SUITE BERGAMASQUE: RARE DONIZETTI

Charles Jernigan, November 2018

Every year in late November the Donizetti Opera Festival takes place in Bergamo, where the composer was born in 1797 and the place of his death in 1848. Two years ago the principal opera house in town, the Teatro Donizetti, closed for renovations and all the Festival activity was transferred to the recently restored Teatro Sociale in the old city, Città Alta, which sits on top of a hill in the middle of the new town (Città Bassa). It was heartening to see that work on the Teatro Donizetti is well under way, but the composer himself would have known the Sociale, which is a ten minute walk from his birthplace, now a small museum. It is something of a shock to walk through the narrow, cobbled streets of Città Alta, now alive with Christmas lights and decorations, with the sound of selections from various Donizetti operas blaring from loudspeakers all over town. I don't know of any other town where one walks the streets to operatic arias and choruses.

The Festival, dedicated to performing the master's work, has been going on for many years, but a few years ago it took a decided turn for the better in terms of consistency and quality of offerings. Today, the celebrated conductor, Riccardo Frizza, is in charge of the Festival and the importance of the singers and equipage has lifted the undertaking towards a more exceptional and scholarly-based realm, with major singers, important musicologists turning out critical editions and interesting productions.

In 2017 the Donizetti Project was started, with the intention of producing one work each year on the two hundredth anniversary of its premiere. Prior to this year, those were student or incomplete works, but in November, 1818, Donizetti's first stage work which was professionally produced had its debut—*Enrico di Borgogna* at the San Luca Theater in Venice. Thus this year's Project offering is that opera, on the 200th anniversary of its first performance. Also on the docket is *Il castello di Kenilworth*, which dates from 1829 and was Donizetti's first venture into the realm of Tudor history, a vein which he would richly mine in the 1830's.

GALA CONCERT

Everything started off with a Gala Concert on November 22, dedicated as usual to Donizetti, but this year also to Rossini, because in 2018 we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of his death. There was indeed a gala group of singers gathered at the Sociale: Jessica Pratt, Daniela Barcellona, and two tenors—Xabier Anduaga and Levy Sekgapane—along with the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale of RAI and the Chorus of the Donizetti Opera. There were overtures from *Tancredi, Semiramide, Don Pasquale* and *La Favorite.* Ms. Barcellona obliged with two of her awe-inspiring standards, "Oh patria!…Di tanti palpiti" from *Tancredi* and "Eccomi alfine in Babilonia…Ah! quel giorno" from *Semiramide* and one not-so-standard, "O mon Fernand" from *La Favorite,* while Ms. Pratt essayed the entire mad scene

from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Levy Sekgapane, a hot new tenor from South Africa, sang "O fiamma soave" from *La donna del lago* and "Cessa di più resistere" from *Il barbiere di Siviglia;* Mr. Anduaga, a young tenor (he is 23) from Spain sang the aria "Je suis joyeux" from *Rita* and "Cercherò lontana terra" from *Don Pasquale.* It was a formidable program!



Inaugural Concert

Most notable was Jessica Pratt's rendition of the Mad Scene from *Lucia.* Not only was the lady in top form, but there was a glass harmonica player placed in a stage box which accompanied her throughout, even in the traditional vocalizations that Donizetti did not write. It was really quite wonderful, and made one long for the whole opera. Barcellona was equally spectacular, except that in the *La Favorite,* I could not understand one word of her French. Mr. Sekgapane sang the tenor lead in Rossini's *Adina* last summer in Pesaro opposite Lisette Oropesa. His is a lovely light tenor with great flexibility in the mold of Juan Diego Florez and José Camarena. Mr. Anduaga was not quite up to the same level, and needed a score brought in for his two arias. He had some trouble with the high notes in "Je suis joyeux," but he redeemed himself in the *Don Pasquale* aria, which was pursued with a fine sense of legato phrasing.

Riccardo Frizza was super with the overtures, especially the monumental *Semiramide,* which he has been recently conducting in Venice with Pratt in the title role. Sasch Reckert was the much applauded Glass Harmonica player.

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Next year's Festival will include the first ever staged performances of *L'ange de Nisida, Lucrezia Borgia* in a new critical edition and the Donizetti Project work, *Pietro il Grande, Czar delle Russie.*