Maria in Minnesota

The Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, are a cultural bastion "out on the edge of the prairie" as Garrison Keeler, host of the long running weekly radio variety show on National Public Radio 'A Prairie Home Companion' terms it. Not only are the Cities home to the Minnesota Opera and the well-respected Minnesota Symphony and the Guthrie Theater, but they also host numerous small and medium size arts organizations. The week I was there to see Donizetti's *Maria Padilla*, one could also have seen productions of *Maria de Buenos Aires* and *La Bohême* as performed by local theater companies and an *Abduction from the Seraglio* in a student production at the University of Minnesota. Not to mention Shakespeare at the Guthrie and Marivaux at another local theater company.

The enterprising Minnesota Opera Company under the adventuresome leadership of Artistic Director Dale Johnson produces a small season of four operas, two of which tend to be repertory pieces, one is a "bel canto" work from the primo Ottocento repertoire and one is a modern work. This season *Butterfly* and *Carmen* are the standard operas, *Nixon in China* is the contemporary work and of course *Maria Padilla* is the "bel canto opera." Next season the standard works are *Tosca* and *Don Giovanni*, the contemporary opera is *Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man* by French composer Laurent Petitgirard (sung in French) and Mercadante's *Orazi e Curiazi*, in its American premiere will be the bel canto work (April 8, 9, 11, 13, and 15, 2006).

For the last several years under Johnson, Minnesota Opera has professed a "Bel Canto Artistic Philosophy" a belief that *"bel canto values, which emphasize intense emotional expression supported by exquisite technique, inform every aspect of the company's programs, from repertoire selection, casting and visual design to education and artist training"*. The Minnesota Opera has a *"commitment to produce works from [the] rich body of early 19th Italian masterpieces"*. Directed by this clear artistic statement, St. Paul (site of the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts where the opera performs) has heard *Semiramide* with Mmmes Harris and Vivica Genaux (2000), *Barbiere* (2001), *Capuleti* with Sumi Jo and Genaux (2002), *Lucia* (2003), *Lucrezia Borgia* with Bruce Ford and Irini Tsirakidis (2004), and this yearls *Maria Padilla*. Future plans, besides *Orazi*, include *La Donna del Lago* (2006-07), *Maria di Rohan* (2007-2008), and Pacini's *Saffo*.

In fact this year's opera was supposed to be *Maria di Rohan*, but Bruce Ford's availability and his interest in singing the role of Don Ruiz (a rare tenor father-figure) and the great mad scene which Donizetti wrote for him in Act 3, convinced Johnson to do *Padilla* now and postpone *Rohan* to a later season. Johnson himself had been fascinated by *Maria Padilla* since it had its American première in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1990 with a virtually unknown Renée Fleming as Maria. The story of Maria Padilla derives from the rich and confusing history of Spain in the fourteenth century. Maria de Padilla really was the mistress of Pedro the Cruel of Castile (reigned 1350-

(Opposite) *Marin Faliero* at St.Pancras Town Hall, London in 1967 with Paolo Silveri, George Macpherson and David Parker. Elena was Rae Woodland. The edition of the opera was based on the Naples autograph. Opera Viva Company conducted by Leslie Head. Photo by Robert Carpenter-Turner

69); his father was Alfonso XI, whose relationship with Leonor de Guzmán is the subject of *La favorite*. His uncle was Dom Pedro of Portugal, also called "The Cruel" whose mistress was Inès de Castro, subject of Persiani's opera of the same name. Pedro did have to marry Blanche of Lorraine, but abandoned her after two days and eventually had her imprisoned and probably ordered her execution in 1361, the same year that Maria died a natural death. The following year, in order to legitimize his offspring by Maria, Don Pedro announced that he had been secretly married to her throughout their liaison. The treatment of Maria's father Don Ruiz and his subsequent madness and Maria's interruption of the coronation of Blanche as Pedro's queen are dramatic inventions.

Maria Padilla is one of Donizetti1s most consistently tuneful operas, but it has two serious problems, well known to Donizettians, which have perhaps worked to keep it from the regular repertoire. First is the vocal writing for the title character: Donizetti wrote half the opera for Erminia Frezzolini, a soprano whose voice suited brilliant, highly decorated lines. But Frezzolini got pregnant and withdrew; her replacement, Sophia Löwe, must have had a different voice, for Donizetti cancelled many of the embellishments he had written for Frezzolini and the last half of the work gives Maria a less decorated, perhaps more dramatic line. Finally, he wrote the final cabaletta for Eugenia Tadolini, another soprano with wondrous technique, when she sang a revised version of the opera in Turin. Any soprano taking on the role today must contend with the differing voice types, not to mention a lot of time on stage singing.

