alle prese con le cose più grandi di lui.

(Teatro La Fenice, 16 dicembre 1990).

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La Straniera del ventisettenne Bellini, trionfalmente andata in scena al Teatro alla Scala il 14 febbraio 1829, meritò allora il successo decretatole dal pubblico milanese e merita tuttora la nostra speciale attenzione. Opera di atmosfera romantica e sperimentale, più "belliniana" del Pirata, esige non meno di questa uno strenuo impegno vocale, un'estrema calibratura, chè più che mai qui tutto si gioca sulle sfumature. Un'esecuzione "routinière" o approssimativa della Straniera servirebbe solo ad accreditare la convinzione che si tratti di un melodramma decisamente minore. Il valoroso (ma per altri versi) Teatro Verdi di Trieste, dopo le due edizioni del 1830 e 1831 (quando ovviamente non si chiamava ancora Verdi), non l'aveva più ripresa fino ad oggi.

Se La Straniera ha trovato in Gianfranco Masini un vigoroso concertatore alla guida di un'orchestra agguerrita e in Denis Krief un regista - oltre che scenografo - preoccupato di offrirci le immagini neogotiche di un medioevo cupo e maligno, contorto nella psiche e nel fisico (come comprimari, coro e comparse ben evidenziavano), la compagnia di canto non si può dire che abbia adeguatamente sorretto l'esecuzione. Lucia Aliberti (Alaide/Agnese), a mio parere troppo incautamente osannata quale belcantista e specialista belliniana - di quest'opera in particolare - ha inseguito affannosamente per tutta l'opera con brandelli di talento il personaggio della sventurata regina, imbroccando fortunosamente giusto l'aria finale : quanto a tecnica, voce, stile e presenza scenica, è apparsa la sconfortante caricatura di se stessa (benchè il pubblico triestino non sia sembrato di questo avviso). Suo "degno" partner l'anodino tenore Vincenzo Bello, uscito malconcio dal confronto col difficile ruolo di Arturo. Esangue è stata l'Isoletta di Sara Mingardo mentre è risultato stretto il nobile ruolo di Valdeburgo al raffinato baritono Roberto Frontali. Tra le note positive va annoverata la prestazione del quinto personaggio, pressochè onnipresente, cioè il coro. Tutto sommato una Straniera che è preferibile dimenticare.

(Teatro Verdi, 18 dicembre 1990). FULVIO LO PRESTI

I Capuleti e i Montecchi tragedia lirica in due atti, musica di Vincenzo Bellini, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia 26 April 1991

An evening at La Fenice - like the Bellini opera which was the object of this visit - is best described as *"contrastato"*, not that the performance was anything but admirable but because the delicious theatre was packed solid with an elbowing, pushing and shoving crowd fresh from the tourist-infested *Serenissima*, as rude and inappropriate as possible. Even the old ladies who throng Italian Opera Houses were off form (overheard from behind:- First Old Lady: *"That's not La Ricciarelli!"* Second Old Lady: *"No that's Romeo"* First Old Lady: *"But he's a woman!"* Second Old Lady: *"Dio mio!"*). I suppose a revival of Bellini's somewhat secondhand score is bound to be subject to *longueurs* and this was no exception. The Covent Garden staging is not to my taste, too frigid, too childishly divided between *red* Capulets and *blue* Montagues in toytown costumes, with outsize cliché statues guarding a Juliet whose "tomb" is the floor. The awkward disposition of the painfully jolly *cori*, the unimaginatively stagy grouping of the principals merely underpinning Bellini's thoroughly inept recitatives. The fact that suddenly this score takes fire with melodies of such melting ingenuity, such a ravishing exposition of operatic magic, simply underlines the static intervals between them and which this production absolutely failed to address. Conversely, the cast was well-chosen and able to respond to the challenges of Bellini's (at times) unforgettable music. First, Katia Ricciarelli: as beautiful as ever, a moving actress, her Giulietta was touching and effective but with the voice spreading under pressure and virtually non-existent above the stave more than a few times absolutely distressing to hear. Diana Montague: ("Diana Montecchi" she might have been called in the nineteenth-century when names were Italianised happily) was not only appropriately cast nominally, but had the *physique-du-rôle* in every way, swashbuckling, hyperactive, lithe, a full bellissimo canto romantic interpretation in a well-schooled voice. Her Romeo had a distinct success. Dano Raffanti: he is no *tenorino*, nor a physical lightweight, but employs his musical tenor to full advantage despite his marginal role. The rest of the cast was not quite up to their standard, Capellio indeed (the magnificent programme - Italy far outstrips every other country in well-printed programmes which do not treat audiences as idiots - confirmed that Bellini had pruned his original "Cappelletti" for gastronomic reasons!) was often inaudible when the *coro* was in full cry. Orchestra good if a bit ragged at first, Bruno Campanella missed none of the lyrical moments. If this *I Capuleti* was not quite an evening of unflawed musical enchantment it was not his fault, nor that of the theatre or its management and music staff. Musical Venice too is In Peril from over exposure to culture vultures from the bratwurst belt, as if Attila had got there at last in rampant, unseemly hoardes.

