A Season of Donizetti

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This year the Bergamo Music Festival offered a virtually exclusive Donizetti season which Festival publicists subtitled "Deliri d'amore, passioni ossessive: un itinerario fra perdita di ragione e sublime nelle arti." Even though *Cavelleria Rusticana* somehow slipped into the mix, the season was dominated by three Donizetti classics: *Roberto Devereux, Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Anna Bolena*. There were also some important artists singing in these works.

Roberto Devereux, performed on two dates in mid-September, boasted the extraordinarily dramatic Queen Elizabeth of Dimitra Theodossiou, the suave tenor of Massimiliano Pisapia and the sonorous Duke of Andrew Schroeder. Although I have seen numerous productions of Devereux over the years, I would have to return to the early 1970's and the pivotal performances of Beverly Sills and the young Placido Domingo with the NYC Opera to find an equal to this performance. Dramatically, Theodossiou was an exciting, even riveting Elisabetta. Her anger and jealousy and vulnerability were all apparent, the latter especially in the final scene, when shorn of her red wig she became an aging and pathetic woman. Vocally, Theodossiou excelled in the dramatic passages demanding fortissimo utterance and vocal acting that matched her visual histrionics. I was reminded of Leyla Gencer, whose 1964 performances of this opera in Naples brought it to the modern world's attention. Less successful on the afternoon I heard her was "Vivi, ingrato," the musical high point of the score, and an aria demanding a smooth cantilena and delicate pianissimi. On a purely vocal level, this was beyond Theodossiou at this late point in the performance, but she acted the role so well that one could forgive her inability to sing this difficult aria as accurately and beautifully as one had hoped. I thought Pisapia's tenor was well matched to the demands of the title role. His is a lovely lyric sound, excellent for many of Donizetti's tenor roles and he made the most of his prison scene. Schroeder, an American who has also sung Lucia's Enrico at Scottish Opera, was a vocally excellent if somewhat wooden Nottingham. The young and pretty Sara, Federica Bragaglia, was unable to bring much vocally or dramatically to the part. Marcello Rota led a dynamic orchestra and chorus. The direction (Francesco Bellotto) was fluid and functional and the beautiful period costumes and adequate sets were from the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma.

The 1837 autograph score of *Devereux* has come down to us and it was not much changed by Donizetti or even by the performing traditions until it disappeared from the nineteenth century stage in 1882. Still, Donizetti added the familiar overture based on "God Save the Queen" and Roberto's cabaletta for a Parisian performances of 1838 and he changed the cabaletta of the Roberto-Elisabetta duet so that the music reflects the differing sentiments of the two characters-a decided improvement on the first version where the Queen and Devereux sang the same melody. Likewise the

tessitura of Sara's romanza was lowered and the key signature changed to intensify the romantic melancholy of the piece. In Bergamo, there was no overture, but the "improved" cabaletta was performed.

More important, this performance stressed the colors and accents of the score. Livio Aragona, in an excellent article ("L'officina del Roberto Devereux") in the Quaderno della Fondazione Donizetti, which served as a program, points out quite correctly how modern performances of Donizetti tend to "attenuate the contrasts across an intensive use of broad ligatures and the elimination of accents, suggesting a performing style which is softer and uniform, founded on a presumed similarity or equivalence of legato and expressive moments...a sort of 'lyric normalization' which tends to make the music of Donizetti sound dull." How often has one heard it said that so much of Donizetti's music is routine, that it is too bad that the whole is not as good as the high points, and so forth? Hearing this performance, one understood that the whole of *Roberto Devereux* is worthy musically. Donizetti's music cannot soar without a knowing performance. A routine performance creates routine music. Anyone who does not understand that does not understand bel canto and the music of the primo ottocento. In other words, this performance was a serious attempt to honor Donizetti's original score.

At the *Lucia di Lammermoor* we attended (on October 14), an announcer proudly intoned that the international audience came from Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Austria, Germany and a number of other countries beyond Italy's borders. In deference, perhaps, to the growing internationalization of the Bergamo Festival, English synopses of the operas at hand were included in the programs. The English synopsis of *Roberto Devereux* might have led the reader to think he or she was attending a comedy. Nottingham's discovery that Sara has betrayed him is described this way: "*Meanwhile Nottingham, that swores to save him, asks mildness for the friend. But it comes shown a veil embroidered with loving figures, sequestered to the Count during the arrest. The veil experiences to the Queen that the Count loves another woman and to Nottingham that Sara betrays him, that is the embroidery that the wife, hiccuping in the solitude of her rooms, was finishing for months.*" Unfortunately, the famous hiccupping aria had been cut from this production. We also learn that the Queen, "*still enchanted of Devereux is in spasmodic wait that he self safes showing to the guards the ring that she had given him....*" "Spasmodico" can be "spasmodic," but I think that the Queen is more likely "anguished" in her waiting. The English synopsis for *Lucia* had no such comedic errors of translation.

