A regal exit

What is the superlative for *grand-opéra*? *Grandissima opera*? *Opéra des grandeurs*? How do you come to terms with music grander than any spectacle, whose intimations dwarf the stage - even the grandest stages of all? This, above all, is the problem with *Don Sebastiano* aka *Dom Sébastien,roi de Portugal* or *Dom Sebastian*, the most ambitious offering, surely, of a maestro about to lay down his pen, especially at that very moment when his freedom, audacity and spirit of innovation had peaked: *"Opera, della quale ho avuto gran cura, e che io reputo lavoro capitale"* the composer himself said with disturbing understatement.

It is fascinating to compare this remarkable score with those of the contemporary Meyerbeer or the slightly later Verdi, grand-opéras which seem predictable - however exotic their setting - in comparison, and thus were better received. In contrast Donizetti seems almost like a tyro at the beginning of his career, too bold by half, too demanding, too challenging, too awkward - as any singer or designer will confirm. Even the plot is too real for credibility. The jingoistic history of Dom Sebastião, King of Portugal, is both improbable and not especially falsified in the text by Scribe, indeed, it accords well with the legend (embroidered a bit by the addition of Zaide) in that no one is quite sure whether the body buried in the pompous tomb at the Mosteiro dos Jéronimos is truly that of the king. Routed in the battle of Alcacar-Quibir the naked piled-up corpses of the slaughtered crusaders were utterly unrecognisable and speculation has always persisted - such was the unbelievable nature of the defeat - that the king was not among them. The funeral of Dom Sébastien was politically necessary (he was buried by order of Philip II of Spain who had indeed, as the opera tells us, got hold of the throne of Portugal - whether a genuine corpse was available or not - in order to ensure his legitimacy). Even the inscription on the monument casts doubt on the tomb's contents giving rise to any amount of romantic conjecture.

Reality, however, was not a prerequisite for success at the Paris Opéra. Triumphs like Auber's *Gustave III* ducked the more questionable bent of that exquisite monarch's amorous inclinations, naturally enough, as for Halèvy's *La Juive* - if its boiling oil upset Bellini - it was was not because it seemed historically to be too correct but because it was too realistically presented for delicate stomachs.

Boiling oil was something Donizetti encountered at the Opéra, *Dom Sébastien* had the most painful and protracted scalding, he was obliged to capitulate ignominiously before the most vicious intransigence that could be mounted by his detractors, mutilating a score he knew to be exceptional in the face of the whim of of a powerful prima donna and a cabal of envious scribblers. Donizetti left the French capital with his score by his side, a working matrix in Italian of the five acts as he had conceived them - all the music he considered essential to this ultimate or penultimate creation - vowing to restage it as soon as possible. It was revived at Vienna on 6 February 1845, in German, with the composer conducting and made the *furore* of his dreams. Such is its background.

There will always be disputes about this score. I personally cannot believe that the forthcoming Ricordi critical edition will resolve anything. From the start it was an opera in flux. No finite position on its music is possible. Even Donizetti himself - I suspect - would refuse to commit himself to a version which did not allow him to make ad hoc

(opposite) Monica Minarelli sings the ActII cabaletta in *Don Sebastiano*. Photograph by courtesy of the Stadttheater, Aachen

adjustments for any particular staging, for.....the singers; the theatre in question; its audience; its orchestra; the text; its language; the sequence; the plot. It was an opera with a matrix but no real contours. It had a message, a mood, a drift as we should say, but no absolute content - rather like the interior of Dom Sébastien's coffin. At this ultimate phase of his career music had become like clay in his hands, he could manipulate it at will. No single rendering of the score was - maybe - ever intended to be like any other.

