Il borgomastro di Dordrecht

Hosted by the whole city, or so it seems, the face of the maestro looking down benignly from every shop window, Donizetti's 1827 opera *Il borgomastro di Saardam* returned to Holland after 25 years amid a plethora of concerts (Donizetti; Vaccai; Rossini), rehearsals, tutorials, breakfasts and brunches and our Annual General Meeting. The reception was warm despite an ever-threatening downpour driving the opera into the adjacent church with a cavernous acoustic. Enchanting music of this kind, admirably rehearsed, cannot fail to please. But what a wasp's nest of textual problems, this score, revised by Jan Schaap for Zaandam in 1973 stirred-up. Neither the *sinfonia* nor its immediate music sounded like 1827, nor - on checking - did the opera resemble the original either in its text, its protagonists or its vocal disposition. What a puzzle. Recourse to the La Scala libretto of 1828 only added to the mystery. As for the Garzanti (1993) *Tutti i libretti di Donizetti*, it proved to be a comedy all of its own (and not for the first or last time I fear). Not only is the libretto printed in that volume anything but that of the first *Borgomastro* (it is that of the Carignano, Turin of 1833) but it is blighted by grotesque interpolations - to our amusement, perhaps, but not that of Donizetti. In it Marietta sings Pacini's 'Il soave e bel contento/I tuoi frequenti palpiti' (written for Rubini in his *Niobe* of 1826) as her entrance aria, and bits and pieces throughout are highly suspect. So much for the usefulness of this interesting publication. As a hysterical coda to the above, the libretto booklet included with the CD ["**Italian Opera Rarities**"] of 1994 proudly reprints this Garzanti confection despite the fact that in the itemised list of individual numbers contained in the same booklet the arias are titled as they are performed in Schaap's Zaandam edition.

Of course there were revivals of this opera until the 1840's, Donizetti had time to rewrite it completely had he wished to do so. In point of fact, for La Scala in 1828 there were major adjustments, not all of them wise. The spoken dialogue and dialect of the original vanished, and so did Carlotta the *seconda donna* (or very nearly). In Act II of this second edition for example there are many changes. Instead of opening with the Czar's irresistible aria and cabaletta 'Va, e la nave, in un baleno' which brings the house down and puts the audience in an immediate good humour, there are five intermediate scenes which serve the interests of the singers more than the plot; instead of Carlotta it is Marietta who sings the rousing 'Senza tanti complimenti' - the only item of the opera to be published repeatedly (to the irritation of the original *prima donna* no doubt) - with the result now that the *prima donna* is constrained to warble through a very taxing duet immediately followed by an inordinately protracted aria finale. The whole act has thus become unbalanced and the title-role merely tapers out leaving the poor borgomastro wondering what to do with himself. [1] Did Ungher, who starred both in 1827 and 1828, impose these changes on a reluctant maestro? No one knows, but can anyone be surprised that the revised opera was given only once?

Alas, most of these changes are incorporated in the Schaap edition of 1973. In **Journal 1 of the Donizetti Society** (1974), Jan Schaap gives an account of the research that led to his revival version for Zaandam, that he used the composer's autograph in the Archivio Ricordi is without question, but the fact that the word

[1] In the original, Carlotta agrees to marry him!

(opposite) ***Il borgomastro di Saardam*** **with Maria Luigia Borsi and Carlo Cigni**
(photo Courtesy H.Piebenga/Bel Canto Festival Dordrecht)

"*originale*" is written on the first page of the overture (which, in any case, is not in Donizetti's autograph) does not imply that the music which follows is that of the "originale" production. Like other of his scores - *Maria Stuarda* for example, *Pia de'Tolomei* or *Maria Padilla* - that which we have in his own hand is far from being what he "originally" wrote, the music of which is only (and then only occasionally) traceable elsewhere. Other of his comments in this paper of 1974 reveal further problems, for example he notes that in this "originale" the secco recitatives - replacing the spoken dialogue of the prima - are written down "*extremely neatly with the words in a beautiful calligraphic writing*" while the rest of the score is "*hastily written*" and "*had to be worked out by copyists who knew Donizetti's handwriting*". Anyone who knows Donizetti's ghastly scrawl must be aware that these recitatives are probably the work of someone else. (Donizetti writing in a "*beautiful calligraphic*" hand? Never!).[2]

Here then, at Dordrecht, as at Zaandam, we have a sophisticated edition of Donizetti's *Borgomastro di Saardam* with *convenienze teatrali* in full measure. *When*, precisely, he wrote some of the score, or re-orchestrated it, is a matter for conjecture which cannot be resolved here and now.

