Il Burgomaster di Saardam

John Allitt, Newsletter 2, July 1973

Our visit to Il Borgomastro di Saardam proved to be a memorable evening. We had unfortunately chosen the evening when the make-up artist tragically died whilst attending to Renato Capecchi, the cast was obviously shaken. The evening ended with the present-day Burgomaster making a speech explaining what had happened. It was a great privilege to be present at a revival brought about by persons who took such care in preparation. All our admiration goes to Mieke de Goeje for her production of the opera which had a constructive love for theatrical values often lacking today. Likewise our heartfelt thanks to Jan Schaap for his careful edition from the original manuscript, and his sensitive conducting of a work which he knew as it it had been his own child.

The people of Zaandam rendered homage to a work of art which immortalised their history. The town's historical architecture, complete with windmills, was recreated on the stage (I wonder what Sanquirico's sets for La Scala in 1828 were like?) The chorus had made their own costumes with a care to gladden the experts of the Victoria and Albert Museum. I wonder if, one day, Kenilworth and Calais will follow the examples of Liverpool and Zaandam.

Il Borgomastro dates from 1827 and as yet Mayr had not addressed his pupil as 'maestro'. However the opera is a mature work and reveals forms which Donizetti was to use and polish for the rest of his life. There are shadows of Elisir d'Amore and even of Don Pasquale. It is so important to revive these comparatively early works in order to have a better understanding of the composer's work. With Il Borgomastro Donizetti had broken with selling his music 'alla Rossini' (i.e. L'Ajo nell'Imbarazzo of 1824). He even felt confident enough to quote Rossini 'en passant' (Betly 1836), no doubt half in jest, half in respect.

The opera begins with an interesting overture, a composition which grows on one when re-heard. Here Donizetti is consciously refusing to write another sinfonia in the accepted style. Simple phrases are built up in order to be compared, whilst banks of chromatic sound are juxtaposed to each other.

A short bubbling introduction indicates that we are in the world of opera buffa (melodrama giocoso, to be precise). The shipbuilding chorus is sung against the rhythm of hammers and chisels, the second verse introduces a 'spanish' dance. Gilardoni's text relates to the exploration of distant lands, perhaps Donizetti was thinking of Spain as a maritime power, of Columbus and the Americas. Next follows a duet between Czar Peter and Peter Flimann, a deserter from the Russian Army. Both are working in disguise, one from a need to eat, the other in order to learn the techniques of shipbuilding. Flimann sings of love and its ideal, while the Czar recommends him to smoke a pipe and have a drink as a safer occupation. There follows a section for the soloists and chorus, the news is that the Burgomaster Wambett is making his way to the shipyards. The Czar and Flimann express their agitation amid a boisterous chorus. Flimann confesses to the Czar, his earthly lord, that he is no more than a worthless deserter, however he has chosen love as his guide. The Czar to his astonishment watches all fear disappear from Flimann's face as he professes such an ideal.

The next scene introduces Marietta, Peter Flimann's beloved. She is under the protection of her tutor the Burgomaster, and she enters along with the other womenfolk who are bringing baskets of food for the workers. Her aria 'In seno al contento' conveys her beauty, innocence and charm. Marietta has none of the vixenish qualities we find in Adina, Rita or Norina, she captures the hearts of men through her simple dignity. Since Donizetti was at this time courting his own beloved Virginia, no doubt something of her grace has found its way into the character of Marietta.

Perhaps we may note at this point that Donizetti, due to his traditional theatrical background (La Commedia dell'Arte, Goldini, etc.) thinks in types rather than personalities. The Czar, Flimann and Marietta are universal types to be found in all stories.

The plot continues with the entrance of the perennial Fool; none other than the Burgomaster himself. He immediately separates the men from the womenfolk because he hopes to command their attention better that way. To the best of his ability he reads one of those incomprehensible letters from the Authorities, similar to those well known printed forms we all receive from the Income Tax Inspectors from time to time. A certain 'Peter' is working in the shipyards and on no account must he be allowed to escape. He vainly believes he has 'la politica' to sort out the whole matter.

The Burgomaster orders all the women off the stage, he now turns with all his 'politica' to solve the riddle of which Peter is to be arrested. He starts with confidence, encouraged by the prospect of appearing in good face with the Authorities for his diligence. He is soon, however, reduced to a state of imbecility. He who thought he had what it takes ('la politica') is left empty-handed. Note the sequence 'tu ti chiami?' in which typical orchestral themes, characteristic of Donizetti, weave their fate around the characters, dragging them forward to their destiny. The scene ends with echoes of Il Campanello (1836).

