A Donizetti weekend

The weekend of November 7-9 offered the remarkable possibility (especially in the United States)* of seeing four performances of three different Donizetti operas in three days. On Friday evening the Washington National Opera presented *Lucrezia Borgia* with Sondra Radvanovsky in the title role. On Saturday, in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Academy of Vocal Arts performed *Anna Bolena*, and on Sunday the 9th there was a matinee of *Lucrezia*, this time with Renee Fleming; finally, on Sunday evening, Washington Concert opera performed *Maria Padilla*.

Friday. WNO's *Lucrezia Borgia* offered an international cast in a relatively traditional production. The musical basis was Roger Parker's critical edition, with some cuts in repeats. Of course Donizetti revised the score more than once, and WNO gave us the two stanza version of the romanza "Com'è bello" and cut Lucrezia's cabaletta "Si, voli il primo a cogliere" (added later by Donizetti in any case), but the finale of Act III (or Act II if the first part is considered a "Prologo") included both the cabaletta "Era desso il figlio mio" composed at the insistence of the first Lucrezia, Henriette Méric-Lalande, but cut when Donizetti revised the opera, AND the lovely tenor arioso "Madre, se ognor lontano" which Donizetti composed for the *finale nuovo*.

The Washington production provided a unit set of tall brick walls and wide steps which served as the Grimiani palace in Venice, the D'Este palace interiors and exteriors in Ferrara in Act II and the palace of the Princess Negroni in Ferrara in the final scene. Truth to tell, these movable high walls were more reminiscent of the Palazzo Pilota in Parma or perhaps the Castello in Ferrara in their present states of restoration rather than a respectable Italian Renaissance palace (especially the marble palaces of Venice). Nonetheless, the setting was functional and worked.

Costumes were another story. Though vaguely traditional, the costumes sometimes veered into modern Hollywood fantasy and even into science fiction. Thus Lucrezia's floor length gowns looked more like contemporary or even futuristic formal wear rather than anything Renaissance, and in the final scene she wore a gold armor-bustier (I don't know how else to describe it!) with a short gold skirt which made her look a cross between Madonna and the angel Gabriel in a Fra Angelico fresco. Romani's libretto says that she is "vestita tutta in nero"--'completely in black' and is accompanied by armed men. Whatever.... Gennaro was given spiked blond hair (the 'wealthy spiked darlings of the nation'?) and tight fitting gold suits with accordion sleeves which sometimes made him look like a refugee from *Star Trek*. In the last scene he was allowed to take off his shirt, thus revealing impressive abs and biceps. Alfonso d'Este and his courtiers were partial to long black leather coats. The lighting was mostly non obtrusive, but in some scenes bright lights behind the wall sets flashed on, shining through the interstices between the "bricks" for no discernible reason. Perhaps the idea was to accent the tension on stage; if so, it was a silly idea.

John Pascoe was responsible for the stage direction as well as the set and costume design, and like the latter, the former was variable--sometimes effective and sometimes not, sometimes causing titters in the audience at what should have been gripping moments of high drama. In a program note, Pascoe explained that his concept derived from Lucrezia being caught in a male-dominated world of power

***Especially anywhere I should say AW**

politics exemplified by Machiavelli's *Prince*, which is not, in spite of Pascoe's contention, "...a virtual celebration of the...exploits of Lucrezia's brother...Cesare [Borgia]." In my opinion, Donizetti's (and Romani's and Hugo's) Lucrezia is a powerful and malevolent woman herself, not a victim of male domination. The other, almost inevitable, innovation of Pascoe was to introduce a homosexual relationship between Orsini and Gennaro, complete with kissing and butt-stroking. It is not an unreasonable stretch, but probably unintended by any of the creators of this Lucrezia. More likely, the friendship between Gennaro and Maffio reflects that Renaissance ideal of male bonding celebrated by Montaigne in his essay "On Friendship" and exploited by Verdi in *Don Carlo* as well as by other nineteenth century opera composers.

Placido Domingo conducted. It is cliché to say that Domingo *qua* conductor is barely adequate, but he seemed just fine to me, moving the drama along, allowing ample breath in the legato moments and offering tautness and speed when the score demanded it. He is not a great conductor, nor is WNO's orchestra a great orchestra, but he is no routinier either.