Few of these quibbles about authenticity prevented both Zaandam - and Dordrecht - from making a very convincing success with this music. At Zaandam there was Renato Capecchi in the title role, a great buffo who died on the 28th June - just short of this revival. If Dordrecht could scarcely rival his mesmeric performance in the earlier edition it nonetheless did very well - first Carlo Cigni, then Donato Di Gioia - each singing twice, both young men required to look old and unattractive. Both looked young and most attractive in fact despite artfully greyed locks: the first was hugely engaging with rolling eyes but far too sympathetic; the second more incisive with admirable diction. Neither a true buffo, but both making a vivid essay into this exclusive category of singer.

The imperial visitors were very confidently taken at Dordrecht. Czar Pietro too was double-cast. The first, Riccardo Novaro, had a ringing delivery and rhythmic precision which brought out every audience-rousing frisson of the cabaletta 'Non più di barbara' in which Donizetti marries Rossini so joyfully; the second, Bartolo Musil, had a softer-grained voice and is earlier in his stage career but showed a real temperament for this kind of *mezzo-carattere* role. As Pietro Fliimann there was an authentic boyar, the Russian tenor Kostyantyn Andreyev with a most beautiful voice. He sang four times (as there was no substitute) with elegant command of line and tone. I don't really think that comedy is his métier, romantic roles certainly are, all that is needed is a degree of prudence at the start of an important career. The small roles were often cameos that were very funny in detail and set off by a coro who sang and acted like troopers, Carlotta, for example, had very little to sing but never failed to do something amusing. Both Irina Peereva and Monika Krayewska showed how dead-pan omniscience can often steal the scene while everyone else is singing their heads off. In the Ungher-role of Marietta, too, there was a choice of sopranos. I heard Maria Luigia Borsi twice, the

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2 For a bibliographic account of this (and all the other) Donizetti fonts in the Ricordi Archive see: *Donizetti a Casa Ricordi/Gli autographi teatrali* [a cura di Alessandra Campana, Emanuele Senici and Mary Ann Smart] Fondazione Donizetti (Bergamo 1998), 19-22. This essential work of reference is one of the key contributions to Donizetti studies which have distinguished these commemorative years; the account of *Borgomastro*, however, does not deal with prior changes to the manuscript.

first time she was forcing a little, the second evening she sang with such style and finish that every note rang true, quite excellent. Kirsi Tikka has a bigger voice and fuller palette of sound, as a result her very fine phrasing suffered more from the swimming-bath reverberation of the church, but this was a very creamy Marietta, very stylish. Both were ravishingly pretty girls who pulled out all the stops for the *aria-finale.*

But this exhilarating showpiece of a finale too brings us back to the edition. Jan Schaap's "*originale*" happily contains the near-riotous cabaletta that Donizetti wrote for the 1827 prima, whereas the rest of this score seems to belong to the 1828 La Scala revision. The inference being that at La Scala in fact Ungher sang another aria-finale of her own choice, probably not by Donizetti at all, and not quite as testing as this one at Dordrecht (the text in the La Scala libretto certainly supports this view). Bellini's jeering at the fate of the La Scala *Borgomastro* was thus the more galling for his Bergamasc rival.

What then - people will ask - are the differences between the Zaandam performance and that of Dordrecht so many years later? Zaandam was more angled to comedy, the action was slower, there was much more laughter. Much more was made of the title-role in 1973, as can be imagined, given the casting. At Dordrecht there was less indulgence in farce, the score sounded more lyrical, less verbal if slightly less idiomatic. But if some of it sounded more rushed it also sounded more like Donizetti on the brink of becoming a more serious composer - casting away the Rossinian mantle under a carapace of concertati and froth. In this way - thanks to Maestro Carella, to the Bel Canto Festival and its scholarly standards, to Michael Aspinall and to the other vocal staff - we sense an evolution in the way that we listen to Donizetti today. An live summation, in fact, of these past twenty-five years of revival and renaissance.

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