The Maid of Artois

(Campion Cameo – Cameo 2042-3)

We live in a strange land where the collective mind seems to revolve around cars, beer to excess, the latest chipboard kitchens, golf and the media. The remarkable thing is that amidst this cultural desert there are people who care and who have an enthusiasm that often puts other nations to shame. I think of the Avison Ensemble in Newcastle reviving the music of Charles Avison (1709-1790), a fine baroque composer who proves that there were others than simply Handel composing music of worth in 'the land without music'. Now we can add to Newcastle, Wilmslow. Wilmslow? Where's that? It's somewhere up North. What good has ever come out of Wilmslow? Quite simply the revival of William Balfe's *The Maid of Artois!* But then I guess most people in this educationally impoverished country have never heard of Balfe, less still of his opera composed for Malibran in 1836. Malibran? The questioning may go on and on...

But for us in the Donizetti Society we know who Balfe was and have always yearned for the renaissance of his operas. With this recording members are in for a surprise. Here is a fine work, revived and recorded with great dedication by a group known as 'Victorian Opera Northwest', and with that typical dedication of enthusiasts, for all was done on a shoestring. It's the sort of success that puts big professional companies to shame. It's no good waiting for Covent Garden or ENO to revive Balfe; you have to do it yourself. I am reminded of the seventies when 'Opera Rara' and 'Opera Viva' did so much for Mayr and Donizetti. And we know that from acorns mighty oaks grow. Surely we are, at last, at the beginning of rediscovering our own operatic tradition. How we long to hear an opera by Bishop, Wallace's *Lurline*, MacCunn's *Jeanie Deans*, operas by Benedict, Mackenzie and Stanford. 'Victorian Opera Northwest' has thrown down the gauntlet.

First of all, the reconstruction of Balfe's 1846, revised version of *The*

Maid of Artois, complete with ballet music, offers an early work (originally staged in 1836) at its best. Valerie Langfield, together with those who collaborated with her, must be congratulated and thanked. Secondly, equally
congratulated and thanked, have to be the soloists, chorus and orchestra under the directorship of Philip Mackenzie. Thirdly, Raymond Walker and his team, for they have ensured a memorable recording. Surely it must be the first of a series. 'Operas in English?' May the Peter Moore's Foundation
please take note?

Malibran sung the role of Isoline shortly before her tragic death and received enthusiastic reviews: '*The finale, which Madame Malibran sings must be heard: – to describe it adequately is impossible. It is one of those thrilling pieces with surpassing skill.*" Don't be tempted to listen to the concluding Air de Balfe first; it's the final icing on the cake! It is excellent to have the tale of Manon Lescaut with a 'lieto fine'. Imagine Malibran singing in English and acting all the spoken dialogue!

The overture was rightly encored. It is ten minutes of enthralling music with themes that will discretely occur in the opera. However, Malibran got one thing wrong, Balfe was not 'the English Rossini', but the 'English Donizetti'. (We ought to say 'the Irish Donizetti!) This fact is born out by the overture, for it follows closely the new path the younger generation was treading after the Pesarese's phenomenal success. In this context it should be remembered that Balfe knew the theatrical life of Bergamo and certainly Mayr.

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The first scene represents the Gardens of the Palais Royal in Paris during the reign of Louis XV. The second verse ('And if woman's love is crowning') of the opening chorus has that unforgettable touch of a Balfe melody, up to that point we have been immersed in Italian opera; soon we find ourselves back again in the world of Italian opera. The Marquis's (B) 'scena' has a delightful mixture of *The Bohemian Girl* with Balfe's Italian musical roots. Furthermore we note immediately that this is music composed by a man who himself was a celebrated singer; he had sung the *Barbiere* with Malibran at the La Scala, Milan – it is music made to be sung and tailored for the human voice. There follows Jules's (T) 'cavatina', it is quite splendid. After a section of dialogue (all the dialogue is cut in the recording) there follows the duet between Jules and Sans Regret. Balfe's librettist, Alfred Bunn, must have had *L'elisir d'amore* in mind, for the idea is inspired from Nemorino's and Belcore's 'Venti scudi'. The heart-broken lover signs his freedom away for a little bag of cash and enlists for the military life. A trio concludes the scene as Jules is marched off the stage.

The second scene takes place in an apartment in the Marquis's mansion where Isoline is held virtually captive. A chorus of maidens delightfully prepares the stage for Isoline's 'scena'. The listener will be in for many vocal surprises that Kay Jordan sings with verve. The following duet between Isolina and the Marquis has dramatically the feel of Lucia's scene

when her brother constrains her to marry Arturo; it is as if Bunn wanted to show the operatic world that he was 'au courant' with latest successful operas. Balfe's music is his own and quite differently spiced to Donizetti's. An offstage mechanical storm begins at the end of duet and rumbles throughout Isoline's ballad, 'Yon moon o'er the mountains'. Isoline is close to the window when a drenched Jules climbs indoors. He has deserted. It is a scene set for dialogue. One can but imagine Malibran's fiery English! The conclusion of the act presents us with a duel between Jules and the Marquis who is wounded. The full cast together with Sans Regret and his men are on stage and eventually drag Jules off much to Isoline's distress. It makes for an ensemble that will please Donizettians, a fine 'stretta' and dramatic finale The first act has confirmed that there is another side to Balfe than *The Bohemian Girl.* Here is a Balfe that challenges the listener afresh. It is music that must surely encourage revivals of other forgotten operas: *The Siege of Rochelle, Falstaff, The Rose of Castille, Satanella, Il Talismano* – and what about a *Pittore e Duca* to be revived at Trieste? An occasional ballad or an aria sung here or there can never convey the drama of a complete opera.

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The first scene of Act II takes place inside a fortress at Sinamari and is filled scene. A touch of buffo is introduced with Synnelet's air as he rebukes the slaves. Puccinian verismo is far removed from the entertainment and an anticipation of Sullivan's sense of rhythm and tune leads on to the Indian Dance which gives an indication of the early ballet music of Balfe composed
for La Scala, Milan. Isoline in male attire appears among the crowd. She is anxiously looking for her beloved. She sings a ballad 'a la Balfe', 'Oh, what charm it is to dwell'. Finally Isoline sees Jules and before they can meet preparations are made for the arrival of the Governor (who will turn out to be no other than the Marquis). We are introduced to two new characters: Ninka, whose role it is to help the lovers to meet, and Martin, who holds the keys to the jail, and who for a few pieces of gold allows the lovers to embrace. A delightful Pas de Deux, the second ballet sequence with plenty of Donizettian references, has been most welcome! The love duet leads to an ensemble during which Ninka attempts to help the lovers but all goes wrong; Jules is shot and wounded as he climbs down the bastion's walls on a rope; however he makes his escape. The act concludes with the arrival of the Marquis.

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Act III takes place in the desert near Cayenne. Contemporary prints remind one of Zaida caring for the wounded *Dom Sébastien.* Before the couple collapse and die of thirst the Marquis and his troops arrive. He makes a benevolent gesture, they are forgiven, and all ills forgotten. Isoline sings her concluding air, a rondo of rapture for her beloved and in praise of friendship.

English ballad opera was to develop over the years into the musicals

that still attract audiences. There is a touch of lightness in Balfe's work that still endears the *Maid of Artois* to the attentive listener and which makes it an important contribution to the musical history of this land.

John Stewart Allitt

