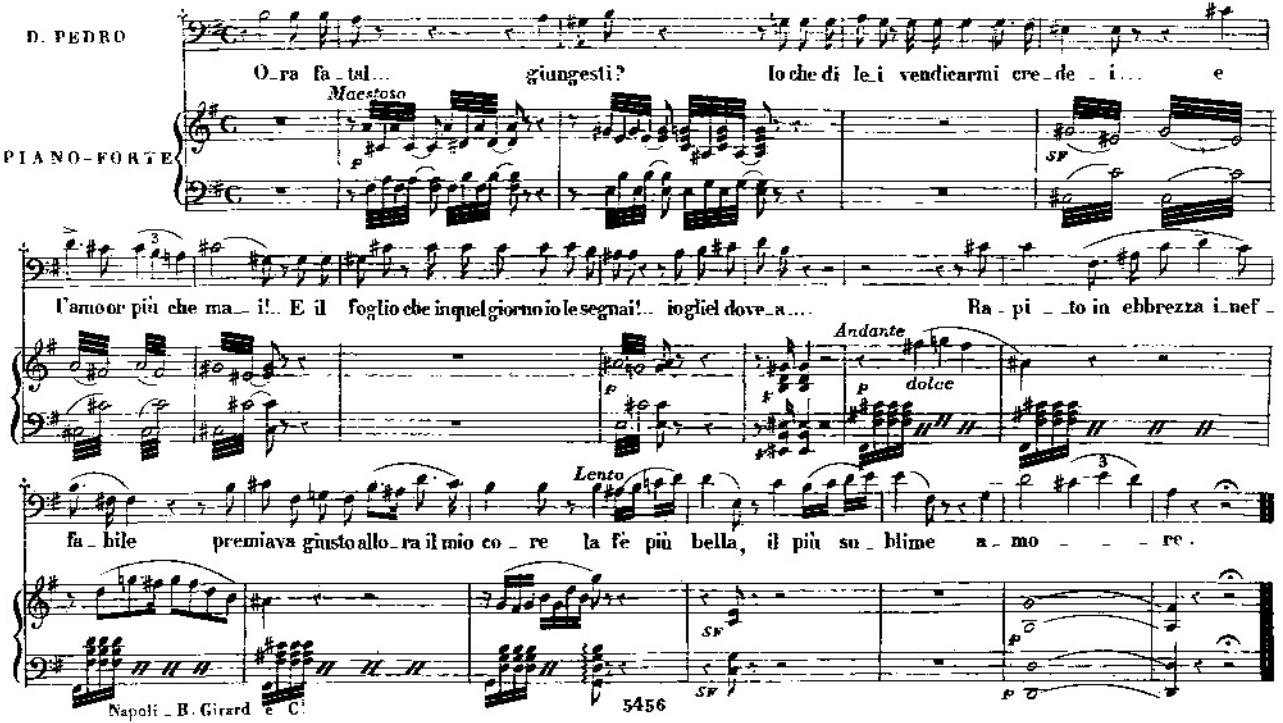
Ah! quello fu per me ...

Eseguita dal Sig.r Ronconi

N. B. Questa Romanza si è cantata di mezzo tono

Gr. 15

La stessa nel tono originale per Mezzo-Soprano o Baritono Gr. 15
La stessa per voce di Contralto..... ..... Gr. 15



Maria Padilla

Washington Concert Opera November 9, 2008

Dan Foley

After her miraculous 1973 resurrection in London by Opera Rara, Donizetti's fiesty Castilian heroine seems to be aspiring to American citizenship. Stony Brook, San Francisco, Omaha, and Minneapolis, have played host to her. Now she adds Washington D.C. to her Yankee itinerary. Washington Concert Opera has a reputation as a champion of Italian rarities, mounting performances of such works as *Stiffelio, Bianca e Falliero* and *Tancredi* in past seasons. The casts have generally been first-rate, with such singers as Stephanie Blythe, Vivica Genaux, Barry Banks, and Sumi Jo – to name only a few – having participated in past performances. For 2008-2009, Artistic Director and conductor Antony Walker offers up the boldest gambit yet: in addition to *Maria Padilla*, in May 2009 we will be treated to Mercadante's *Il Giuramento*, featuring Elizabeth Futral as Elaisa, the exciting young tenor James Valenti as Viscardo, and veteran baritone Donnie Ray Albert as Manfredo. Local radio personality Colleen Fay delivered a pre-concert lecture in engaging and funny style. Lamentably, she summed up her talk with at best a lukewarm assessment the score's quality, alleging that many of the pieces were workaday - interchangeable with pieces from any other Donizetti opera. Neither her talk nor the program notes drew attention to the opera's unique features – the rich orchestration, the Spanish coloring woven throughout, and the interesting genesis of the title role, written in different phases for the unlikely trinity of Frezzolini, Löwe, and Tadolini. During the Q&A session, one audience member expressed a different viewpoint, assuring everyone that there isn't a weak page in the score, and that all were in for a treat. How prophetic that prediction proved!

