COVENT GARDEN - RITARDANDO SOSTENUTO by Alexander Weatherson

IT HAS BEEN fashionable for quite a long time to be rude about Covent Garden, there is a sort of cabal of silly critics who never find anything good about the productions there, though their standards for other houses are curiously flexible, as for the displeasing minority fringe of fierce defenders of 'the other place' - they float along on the hot air of denigration by never going near Floral Street and thinking virtuously of all the money they've saved. How satisfactory then to hear at Covent Garden the kind of performance that throws all this kind of shabby dissent into its correct perspective. A promenade staging of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* on Saturday 3rd May was simply a revelation of what can be done with those highly suspect features of the traditional opera house, star system, jet-lag, foreign language and all, yet an evening as radiant , as flawless, as superbly satisfactory as possible, with the thronging audience pouring out afterwards in a glow as near to bliss as ever is likely in this unpredictable world.

The production, though not in its first youth, was in pristine condition and rehearsed as if it was brand new. *Everything* worked, no gimmicks were necessary as everyone on stage was a professional and those of the staff who designed, dressed and directed the performance knew their job; no one had been given a task without an exhaustive apprenticeship elsewhere (and how often can St. Martin's Lane say that?) . As for the cast, everything expected of Sam Ramey was fulfilled fourfold, what a voice! And what a talent! And if commuting to Bologna in between stagings is supposed to be harmful, I can say that I have seldom witnessed such complete mastery, such a total command of every inch of the stage. Domingo's successor in the title role I have no hesitation in declaring to be Domingo's equal- and even superior- in that Neil Shicoff looked and sounded like a young romantic and threw himself into his quadripartite adventures with such a zany spontaneity that one almost forgot how beautifully he was singing the role. (When you were able to wrest your eyes from this engaging figure you realised that he had a voice in the top rank).

Of course the first thunder of applause went to Luciana Serra for her brilliantly articulated Olympia, she may have only one role but it was perfect from every angle, her special triumph was not that she made the role sound *easy* -no one could do that- but she made it sound effortless which was the kind of superhuman accomplishment we were going to hear many times that evening. If Karan Armstrong's Giulietta(not an especially grateful role in my view) was describable as delicious it probably underestimates the hūge skill that went into the staging of the

Venetian phantasmoria. Again, the setting *worked*. the orchestra sounded happy, the *comparse* had a field day; for once it did not seem improbable that gondolas could legitimately be employed ferrying amorous couples to and fro' instead of the elderly American tourists and expensive funerals of today(how useful if they could do a deal and get together). Nelly Miricioiu'was a wonderfully touching Antonia, she has a big voice which makes effective use of a breathy vibrato . Coming so late on to the stage, when everyone else was warmed-up, she took over the emotional pulse of the huge audience without a tremor and then held them in the palm of her hand. The Dante-esque seance masterminded by Dr. Miracle was brilliantly done, in fact the whole of this scene with its sharp vignettes of Crespel and the servant Frantz(Francis Egerton's French should be commended- as should his senile capering) was handled with remarkable sensitivity and proved to be the heart of the opera as Offenbach certainly intended.

Somehow the untarnished expectations of the promenade audience below swept over the whole house and touched every tier of spectators, especially the connoisseurs in their newly-gilded eerie under the dome. Orchestra and conductor gleamed, the curtain-calls were heartfelt and included showers of golden daffodils bought in the street outside. It was a glorious evening.

All this makes one wonder what hope there would ever be for one of Donizetti's more important operas to get such a staging. The record, so far, has not been very good. Does every revival of lesser-known Donizetti have to feature Dame Joan? And does it have to have reach-me-down sets cannibalised from operatic flotsam and looking like it? I should like to make a little list of operas and singers which could usefully be put together, one which would fill the house from top to bottom and, be viable for co-production elsewhere. Why ever cannot Covent Garden stage *Poliuto*? Are they afraid of all those far-from-flattering togas? A score hallowed by Callas has a ready-made audience appeal; *Poliuto* does not ask for impossibly attainable vocal acrobatics and has precisely those heart-stopping coups-de-théâtre which Covent Garden seems to adore. Two of his French operas could well be considered; *La Favorite* is that rara avis, an opera with a mezzo-soprano in the forefront, the opera world is full of splendid mezzos absolutely longing for Leonora's not entirely sad fate- a *French* version of this opera, properly staged at Covent Garden, could be set for a world tour (and give a fillip to those fervent balletomanes we never seem to meet) As for *Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal* there is no excuse now to pretend

that there is no modern edition, there is, and it is in the original language. This opera-which the composer thought to be his masterpiece- is probably the one most suited to the tastes of modern producers with a minimum of routine and a maximum of scenic magnificence. Is it not possible somehow to persuade opera directors that *Dom Sébastien* is a more exciting opera than *Don Carlos* , and is likely to inject an infusion of life into the incredible tedium into which mid-nineteenth century opera has fallen under the impact of too many *Trovatori and Traviate!*

As for the singers , if they don't hurry we shall never hear Caballé in one of the Donizetti roles which have in fact been her greatest achievement. Where is Alfredo Kraus? There are two roles for him above, and also two for Agnes Baltsa, or Tatiana Troyanos, or Stefania Toczyska, or Lucia Valentini-Terrani (you can take your pick). Singers I am waiting to hear at Covent Garden: Lella Cuberli Rockwell Blake; Margarita Zimmermann. Everyone has their own list of lacunae: *Roberto Devereux* (a better opera than Anna Bolena); *Marino Faliero; Il duca d'Alba; (in Salvi's version).* And of course there's *Élisabeth.* (C) A. Weatherson.

PS. We could, I suppose, have a competition to guess why Covent Garden wants extras on stilts for *Fidelio* (see page 4) My own guess is that someone has been looking at Goya's etchings, but there could be a more obvious explanation - a burst pipe? Swan Lake overflowed?