Torvaldo e Dorliska at Bad Wildbad

10 and 12 July, 2003

Torvaldo e Dorliska was (uncharacteristically) the single Rossini opera offered at this year's Bad Wildbad Rossini Festival, but doubly welcome because of the infrequency with which it is performed. It falls into the problematic category of melodramma semiserio, in this case more melodramatic (in the East Lynn genre) than comic, provoking indulgent smiles rather than frissons of horror or gales of laughter. It is the operatically not-unfamiliar tale of an innocent (and, in this case, newly-wed) maiden kidnapped by the local nobleman and released by her husband – in the mould of so-called 'rescue operas', like *Fidelio*. Coming, in Rossini's output, between *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (with which *Torvaldo e Dorliska* has its librettist – Sterbini – in common) it has, as one would expect, a highly competent score. Although there is considerable self-borrowing from earlier operas, there is also an unmistakable unity of style, and the amount of original music is by no means negligible. The latter can be divided into music subsequently reused elsewhere (some of it in *Otello*, for example), and that which was never re-used at all (like the brilliant trio for bass, baritone and tenor 'Ah qual raggio di speranza' towards the end of Act I).

Musically, the performances were stylish and reasonably pleasing. Paola Cigna (soprano) was a winning Dorliska, both fluent and expressive. Michele Bianchini, the villainous Duca d'Ordow, had a rather cavernous bass, satisfyingly sonorous when singing forte, but apt to lose tone and colour when singing mezza voce or piano. Hugh Rhys-Evans, as Torvaldo, had a nice Italianate timbre to his tenor, but he must avoid forcing his tone, which becomes strident under pressure, and he needs to work on improving the fluency of his recitativo. On the whole the best singing of the line-up came from Mario Utzeri (baritone) as Giorgio, with round, focussed tone, impeccable diction, and a reliable vocal technique. The male members of the Ars Brunensis Chamber Choir provided forthright singing, while the Czech Chamber Soloists of Brno made Rossini's music bubble despite an absence of much shading of volume in the conducting of Alessandro de Marchi.

The production by François de Carpentries was safe, rather than imaginitive or adventurous, and was played in contemporary dress (Karine van Hercke and Bärbel Lomer) against a simple, static, utilitarian abstract setting provided by Siegfried Mayer. Its virtue was that it did not obtrude, but neither did it add much visual appeal to the production. The action was clearly presented, but one cannot help thinking that the director was struggling for ideas when he was reduced to getting his singers (pointlessly) to swing pendant lamps back and forward over their heads simply to avoid having them standing idly throughout an ensemble.

In spite of these criticisms, this was generally one of the most successful productions of recent years at Wildbad. There was a great deal to enjoy, and one left the Kursaal with a spring in one's step.

Alex Liddell