Books

Osborne, Charles **The Bel Canto Operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini**; Methien (London) and Amadeus (Portland), 1994, 378 pages.

This is the sixth in the Osborne series of opera guides. Previously, single volumes had been devoted to Verdi, Mozart, Puccini, Wagner, and, Strauss. Of these, I am only familiar with the Verdi book, which I enjoyed very much. At the time that this book was first published, it represented a significant advance in the analysis of Verdi's operas.

This new volume provides basic reference data on the bel canto operas. These generally include brief details on the circumstances under which each work was composed, historical background, performance histories, plots, and some evaluation of the music.

As it happens, Donizetti composed well over 60 titles, which is almost as many as the combined total of the other five composers dealt with by Osborne. If we add the output of Rossini and Bellini, the net result is that the amount of space that can be devoted to an individual opera is much less than in any of Osborne's previous books. While it may have been possible to argue some years ago that the other composers dealt with by Osborne were more important than the three bel canto composers, this argument no longer holds water for Rossini. And the day should soon come when both Bellini and Donizetti are accorded the respect that is due them. But, even if we accept the basic premise that the three composers dealt with together are less important than those dealt with individually, it would not hold true for individual works. I doubt if even the most devoted Verdiphile (and I am one) would suggest that *Alzira*, as an example, is more important than *La Favorite*. Yet, *Alzira* gets 6 pages of text, including two musical examples, while the Donizetti work gets less than four. The net result is obvious: The coverage of individual operas in Osborne's latest volume becomes inadequate. What there is, makes interesting reading and becomes a useful reference tool, at least for Rossini and Bellini (Donizetti's operas are analyzed much more thoroughly by Ashbrook in his 1982 book; Donizetti and His Operas). Yet, even for Bellini, there are deficiencies. Thus, while the Malibran version of *I Puritani* is mentioned in the text, the fact that it was actually given its world premiere in concert form in 1985 is ignored, as is the subsequent recording of the first staged production in 1986.

By the same token, in his section of performances of *Dom Sébastien* he talks about the inadequate Florence production of 1955, and concludes by saying that the opera still awaits a decent modern revival. I am not sure as to whether he was unaware of the concert performance by Eve Queler in New York in 1984, knew about it and did not consider it decent enough, or merely felt that it should have been recorded. While I would agree with the latter explanation, I have a feeling that it is wishful thinking, and that the first explanation is the correct one.

Osborne also provides many value judgements on individual numbers in the *bel canto* operas. He has a great vocabulary of superlatives

(and negatives), but runs the obvious risk that he is only providing one man's opinion. Some of these evaluations conflict with the published opinions of recognized experts on Donizetti. As an example, Osborne states that much of *Marino Faliero* is mediocre, although Ashbrook has nothing but good things to say about that particular score. Opinions of this kind about an opera as worthy of revival as *Marino Faliero* are dangerous in that they might, if taken seriously (which would be a mistake), discourage a planned production. Frankly, I am at a loss to understand the basis of Osborne's conclusion.

Finally, there is a selected bibliography followed by a selected discography. These are far too selective to be of any use. The bibliography is so thin as to be almost non-existent, and even omits the best and most important of all Donizetti books (Ashbrook's second:, published in 1982, and which contains the previously mentioned much more thorough analysis of Donizetti's operas), while the first (dating from 1965) is included.

As for the discography, I find it hard to decide what the criteria for selection were. Logical grounds might have been availability on CD, completeness, sound quality, inclusion of a libretto, quality of presentation, a preference for "authorized" versus "pirate" recordings, or the existence of various performing versions. Yet, no pattern emerges, except possibly a personal preference for some of the singers involved. A few examples: For *Roberto Devereux*, the Sills is listed on LP while the Caballé/Carreras (available on CD) is ignored. For *Poliuto*, the CBS (with Carreras) is listed, while the more complete Nuova Era recording is not. For *Maria di Rohan*, the "pirated" Melodram, available only in conjunction with another opera, is listed, while the authorized (and, to my mind, much better) Nuova Era recording is not. The brutally abridged Rinaldi-Kraus *Linda di Chamonix* is included, but not the much more complete old CBS version with Stella and Valetti (then available only on LP). The Malibran version of *I Puritani* and the Abbado version of *Capuleti* are also both inexplicably omitted.

Also, as long as the main title of the book is the **Bel Canto Composers**, I can not help but think that it would have been nice to include a supplement dealing with the few operas of Coccia, Mercadante, Pacini, and Ricci that have been performed and recorded-or were at least planned/rumored at the time the book was being written. It is a short book, and the addition of a few more pages would not have hurt.

Having said all this, I must add that it does contain a great deal of useful information, especially on the Rossini and Bellini works. While it seems to be aimed more as an introduction to the *bel canto* operas for the beginning opera fan rather than the specialist in the *ottocento*, it will still be a worthwhile and essential addition to the library of anyone who enjoys these beautiful operas.

