DONIZETTI'S ISLAND by Alexander Weatherson

Operatically speaking, islands have always been places reserved for soul-storms - Alcina's island and L'Isola disabiata are good examples of the genre. Donizetti in his Il Furioso all' isola di San Domingo, fully licensed by the romantic era, has contributed actual elemental disturbances and his island is literally blown apart by both emotional and tropical gusts. In fact Jacopo Ferretti and Donizetti in this work produced an unexpected variant of the romantic hero, the man who always wants to be alone - their hero is the furious husband, shaken with rage at his wife's infidelities who has taken refuge on the Island of San Domingo, blind-for a time-literally with fury he is the object of fear and pity by the natives who regard him with awe and it is the anguish of these comic attendants that is so moving when they find themselves impotent to help him.

A contrast between extremes is the hallmark of opera semiseria, an artform that has almost vanished from the stage but which in many aspects has a claim to be considered the backbone of all true Italian opera. Donizetti wrote a handful of such works, most of them at the start of his career and Furioso is possibly the most sensitive and complex of these. Its date betrays the changes that are taking place in Donizetti's art. Framed by Fausta, L'Elisir d'amore, Torquato Tasso and Lucrezia Borgia for example, the years 1832 - 1833 show the second stage - that of expansion and experiment that followed the worldwide acclaim of Anna Bolena; in these operas he is always trying to erode boundaries, to modify conventional forms and to place the opera on a more fluent and organic basis. The theme of Furioso was ready-made to help him in this. Against a shifting canvas of comedy, shipwreck, storm-sequences in 6/8 metre, of mood changes - anger, bitterness, pathos and sudden radience, Donizetti can be heard inserting arioso between recitative and aria, melting cavatina to duetto to ensemble and marshalling his forces steadily and logically so that each concertato or ensemble comes on as an inevitable - rather than contrived - event.

The text, full of flashback reminiscences is a nearly perfect vehicle for Donizetti's empathic commentary on the anguish of despair, irresolution and heartbreak and like most other examples of the art-form, La sonnambula for example, this is a most sympathetic score.

Opera semiseria was already expiring quietly when Donizetti produced Furioso the happy Italian concept of an opera with something

for everybody was giving way to the straightjacket of opera with one dominant mood. It could indeed be argued that this kind of work embodied all the virtues and vices of the southern tradition, an opera contrived for a volatile population, inconsequental, haphazard, only half-serious (what anathema this must have been to pedantic ears in Leipzig) but at the same time reserving the right to be relatively unprogrammed - with the latitude to bend both the music and the plot to the inventive vein of the composer.

By the 1830's opera seria had become more predictable even than opera buffa and only the greatest composers of the peninsula were willing to tackle its limitations.

Bellini and Donizetti were always railing at the laws which prevailed, wanting to abolish arie di sortita, the allegro sections of scene to merge recitatives in the musical texture, to get rid of the banda, rondos and so on. Both these maestri looked to opera semiseria to help them break the mould at a certain point of their careers and both indeed used such scores as a proving ground for the discoveries they would use elsewhere. Il Furioso is a mine of innovation, breaking conventional shackles almost throughout but not in any way abandoning the melodic resourcefulness and rhythmic underpinning that Italian opera (and Italian audiences) demanded.

Without too, falling for the inconsistancies of dramma giocoso Donizetti succeeded in evoking a freedom almost forgotten for well nigh a century, conjuring up a vocal line where a full lyrical cantilena blends into neo-dialogue or arioso, a freedom just about banished in the preceding age of Metastasio but familiar to us in England in the operas of Handel at his most felicitous.

The opera was first generally known as 'Il Furioso nell ' isola di San Domingo, the original printed score (Ricordi) makes this quite clear; probably because a play of this name was familiar to audiences - a play that had its origins in Cervantes 'Don Quixote', hence the Spanish background to the libretto. A certain laxity about its proper title was always in evidence, 'Il furioso all' isola di San Domingo' being succeeded by 'Il furioso dell'isola di San Domingo' and so forth (this last of course at the Teatro Carolino of Palermo, an opera house distinguished by performances of works seldom heard anywhere else -

Arturo e Elvira of Bellini for example, and Orietta di Lesbo of Verdi).
The title role was written for the superb bass-baritone Giorgio Ronconi who carried moist eyed audiences with him almost from the instant he arrived on the stage to sing 'Raggio d'amor parea' an aria which is the essence of his role. He made a sensation as Cardenio (a fact which alone broke new ground as baritones in the theatre of his day were almost always villains or fathers)
The opera's prima at the Teatro Valle, Roma on the 2nd January 1833 was one of the happiest of its time. Donizetti wrote the next morning 'the public.... shouts and calls us out', it went on shouting; La Scala Milano, alone ran up 36 performances the same year and it remained in the repertory for some 30 years.
In performance - and especially perhaps in a concert performance - Il Furioso needs dramatic singing with a greater need for declamatory skill this is usual in Donizetti's works, particularly at this stage of his career. The finale that ends Act 1 is in many ways one of his high points and achieves a tension and a cohesion of a towering order. The opera has its own distinction and its own special niche in Donizetti's oeuvre. Both its mood and colouring are unique in their intensity and reach a poignancy, a real tragedy (and a real violance) the more compelling for the framework of near-pantomime, its creole-kitsch setting. It is, in its own way an island in his career and it will be rewarding to hear its performance after a silence in London for 143 years. (C) A. Weatherson

IL FURIOSO Original cast

Cardenio	Giorgio Ronconi
Eleonora	Elisa Orlandi
Marcella	Marianna Franceschini
Fernando	Lorenzo Salvi
Kaidamâ	Ferdinando Lauretti
Bartolmeo	Filippo Valentini
conductor	Giacomo Orzelli

Teatro Valle, Rome 2 January 1833
First modern performance:
Siena: Teatro Rinnovati 14 Sept 1958
C= Ugo Savarese E=Gabriella Tucci
F= Nicola Filacuridi B= Silvio Maionica
K= Alfredo Mariotti Cond: Franco Capuana



Giorgio Ronconi as Cardenio in *Il furioso*