The main interest I had in seeing *Lucia di Lammermoor* was the Lucia of Désirée Rancatore, the young (29) Sicilian singer whose vocal concert last August in Pesaro had made a strong impression on me. In spite of her youth, Rancatore has had an impressive international career beginning ten years ago when she was 19 and extending to London, San Francisco and Melbourne as well as continental capitols. She is announced for the last performances of *Fille du régiment* in Milan in March. Although Rancatore's *Lucia* was well received and she was particularly good in the acuti, it was the Edgardo of Roberto De Biasio which elicited the warmest

response and the most cries of "bis" and "bravo." Most interesting to this Donizettian, however, was a chance to hear Roger Parker and Gabriele Dotto's critical edition in the theater, complete with glass harmonica. The score was performed virtually complete. It did not however include the recitativo for Enrico and the exchange between Normanno and Bidebent which follow the mad scene. This can certainly be forgiven on dramatic grounds, although the production tried to establish an antagonism between Normanno and Raimondo in the earlier scenes, even a contempt of Normanno for the "educatore e confidente di Lucia." There is nothing in the libretto of Sc. 1 to suggest this contempt, but Raimondo's accusation that Normanno was the cause of the tragedy in the dialogue following the mad scene does give it some validity. Still, we got Raimondo's aria and the Wolfscrag scene and all the cabaletta repeats. As with *Devereux*, the Festival made a serious attempt to honor Donizetti's score.

Rancatore's forte as a singer seem to be her astonishing high notes, and indeed they were strong and crystalline-and high. Like any good singer who knows her strong points, Rancatore uses them whenever she can. Hearing the mad scene with those bell-like acuti accompanied by the glass harmonica was indeed a revelation and an other-worldly sound. She was less convincing in some of the other scenes, including "Regnava nel silenzio" and the Act I duet. Likewise, the tenor, De Biasio, did not seem to blend well with Rancatore in "Verranno a te." He improved from a slightly weak start, however, and reached his stride by the time of the sextet and the imprecation, which were truly exciting. He also showed us why the opera does not end with the mad scene. "Fra poco a me ricovero" and "Tu, che a Dio" were beautifully phrased with lovely pianissimi. The Enrico was Luca Grassi, who has been heard in a number of rare operas at Martina Franca, including Donizetti's Il fortunato inganno. He was adequate to the role and the bass Enrico Giuseppe Iori made the most of his aria. Orchestra and chorus were conducted by the young Antonino Fogliani with appropriate sympathy for the singers and respect for Donizetti's masterpiece.

Sets (Italo Grassi) and costumes (Francesco Esposito) were dull and uninteresting and stage direction seemed to be nil (Esposito again), with singers left to do what they thought best (which usually was not much except to stand and sing). One must however comment on the terrible Scottish weather. It snowed in Act I-and poor Lucia was out there without a hat, coat or gloves, and Lucia and Edgardo sang their loving farewells completely unprotected from the Scottish blizzard. It rained intermittently during the Wolfscrag scene. Admittedly, the orchestra projects a storm here, but the rain seemed to pour down, stop, pour down, stop.... Fortunately, it stopped for the duet or it would have drowned out the voices. It snowed again out there among the Ravenswood graves, and at the end, the chorus of mourners parted to reveal Lucia's body lying under a dead tree among the "tombe degli avi miei"-and it rained rose petals. We can be thankful that there were no midges, but Scotland certainly lived up to its reputation for interesting weather.

Anna Bolena (October 27) was pretty much a disaster. The score was badly cut and sloppily directed by Fabrizio Maria Carminati, with tempos so slow that at times it was difficult for the singers. This opera, which relies so

much on atmosphere and setting and sfumatura was given a truly ugly unit set (by Italo Grassi): a semi circle of risers, on which members of the chorus and sometimes principals perched when they were not singing or taking part in the action, as if watching a sporting match in a gymnasium. (See p7) For Percy's Tower of London scene "bars"-in reality steel water pipes-were lowered at the front and back to the stage from metal chains. Poor Percy had to sing "Vivi tu, te ne scongiuro" through these pipes, much to his discomfort. For Anna's final prison scene, the front bars were raised somewhat so that we were not forced to watch her sing blocked by parallel sets of water pipes. For "Al dolce guidami" an ugly oblong box made of sheet metal was rolled forward and the soprano reclined on it on her back. A program note explained that the bleachers suggested that the people (chorus, judges, characters) were continually sitting in judgment of Anne Boleyn. Huh?

Stage direction was usually wooden and if not, it was contrary to the libretto. The Act I duet of Giovanna and Enrico took place in Seymour's bedroom rather than the "sala" of the libretto. She was in a nightgown and Enrico fondled her or combed her hair in a scène très intime seemingly as far from the strait-laced Jane Seymour as from Romani's libretto.