Scarcely an empty seat was in evidence at George Washington University's Lisner Hall. Right from the first outburst of the brass section, it was clear we were in for a roller-coaster ride. Walker is himself a trained singer. During the last act of *Aida* in Pittsburgh he sang Radames from the podium when the tenor was taken ill – and his ovation was the wildest of the evening. He is a conductor of the Leonard Bernstein school, as much a performer as his vocalists. His passion and joy for Donizetti's music manifests itself kinetically. Wild leaping and gesticulation, twitching hips, crouching, and spry little soft-shoe dance moves are part and parcel of his direction.

If this terpsichordian display didn't elicit such thrilling results from his orchestra, soloists, and chorus, one might be tempted to criticize it as too distracting. But the proof is certainly in the pudding, and Walker shows a remarkable sensitivity and enthusiasm for Italian music - rarely was there

anything I would have wanted done differently. Perhaps it is his training as a singer that makes him ideal to interpret a paragon of singers' music like *Maria Padilla*. Tempi were tastefully chosen, dynamic shading was expressive and varied, missed cues were almost non-existent. Slower, "Bellinian" melodic lines were properly savored, while the more urgent passages were attacked with unapologetic enthusiasm. And the tension between virtuoso vocalism and emotional intensity that exists in all works of this period was perfectly maintained. All the singers appeared to be well-rehearsed, with nary a misstep in the recitatives, ensembles, and the elaborate cadenzas. If anyone knows how to serve up delicious Donizettian fare, it is Maestro Walker.

Promising young coloratura Leah Partridge tackled the role of Maria with skill and gusto. In a recent *Opera News* interview described the role as being "Lucia on steroids" (would mere steroids have transformed the shrinking violet Persiani into the formidable Löwe?). Her start was a bit slow, with the voice needing a bit of time to warm up, but before long she was at her full powers, with a gleaming, bright tone, a stellar trill, well-articulated coloratura runs and roulades, and convincingly conveyed the emotional import of the words and notes. In the great central confrontation between Maria and Don Ruiz, she was heartbreaking in her intensity. The second verse of the final cabaletta was bejeweled with new, high-flying ornamentation that almost, but not quite, got away from this ambitious young soprano. The standing ovation that washed over her at the end of the performance was well-merited. Of all the singers, by far the best from a technical viewpoint was mezzo-soprano Jennifer Rivera. Donizetti was most unkind to Luigia Abbadia, his original Ines, giving her so few friendly bars of recitative with which to warm up before the incredibly tricky *aria di sortita*! But Rivera's performance was an object-lesson in perfectly-executed fioritura. Her tone is beautiful and warm, but rather more like a soprano's in its weight than a mezzo's. Paired with Partridge in the great duet for the two sisters, "A figlia incauta," she perfectly matched her partner's every run, trill, and mordent.

Justin Lavender – one of only two currently active tenors to have experience with the role of Don Ruiz – replaced an indisposed Bruce Ford at short notice. His familiarity with the role was obvious, and presumably his intermittent glances at his score were only required because he previously had sung the role in English (at the Buxton Festival in 2003). His phrasing is a bit ragged – it wasn't the notes themselves that were the problem, but what was between them. That aside, his performance was a most exciting one – the top is beautiful with a real Italianate ring, is beautiful, particularly the high notes. He had a clear purchase on the character's outrage, madness, and grief – emotions

he poured out relentlessly, liberally resorting to *parlando* for dramatic effect. The audience (including myself) obviously liked his performance a great deal. The weakest link in the cast was bass-baritone Mark Doss as Don Pedro. Doss cuts an imposing and handsome figure and clearly possesses a remarkable instrument (a fact that is most obvious when sings at full volume, where the voice is very beautiful and full-bodied), but looks and natural talent alone do not qualify one to sing bel canto. Breath support was a critical weakness; when he tried to produce sound at anything less than forte, the voice flickered and sometimes just disappeared. He was unable to produce the long, slow cantabile lines required by the score, nor did he have the dramatic commitment or grasp of the text that mitigated Lavender's vocal problems.



The chorus was excellent. They not only knew the music, but clearly grasped the meaning and importance of the text. Lisner Hall's acoustics were a bit unfriendly, however, for they sounded as if they were placed a bit too far back in the auditorium. A very good supporting cast rounded this exciting performance. Richard Novak as Don Luigi was most impressive, using his big and very pleasing tenor to great effect, especially in the delicate Act III trio with Partridge and Rivera . The role of Maria's duenna was taken by Kate Vetter Cain, whose few lines allowed a glimpse of a strong and beautiful voice that undoubtedly will move on to bigger and better things. As the Duca D'Albuquerque, Bryan Jackson was a menacing presence, stalking on and off stage, but his voice was barely audible. The orchestra was very well-rehearsed and the instrumental soloists were all top-notch, even in the most demanding obbligato passages. A thrilling evening, and an opera one would certainly like to see staged more often. Can we dare to hope that *La Padilla* will find her name in lights at the Met on day?