Maestro Boncompagni, as is well known, has made his edition from the Viennese version of the opera, but he has not - true to the spirit of the above - treated its music as sacrosanct. He has made a *choice* to be sure, thus we hear at Aachen the rumbustuous "*Heinefetter*" cabaletta in Act II - a real tour-de-force - but Zaide's aria in Act V 'È bel per chi s'adora/Für ihn vom Leben scheiden' is missing. And there is tradition behind this too, in Vienna too there was always a certain leeway in performance, the funeral procession for the unfortunate monarch was quite often omitted for reasons of discretion and, as always, a very long opera was subject to pruning for all sorts of temporary reasons.



A scene from a 19th century South American staging in "modern dress'

After a hearing at Aachen of this opera on 6 February 1998, all one can exclaim is: *What a jump in style! Where do you go from here?* No wider gap can be imagined

between this opera and its predecessors, it is as if *Maria di Rohan*, *Don Pasquale*, *Linda* and *Caterina Cornaro* (especially the latter) were on another planet. Is this an exaggeration? Not at all, the cut, the shaping, the boldness and originality of the final act of this opera are not less than sensational. Can this really be the work of a composer in decline as was sometimes insisted in the 50's and 60's of this century?

All carping about the Aachen staging is subject to the proviso that this has been a highly successful revival, colourful, energetic and engaging. True, the Stadtttheater is too small for such a grandiose project but the costuming has been stunning, the settings adroit and appropriate and the roles well sustained. That there was some inequality vocally has not in any way diminished the occasion, the prima donna (Monica Minarelli on 6 February) and Camoens (Ettore Kim) stole the show without undoing their colleagues, the tenor Sebastiano (Robert Woroniecki) did not look ideally youthful and impetuous but sang ardently, the Abaialdo (Mario Taghadossi) was elegant, even eloquent, but did not impose himself on the music. Nor for that matter did the Inquisitor (Randall Jakobsch) though his accents were ideally dark and his stage presence effective. A great deal of ingenious preparation went into this *Don Sebastiano*, movement was contrived in a smallish space and both the *auto-da-fè* and the funeral procession were cramped, indeed the latter closely resembled a Donizettian Jumbo Jet making attempts to land with repeated circling, its flight path ending up more or less where it began. Act I was a trifle rushed; Act II featured an excellent scene-change from tent to battlefield and some good stage movement, simple and effective emotionally; Act III was very dramatic; Act IV was insufficently portentous but musically outstanding; Act V turned out to be deft, swift and admirably lit - and the *finale ultimo* very adroit (especially for all those who had been wondering from the start however it could be possible to make it theatrically convincing!).

Of greatest distinction has been the orchestral handling of this opera. No one can ever possibly underestimate the boon of having the *revisore* as both conductor and *deus ex machina*. Elio Boncompagni - with Donizettian expertise and insight at his baton-tips - is unequalled here and the score of *Don Sebastiano* has been reviewed with affection and sympathy. Some people complained that the orchestra was too loud. This was not my impression, I expect it depends upon where you were sitting in this elegant, well-run and squeaky-clean modern theatre. It <u>is</u> a big score, and decibels are mandatory if such a climactic summation of a lifetime of composition is to be done justice. Certainly on this occasion convincing acting took priority over the kind of *footlights line-up* that in the nineteenth century would have aided dynamics - even for romantic grand-opéra. In all the opera houses of Donizetti's day *stand-and-sing* was the rule (and there would have been an apron-stage for the forceful delivery of *cabalette*). In any event, the consistancy, completeness (however comparative) and coherence of the envelope of sound was quite overwhelming; if this is to be accounted "*noisy*", so be it, and a small price to pay for a truly memorable evening. *(NB The house was full, and was full to the end of the run - 15 performances, before admirable and serious German audiences).* The *dénouement* - astonishing, rich in imagination, a poignant series of snapshops and vignettes, which sees the real demise of the hero - ends with Camoens' cry "*A Sebastiano onore*".

"*A Donizetti - ed Elio Boncompagni - onore*" is how it *should* have ended...

Alexander Weatherson

A revival of this edition of *Don Sebastiano* is projected for Bilbao early next year. With many thanks to Thomas Lindner for assistance in a passing optical difficulty!