'IL MIO DESTINO È QUESTO.....' by Alexander Weatherson

Not often is London so prodigal. On Thursday there was *Don Pasquale* at Covent Garden, well cast for once, with Sir Geraint Evans in magisterial voice - each nuance of his role absorbed into a personification that seemed inevitable on the stage, with Luciana Serra - a bright sound which turned steely when her Norina became Sofronia and then melted so engagingly that one suddenly realised how long it is since we heard an Italian prima-donna sing this role, a young Mexican - Francisco Araiza, as Ernesto who both looked and sounded the part and sung as ardently and sweetly as one could have wished, and Jonathan Summers camping the duplicitous Doctor Malatesta- every bit of stage business played to great effect and a sure vocalism that underpinned everyone else. The sets we all know, ingenious, efficient, the gags as good as new (especially the stuffed cats-surely not quite as many as before?). The chorus was admirable, looking and sounding credible too, so well turned out that each member seemed to add one more tiny facet to a prismatic staging. And there was a new conductor: under the baton of Guido Ajmone-Marsan - an Italo/American - Donizetti's sometimes dusty-sounding score came up fresh as paint. Rhythms crisp, each new theme deliciously moulded, he has the pulse of this music in his blood and I hope he comes to London to conduct Donizetti again. But the real joy was to experience an expert restaging, in Richard Gregson's hands the comedy gleamed and the audience came out of the theatre in that kind of good humour which is the sole reward of all this talent and hard work. Donizetti would have been delighted.

On Sunday there was the trmendous throwing-open of the neglected *La gioconda*. It was as if some theatrical Aladin had suddenly revealed a new wonder - indeed the orchestram the London Symphony no less, opened coolly but Anton Guadagno's furious advocacy of this heartrending score gradually engaged them in playing which-to their amazement perhaps, certainly to ours- made music of such poignancy (and such force) that they found themselves at the heart of the grandest of Italian Grand Opera almost against their will. Of course a Denny Dayviss/Alan Sievewright concert performance made no concessions to the kind of musical cheeseparing that afflicts our opera houses. With a vocal line-up that reads like Deutsche Grammophon's next press release this opera, which *needs* great voices, found itself with such a trio of stellar performers that frankly few people in the audience could believe their ears. No muffing, nothing kept for reserve, no accomodation asked for or needed, *La gioconda* in the superb throats of Ghena Dimitrova, Placido Domingo and Piero Cappuccilli was the golden age of

singing live and in front of us and people simply turned and looked at each other, so long is it since we heard anything of the sort on the stage.

Italian opera is not non-existant in London, there is *some*, not terribly adventurous and depressingly reliant on tinkering with the score or the production as if something was needed to make it palatable to modern audiences.
Managements have the idea that nineteenth-century opera has to be'reinterpreted' before people can take it, that 'melodrama' or 'stock gestures' or any such of the dreadful shibboleths that so inhibit our sociologists-cum-producers have to be swept under the carpet before Verdi can let rip, that outsize characters have to cut down to size. But this is of course to the size of the management, audiences in general- and aided by recordings - come to the theatre with optimum expectations and mostly, as a result, leave it disappointed.

If only, for example, Covent Garden could take serious opera as seriously as it takes comedy! Their last *Lucia di Lammermoor* is a case in point. The gifted Katia Ricciarelli came on to sing 'Regnava nel silenzio': after the recitative, Alisa - instead of obeying Lucia 'ascolta' departed to a rock or something some twenty-five yards away and there took up her knitting - it was too dark to see what exactly (possibly she was reading the programme book to catch up on the plot), any dramatic effect that Lucia's gory revelation might have had came to nothing. Even this pales compared to the 'mad scene'. While their newly widowed hostess wandered among them stark-raving and blood-spattered, the wedding guests stood around as at a cocktail party scarcely deigning a glance, one choral madam remained seated ogling the audience throughout. Of course such operas have to be played for everything they have got, and this I'm afraid means paying attention both to the words and the music *and* to the spirit in which such melodrammas were written. The whole quality of the opera of the day was forceful and extrovert, though much of the singing could be subtle or reflective the action was invariably overlifesize - which means that response to the words or situation was exaggerated; outsize gestures were just as much an ingredient of grandly conceived vocalisation as were the outsize costumes and outsize sets.
It is not that theatres baulk at melodramma, they also shrink from the uninhibited virility of the human voice which - after 1830 or so - came to characterise Italian opera.
No doubt any quality so potentially risible would be pure anathema to the prissy/political echelons of International

producers whose roots, when they have any, are more likely to be drawn from science or kinetics than from art. Unlike performers, these people are self-concious to a fault. As a result great roles in great operas are persistantly undercast, not unintentionally it is to be feared and not only because cash is short, but because there is a wilful desire to moderate their vocal importance. The International tradition is not the Italian tradition, too much of that which would be appropiate to, say, Wagner or Beethoven, gets into Verdi and Donizetti by the backdoor and strives faithfully - if misguidedly - to turn it into something quite different from that which was intended.
When the result is a failure, the critics find their prejudices against these nineteenth century 'warhorses' confirmed and revert to the anaemic joys of other less challenging scores that fulfil the 'International' ideal admirably.

To produce *La gioconda* or *Lucia di Lammermoor* or any such heroic tragedy demands skills that remain in short supply it seems, opera was always a momentous art, always courted disaster, its thrills were always dependant on its cliffhanging vocalism, on the precarious balance between all those talents striving to achieve a moment of subliminal unity - conductor, leader, comprimari, cori, comparse, the lighting engineer, promptor, prima donna, primo uomo and the rest - whose fragile alliance could only be appreciated in full across the footlights. The applause of the audience respected this sense of hard-won perfection even when - as the apex of an art which conceals art - they were cheering some resplendent celebrity whose voice soared in triumph above all these problems. Is it too much to expect an *authentic* staging of these operas?