The other problem is the ending. Rossi's libretto, based on a play by François Ancelot, originally has Maria committing suicide onstage after being reproached by Don Pedro for breaking her oath of secrecy regarding their "marriage". Either the Milanese censors or Donizetti himself had second thoughts about her killing herself at the very moment of her triumph, and when the opera opened in Milan on December 26, 1841, Maria died at the moment of her triumph (being acknowledged by Don Pedro as his wife and receiving the crown) in an excess of joy. This seems to have been over the top even for the melodrama of the 1840's and soon the opera was revised by Donizetti with a *lieto fine*, sort of: Maria is recognized by Pedro and ascends the throne as the horrified Blanche of Lorraine looks on and the courtiers mutter. It may be *"lieto"* today, but be careful about tomorrow! None of the solutions seem absolutely perfect as drama, but at least this one gives us the rousing aria finale written for Eugenia Tadolini, 'Oh padre, tu l'odi?'

The new production in St. Paul by Jose Maria Condemi (Stage Director), Cameron Anderson (Set Designer) and Gail Bakkom (Costumes) was fluid and appropriately simple. It took note of the fact that Donizetti in 1841 was moving towards the kind of drama that Verdi would exploit. The wonderful mad scene for tenor in particular was gripping and moving. Condemi seemed less sure of the stand-and-sing moments which hark back to the old style bel canto: the *arie d'entrata* for instance. He framed Don Pedro's last act aria, literally, in a picture frame with a throne. The sets were unobtrusive, except for their symbolism which seemed to rely on empty picture frames: one small frame in Act 1, Sc. 1; a hanging frame in Sc. 2, and a whole backdrop of frames in Act II. Someone told me that they were left over from an earlier production of *Rigoletto*, where they would have

been equally obscure. In the Act III finale the frames move slowly offstage, leaving two large gilt frames framing the lovers and their thrones. The costumes were traditional stage-medieval for the principals and dark for the chorus, probably reflecting the popular idea that the Spanish court always wore black.

Mr Ford and Mme Harris were just splendid as the Padillas, father and daughter. Ford was in secure voice with golden, rounded tones, and he clearly relished Don Ruiz'mad scene. He acted movingly and more convincingly than I have ever seen him before. Brenda Harris was fearless. Having recently sung Chrysothemis in *Elektra* and Vanessa, of all things, one would think that she would be unable to take on this demanding role, but she did it all with secure technique, and without the annoying vibrato that was in evidence when she assayed the role in Buxton in 2003. Of course in the large hall in St. Paul, she did not have to narrow her voice to fit a small house as she did in Buxton. She was especially applauded for the lovely duet with Inès in Act II, perhaps the last of its kind, the end of a wonderful tradition of mezzo/soprano duets that all of the bel canto composers exploited to our everlasting pleasure. Best of all, the Inès, Maria's sister (Karin Wolverton) and the Pedro (Ashley Holland) were as good as Ford and Harris. Wolverton handled her first act aria so well that one wanted to hear more of her than her role affords. Holland managed to invest Pedro's beautiful Act 1 aria ('Lieto fra voi ritorno') with true cantilena, reminiscent of Renato Bruson at his best. All in all, the two performances I saw were wonderful nights for singing.

The Minnesota Opera Orchestra, under Francesco Maria Colombo, played very well and the obbligato moments that Donizetti is generous with were flawless. Colombo kept things moving when propulsion was called for such as in the Act II finale, but he also understood the lyrical moments and let them develop naturally. The chorus, under chorus master Bruce Stasyna, sang and acted well. They were not static and played the contrasts in the lengthy chorus, which opens Act 2, one of Donizetti's very best choruses with its iota-like Spanish rhythm.

The capacity audience at the two performances I attended seemed genuinely entranced by the unfamiliar Donizetti, and if the overflow crowd attending Artistic Director Johnson's pre-opera lecture was any indication, the Minnesota audience is eager to learn. Next year Harris returns for *Orazi* (and if *Padilla* is something of a rarity on stage, productions of *Orazi e Curiazi* are almost unheard of in our time). St. Paul/Minneapolis has become a real Mecca for lovers of the primo Ottocento in America. We must all be grateful to Dale Johnson and his enlightened fellow Minnesotans for their adventurous repertoire and their excellence in musical quality.

Charles Jernigan
Long Beach, California