As for the singers, I thought that Riccardo Zanellato as Enrico was very good-strong and virile and menacing and rich of voice. (Why didn't Donizetti write an aria for the original Enrico, Filippo Galli?) The Smeton sang prettily. (Too bad this production cut the second verse of "Deh! Non voler costringere".) As for the others-Percy (Gian Luca Pasolini) was tentative even if he occasionally managed musical sounds and Sofia Soloviy (Seymour) was wooden. Dimitra Theodossiou was the Anna Bolena, but in contrast to her Elisabetta, here she emitted some remarkably ugly sounds here, most of them loud and high. Anna is not the Elizabeth of *Roberto Devereux*, not vocally, not dramatically. She is a young, frightened woman, not a seasoned middle aged queen. Elizabeth has few moments of quiet introspection (such as "Vivi, ingrato") and many moments of force and anger. In contrast, Anna has fewer moments of high drama-the famous outburst in the Act I Finale, "Giudici-Ad Anna!!" and the final cabaletta are exceptions, not the rule. In the former, Theodosseu finally lit up a stagnant performance, more as an actress than as a singer however. Her outburst was electric. In "Coppia iniqua," however the singing was so ragged that the stage energy could not compensate. At the end of it, she turned with her back to the audience as if summoning the will for a final note and then turned, and sang-completely out of tempo-one of the ugliest high notes I have ever heard.

The verdict of the audience on this *Anna Bolena* was almost as harsh as Henry's jury on the original Anne. There was a chorus of boos. In fact, even the chorus was booed. The critic of the local newspaper, the Eco di Bergamo, said he had never witnessed such a negative reaction in twenty years of reviewing performances at the Teatro Donizetti. Indeed the greatest wave of boos was reserved for the conductor, a native Bergamasque. Save Zanellato, each principal was booed as he or she came on stage. Except for Theodossiou. She received cheers and bravas and a rain of flowers from a stage box. It was all undeserved. The perfromance was not good, but not so bad as to merit so many boos (punctuated with cries of "vergogna"-"shame"). Nor did Theodossiou merit the applause, or

any applause for undertaking a work which is clearly beyond her at this point in her career. Yet she milked the plaudits for all they were worth. At one point she shook hands with the prompter and then virtually pulled him out of his box, as if to suggest to the audience that the poor singers were unprepared and got through it only with the prompter's help. Yet it was not evident very often that the singers were staring at the prompter. Everyone deserves some blame for this fiasco and poor preparation is a poor excuse.

Bolena is promised for a Verona forthcoming season, in a production by Graham Vick with Mariella Devia, Michele Pertusi and Francesco Meli, conducted by Lu Jia. It will make an interesting contrast.

In sum: a worthy *Roberto*, dramatically and vocally in an edition true to the composer. A well sung *Lucia* in an admirably complete edition. And a poorly sung, dramatically disastrous and vividly contested *Bolena* in a mutilated version.



FESTIVAL DONIZETTI E...
ANNA BOLENA

Una serata all'insegna della contestazione

Per il terzo incontro con Donizetti, nel contesto del Bergamo Musica Festival 2006, è stata la volta dell' *Anna Bolena*, il capolavoro che decreta l'affermazione del Bergamasco sulla ribalta teatrale dell'epoca.

Singolarmente, alla moglie, signora rispettabilissima e moltissimo amata, il compositore narra il magnifico successo dell'opera, con un entusiasmo che forse non si ripeterà più, nel suo epistolario, per nessun altro titolo (nemmeno per *Lucia*, che porterà al delirio la platea del San Carlo....) .

1830: pieno romanticismo, quindi! Si tratta, infatti, di una grand tragedia romantica in cui Donizetti inizia a delineare quello che sarà il suo intento drammaturgico che dai primi anni napoletani lo porterà a inventare un percorso tutto suo, fino alla stagione viennese e francese della maturità, fino al *Dom Sébastien*, esito finale di questa ricerca amplissima di coesione fra dramma e musica. Ricerca di un'espressione artistica che arrivi al cuore del pubblico traducendo in effusioni liriche ed in tragica tensione i sentimenti dei personaggi, di cui vengono scandagliat emozioni e sofferenze. Dopo la splendida interpretazione di Elisabetta del *Roberto Devereux*, nello scorso settembre, si è ripresentato al pubblico bergamasco il soprano greco Dimitra Theodossiou, del quale è impossibile dimenticare la stupenda pérformance proprio in *Anna Bolena*, qui a Bergamo, nella stagione lirica del 2000.

All'inizio dello spettacolo la cantante è parsa , tuttavia, meno smagliante di quanto ci si sarebbe a tutta prima aspettato,quasi sotto tono, con una minore capacità di presa sugli spettatori di quanto non fosse avvenuto