The first part of Act I has virtually ended, Donizetti is left with a problem, so far he has not introduced Ali Mahmed, the Divan's special envoy, who is also looking for a certain Peter..... the Czar. He is in Saardam with diplomatic proposals concerning Turkey, Russia and the Black Sea. Donizetti introduces him in a short recitative scene with Wambett, and dispatches them, and the scene with one of his most sauntering and infectious melodies. Only a composer completely assuredóf his theatrical techniques would have dared such simplicity.

The second scene of Act I takes place in the local tavern, 'The Three Swans', Wambett and Ali enter, presumably from their sauntering walk. Ali mistakes Flimann for the Czar, the real Czar lets the situation develop in order to deceive Wambett, whose stupidity annoys him. Eventually Czar Peter gives the Burgomaster a firm blow which floors him. The Burgomaster's dignity and social status has been humiliated by one whom he believes to be no more than a mere worker. The scene develops into one long Rossin-type crescendo. Women enter with the news that soldiers are occupying Saardam, next a captain enters with a handful of soldiers. Another letter from the authorities informing Wambett that this certain Peter is crimping the people of Saardam. Since he has not yet discovered who this Peter is, he orders the soldiers to arrest all present in the tavern. The captain wonders if the poor man is in his right mind and turns to Marietta for an explanation. Wambett thinks the captain is about to arrest her ..... and so begins a whirling merry-go-round of arrests, misunderstandings and orders of release. The scene ends with all present acknowledging Flimann as the Czar of Holy Russia.

The first part of Act I set out the characters and the main points of the plot, the second part was an antithesis of confusion; Act II beings all to synthesis and contains some of the opera's finest music.

The setting is now the street outside Czar Peter's house in Saardam, a short prelude quotes the drunken soldier theme from Il Barbiere di Siviglia: it is very pertinent after the confusion of the previous scene. Flimann is now dressed as the Czar, Marietta enters grieving for she thinks she has lost her Peter now that he has turned out to be a Czar. Peter assures her that he is no more than a miserable deserter meriting death according to the law, he still loves her. They swear to their ideal, promising that not even death will separate them. The moral of the tale being that Peter's head is not turned by his 'giorno di regno', he remains himself and thus passes the test which life has presented to him. His honesty eventually wins him his beloved. The love duet is a fine number in which the composer continues his themes of naive innocence and the quest for the ideal. The music's simplicity is the scene's hidden strength.

Various short scenes lead to the Czar's aria, 'Va, è la nave, in un baleno' and its cabaletta, 'Non piu di barbara'. The scene is powerful and it is the opera's highlight. Next follows a buffo scene between Wambett and Marietta. He proposes to her. She jeers at him and mocks him. The Burgomaster's pride is again bitterly wounded. I wonder if anyone heard a theme which Donizetti was later to use to great effect in Maria Padilla? His self-borrowings become disguised, developed, changed, adapted. In Il Borgomastro the theme passes by, half-noticed; in Maria Padilla it is transfigured into opera seria, and becomes a show-stopper.

The opera concludes with the complete humiliation of the Burgomaster; he is, literally, reduced to silence, and though acting, sings not one word in the finale. The true Czar reveals himself, he has learnt the art of shipbuilding and will now return to Russia. Flimann is forgiven and made a naval commander: his greatest reward, however, is his promised marriage with Marietta. Marietta brings the opera to a close with a rondo.

It is worth noting that Donizetti wrote another opera based upon the 'life' of Czar Peter. This was Il falgename di Livonia (Venice, 1819).

The opera reminded us that Donizetti was rooted in a long theatrical tradition through the genius of Mayr and contacts with literary persons such as Sograffi and Rossi. He followed in the wake of Goldoni and understood comedy as reflecting profound insights into humanity. Through making his audience laugh, he believed he could give expression to thoughts from which an audience might well wish to protect themselves. There is a deep perennial wisdom underlying an unassuming work like Il Borgomastro. We have already referred to Flimann's initiation, but what about Wambett? He is, after all, the hero of the piece. Is he not the Fool inside all of us, if we only have the courage to acknowledge him? Too easily we think we possess 'la politica' to solve life's problems; too often we unwittingly set ourselves up against those greater than ourselves, too frequently we vainly believe that we can succeed in winning the heart of the girl we had hoped to be our beloved, and so on. Donizetti's characters are mirrors to states of being, which we know in our own hearts, and through which we must pass if we are to mature, like Dante, recognising the Hell, Purgatory and Paradise within the subtlety of the self. Thus Wambett is stripped of his pride and vanity. Let Donizetti himself explain the meaning of Wambett's humiliation:

> 'The dress which clothes us in order to appear before God will announce either depraved baseness or good deeds, it is the same for the king as for his subject. We will all travel, indeed all mankind will be made to walk the same path. The loss of every treasured object only serves to give us greater encouragement to follow that path in the hope of meeting again - this helps to infuse balsam into the rest of life - I know it to be so - I have proved it - and yet few believe it to be so'

Here is the heart of Donizetti, it is the core of his music and his theatre.