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La Fille du régiment opéra-comique en deux actes, musique de Gaetano Donizetti. Théâtre Royal de Liège, 21 April 1991

I know how difficult it is to think of yet another way of setting an over-familiar opera, replete with the wilful stereotypes that abound in this species of score, but putting it down in a museum is *not* alas a brilliant idea, even if as well staged as this was. No, Donizetti's music is not suitable for glass case treatment. Nor can the Saint-Georges/ Bayard plot be treated like a parade of stuffed dummies (these bored people are to be found amongst the designing and production team only). This cavil disposed of, the Liège performance was splendidly enjoyable when it got going, vivid, well-rehearsed and sung, the theatre full (many subscribing clients, enjoying the high standards which are to be expected from the Opéra Royal de Wallonie - the season also including one single performance at the Palais de Beaux-Arts de Charleroi).This French-language

performance sung by a francophone cast appropriate to this *Centre Lyrique de la Communauté Francaise* was no antiquarian team but a highly active crew throwing themselves into their roles as if the opera was new. The leading ladies both come from Toulouse - an unsung musical capital noted for vivacity as well as for quality - Corinne Segrette was Marie, Hélia T'Hezan a rumbustious Marquise, the first looking something like a hoydenish edition of the young Princess Royal but with a vocal compass that is quite exceptional, the second a very experienced singer, acting (perhaps overacting) with extraordinary gusto and an excellent comedian. They were perfectly at home in this music, as was Michel Trempont as Sulpice and Jean-Luc Maurette as Tonio. Only the soldiers seemed to bother with the museum setting (Marie - a uniformed Conservatrice - imagines that her exhibits come to life) and occasionally twitched and stumbled like marionettes, everyone else ignored it. All the high spots of the score went well: Marie's 'Chacun le sait, chacun le dit', her *romance* 'Il faut partir', Tonio's *cavatine* 'Ah! mes amis, quel jour de fête', the choral 'Rataplans'. It is true that the *ensemble* 'Tous les trois réunis' went so fast that any unison was well-nigh impossible, but the lesson scene was absolutely hilarious, funnier than ever, timed with utmost skill, a genuine *tour-de-force* worthy of the best operatic stages in the world. Its a shame not more of the spoken dialogue made an appearance, the theatre was not too big for it to be heard and the cast (for once) was eminently capable of delivering it; all of it was printed in the programme however.

There weren't many *douceurs* in this performance, it was ebullient for the most part and the soubrette vocal line somewhat brittle, Elio Boncompagni kept the score moving, but Act II managed to be quite touching (and, to be fair to the museum setting, was well organised within its fustian premise). How well-placed this fine theatre is to stage the *embarras de richesses* of French scores by Italian composers which is so neglected both in Italy and France and which the European Community could further here with an unparalleled pertinence - both to the city of Liège itself with its linguistic orientation - and to its placing in the Brussels orbit of cultural unity.

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Lucia di Lammermoor dramma tragico in due parti, musica di Gaetano Donizetti, Teatro Regio, Parma 23 April 1991

The reviews for this staging have been of the 'rave' variety, and really with justification. We all know that *Lucia* favours vocal comets who vanish promptly beyond the operatic horizon for ever (I will forbear to name them), but the *Gazzetta di Parma* said *"Perde la mente, trova il trionfo"*; the *Corriere della Sera* said *"Parma assapora il trionfo"*; *il Resto del Carlino* said *"Il Regio si inebria di mirabile pazzia"*. One newspaper indeed compained that there was so much applause for Mariella Devia at the end of her mad-scene that she was not allowed her semi-expiring swoon the composer decreed.

In the face of this hubub, to persuade oneself that the Parma performances were simply a celebration of the vocal stints of yore would be mistaken, the settings were traditional, true, the costumes were of the period Cammarano intended, there was nothing to offend those who went to the magnificent theatre to hear a familiar score, but there was a radical spirit hovering over the interpretation from the beginning. Much of this stems paradoxically from the decision (by Daniel Oren - the conductor) to abandon the original idea of singing the López Cobos edition and reuse the archaic version by Mario Parenti with its lowered keys, traditional cuts and ugly *cadenza* for Lucia. It is as if the unusual empathy between conductor and prima donna had fostered the notion of re-forming the score from within, enhancing its meaning by interpretive strength rather than by musicological nicety. The dangers of such a proceeding were immense, had not the splendid Regio orchestra been utterly