

DONIZETTI

Maria Stuarda

When Maria Stuarda was given its first performance in England at the 1966 St. Pancras (now Camden) Festival it was enthusiastically greeted by the audience and hailed by the critics as a major discovery. Andrew Porter writing in the Financial Times was particularly appreciative of the fine things in the opera and described it as "one of Donizetti's strongest, most gripping operas". However some three years later when reviewing the Naples production he "wondered for two acts how 20th century adults could sit through a ridiculous drama cast in musical cliches : stock forms, conventional melodies, harmony and orchestration though skilfully deployed. The whole thing seemed a costly, monstrous absurdity and, ... I began to feel a revulsion from the whole pompous apparatus of old-fashioned grand opera".

This revised opinion could not be put down to a passing touch of Neapolitan colic on the part of Andrew Porter because writing in 1971 (again in the Financial Times) when a concert performance of Maria Stuarda was given in London with Montserrat Caballé he said "I must own to thinking that most of Act 1 of Maria Stuarda is from a musical point of view empty rubbish, that Act 2, apart from some moments in the 'dialogo della due regine' is little better, that from Act 3, only the sequence of the 'duetto della confessione', the 'inno della morte' and the 'preghiera degli scozzesi' represent Donizetti at anything like his best level, and is worth serious attention".

Mr. Porter is a respected critic of many years standing and his opinions cannot be ignored but was he being fair to Donizetti and Maria Stuarda? Writing in the May 1977 issue of OPERNWELT about the performances of the opera given earlier this year in Holland, Imre Fabian says :-

"...Donizetti's Maria Stuarda is slowly beginning to conquer the operatic stages. A gramophone recording contributed to this. It is however still an (almost) unknown piece, although it has earned a well established

place in the repertory of our opera houses. An obstacle to a general acceptance could be problems in casting; the opera demands singers of the highest calibre in its two major female roles.
... Seen shortly after the recent production in Vienna of Norma, the musical and dramatic qualities of this Donizetti opera made the feeling and virtuosity of all Bellini's beautiful melodies seem pale. Maria Stuarda is a masterpiece of operatic writing on the same level as the major works of Verdi. The arias of Elizabeth in the first act and her duet with Leicester are among the most powerful and most beautiful in all romantic opera. These offer the singer of Elizabeth brilliant opportunities for acting and for dramatic singing, and demand from her almost the impossible from below mezzo range to dramatic coloratura. One wonders why the opera is not named Elisabetta! I can well understand the quarrel between the two protagonists prior to the premiere, since after that Elizabeth dominated act, the singer of the title role has no easy task. In the second and last acts she has opportunities in magnificent pieces of music but the tension and drama of the first act is not attained again. Donizetti must have been more intrigued by the person of Elizabeth compared to which the spirited iridescent personality of Queen Mary Stuart appears somewhat too flat and stately".

So there we have two greatly differing views of the same opera. Where can a balanced assessment be found? I suggest the following introduction to the opera by Jeremy Commons and the rest of the contents of the Journal, the catalyst for which was the first performance of Maria Stuarda at the Royal House, Covent Garden.

The contributions from many leading Donizettians have been based on the results of the latest researches and the Journal is a gathering together of all the most recent and important studies, especially revised and largely rewritten.

J.W.