There has been an absolute plethora of new books of interest to members of the Donizetti Society in the last few months. I will review a few of them in time for this issue, and a few more for the next issue:

Simpson, Adrienne: **The Greatest Ornaments of their Profession-the New Zealand Tours by the Simonsen Opera Companies, 1876-1889**; Univ. of Canterbury, Christchurch, 154 pages

A fascinating story, thoroughly researched, of an almost unknown and previously totally ignored aspect of the history of opera. The book deals with the Simonsens, who also toured Australia extensively. They made four lengthy tours of New Zealand: in 1876, 1880-81, 1882-83, and 1889. In addition to the obvious big four cities (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin) they visited a number of other towns including Nelson, Napier, Invercargill and still more places, many of which were totally unfamiliar to me, and in which I never would have expected performances of bel canto operas to have taken place. Operas were given in both Italian and English, and included such surprising rarities as Auber's *La Part du Diable*. The most important singer of the company was Frances Saville.

A separate chapter is devoted to each tour, and includes a chronology with the dates of each opera in each city. Casts are provided separately in a section devoted to the New Zealand premieres by the Simonsen companies. There also are occasional casts in the narratives and/or reviews that accompany each season.

A useful and delightful piece of work. Highly recommended.

Preston, Katherine K., **Opera on the Road-Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-60**; Univ. of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill. 1993, 479 pages

A first class study of touring opera companies in the United States from 1825 to 1860. The amount of research and scholarship that went into this book are absolutely remarkable. While there is no single formatted chronology as such, many of the individual chapters do provide tables giving the cities and operas performed by various touring companies, and also providing dates but few casts. The amount of previously unpublished information about the activities of these touring companies is staggering.

The bulk of the book comprises chapters on the following:

1. *Vocal star troupes*

2. *Jane Shireff and John Wilson*

These two chapters deal primarily with English touring companies active in the late 1830s into 1840. There are a number of tables giving cities and repertory.

3. *Italian Opera Companies 1825-1860*

This chapter is exclusively a narrative history of some of the more important touring companies.

4. *Max Maretzek and His Astor Place Company*

There are extensive tables giving their repertory and itineraries.

5. *English Opera Companies*

Narrative dealing with various English companies, especially the Seguins.

6. *The Pyne and Harrison Opera Company*

This chapter again provides several "mini chronologies" in addition to narrative.

Then, there is an epilogue, followed by four appendices:

A. *Personnel of Italian Opera Troupes 1833-1847*

The rosters of twelve different Italian companies are provided.

B. *Itinerant Opera Companies Active in the United States 1841-1848*

C. *Itineraries of Italian Opera Companies in America, 1847-60*

D. *English Opera Companies 1847-1860*

Itineraries of numerous companies are provided, as well as copious footnotes on these companies.

Gaspare Nello Vetro: **Lucrezia Agujari-la "Bastardella"**; Edizioni Zara, Parma 1993, 193 pages

Lucrezia Agujari, also known as La "Bastardella" (and other nicknames with the same meaning) did not enjoy a long career, since she retired around 1782 at the age of 38 or so, only to die some two years later after marrying the composer Giuseppe Colla. Nor was all that much known about her, at least until this book was published late last year. But what career she had, lasting some 16 years, was brilliant, and took her to the principal opera centers of the time, including Paris and London. She is perhaps best known by the fact that Mozart had written about her, commenting on her bravura abilities.

It is good to have a book on this fascinating singer, and better yet to know that it was written by a musicologist of the caliber of Gaspare Nello Vetro. Vetro had lately been delving into many nineteenth century figures-among them Gomes, Bottesini and Emanuele Muzio, so it is somewhat surprising to see him going back even further into history. But when he tackles a subject, he does so

with great ability and with great thoroughness. He provides hitherto unpublished details about her life and about theatrical conditions in Italy during the third quarter of the 18th century. Finally there is a brief chronology of her appearances.

A welcome addition to any operatic library.

Cassinelli, B., A. Maltempi and M. Pozzoni: **Rubini L'Uomo e l'Artista**; Cassa Rurale ed Artigiana di Calcio e di Covo, Romano di Lombardia, 1993, 2 vols. with slipcase, 910 pages.

Issued to commemorate the 200 th anniversary of the birth of Rubini, these are easily both the most sumptious bank books I have ever seen, as well as the most beautiful books ever published on a singer. The quality of the paper, and the beauty of the countless illustrations are almost beyond belief. One wonders if the three composers whose bicentenaries are coming between 1995 and 1997 (Mercadante, Pacini and Donizetti) will fare as well. But, certainly, Rubini deserves no less.

After a brief preface, the authors start with a year by year summary of Rubini's life. Then there is, among lesser sections:

- A moderate sized biography (about 114 pages)
- Correspondence by Donizetti and Bellini in which Rubini is mentioned.
- A chapter on his voice and singing style.
- Rubini's repertory arranged by composer.
- A chronology of Rubini's appearances.
- Comelli's repertory arranged by composer.
- A chronology of Comelli's appearances.
- Excerpts on Rubini from newspapers. These from foreign newspapers have generally been translated into Italian, but some are reproduced as is.
- An essay on critical reviews of Rubini.
- Brief chapters on his brother Giacomo and on the musical tradition of Romano.
- Extensive correspondence from, to and about Rubini. (This comprises almost all of volume two.)

The sum total is awe inspiring. But it should be pointed out that readers of the Journal of the Donizetti Society will find parts of the chronology familiar-since so much of it is based (with attribution in the bibliography) on Bruce Brewer's chronology in