The cast all looked creditable in their roles. Gennaro (Vittorio Grigolo) and Maffio Orsini (Kate Aldrich) were young and athletic and moved around the stage like the 20-year olds they are supposed to be. Grigolo, who was born in Arezzo in 1977, has occasioned diverse reviews, probably because he has sung a rock star type concert at Tivoli, near Rome, and he sings some lighter music in recordings. (So did Caruso and many another Golden Age singer of course.) I found him a very exciting singer with a bright voice which carries with ease in the enormous John F. Kennedy Center Opera House; he possesses effortless top notes and fine technique. Once I got over my preconception that this role should be sung by a dreamy *tenore di grazia* in the manner of Alfredo Kraus or Cesare Valetti (Grigolo is not than kind of tenor), I thoroughly enjoyed his vocal performance, although his acting was often mannered. He has lots of time to learn. Kate Aldrich was a splendid Orsini; hers is a rich, deep mezzo capable of ringing top notes, and she impressed in the introduzione, "Nella fatal di Rimini" as well as in the famous brindisi. On Sunday, however, she seemed tired and did not project so well. Ruggero Raimondi's Duke Alfonso was four-square and not particularly nuanced, and he scooped shamelessly in "Vieni la mia vendetta," but his voice still impresses with its richness and power.

The Lucrezias. On Friday evening Sondra Radvanovsky was singing the first of three performances in a production obviously designed for Renée Fleming. (She has previously sung the role in the Canary Islands.) She looked the part, both alluring and maternal, but she did not plumb the contradictory depths of the character. Lucrezia, after all, is a monster, having poisoned or otherwise brought about the deaths of many men, enumerated by Maffio and the others in Act I. In Act II she is a fury wanting vengeance for the insults to her until she discovers that Gennaro has been arrested by Alfonso as one of the desecrators of the Borgia name. When Alfonso, believing that Gennaro is her lover and not her son, wants his death, she warns him not to cross her by pointing out that he is her fourth husband (a line ignored by the supertitles); husbands don't survive Lucrezia. In the final act, it is she who has arranged the murder of the young men with poison, unaware that her net has also trapped Gennaro. She is not a sympathetic character. Her one saving grace is her love and tenderness towards her son, a side amply explored by Donizetti, especially in her beautiful romanza, "Com'è bello, quale incanto." This complexity was beyond Radvanovsky although her attempt was valiant. Vocally, she has a metallic edge which I do not find very appealing, although it is an undeniably powerful instrument.

Her bel canto technique is more than adequate, but far from perfect (think Caballe or Sutherland in this role); ironically however, her best work was in the final aria which Donizetti added at the Méric-Lalande's insistence. She carried it off with great force, brought down the packed house and won herself a *de riguer* standing ovation. Perhaps she will get even better in subsequent performances.

Saturday. A two hour train ride brought us to Philadelphia and a production of *Anna Bolena* at AVA, the Academy of Vocal Arts. The mission of AVA, founded in 1934 by Helen Corning Warden, "...is to provide tuition-free vocal and opera training of the highest quality...to exceptionally talented and committed young singers who have the potential for international stature, and to present them in professional performances...." This season's staged productions are all Donizetti: *Don Pasquale* and *Lucia* as well as *Anna Bolena*. Also scheduled are a concert performance of Respighi's *La fiamma* and several vocal concerts. Students, chosen by competition receive financial support as well as free tuition and study all aspects of operatic production. The list of singers who have attended AVA's program is long and impressive and includes among many others several current international stars who have made a specialty of the bel canto repetoire such as Joyce DiDonato, Ruth Ann Swenson and Eglise Gutiérrez.

The fully staged *Bolena* was produced in the tiny Helen Corning Warden theater, really a concert hall. Fortunately, the theater/concert hall is constructed in faux Tudor style, rather like a dining room or reception room in a Tudor palace. Thus the simple act of entering the space was to walk into the world of Anna and Henry VIII. Costumes were traditional and sets were minimal. A tapestry and a Tudor chair establish the room in the palace in Act I, Sc. 1; a few branches and leaves establish the park at Windsor in Sc. 2; a small table and chair make the queen's apartment and a few movable bars fix the Tower prison in the final scene. All of this, done with taste and style, prove that less can indeed be more. The acting was first-rate and made the action clearer than in any of the other many *Bolenas* I have seen on stage in the last 30 years. In Act II, Sc. 2, when Enrico, Anna, Percy and Hervey confront each other over Smeton's confession, things turned so violent that Percy punched Hervey (a resounding 'smack') and threw Enrico to the ground (the bare bones production evidently could not afford the usually present guards). I distinctly heard Enrico's knee crack on hitting the stage and feared for his well-being. When Enrico recovered with some difficulty, his rage was so palpable that he threw his regal walking stick with such force that the pommel on top broke off and flew into the orchestra!

All of the roles were double cast for the run of six performances, and all performances, by the way, sold out. At the opening night on Nov. 8, Angela Meade sang Anna; Olivia Vote was Seymour; Cynthia Cook, Smeton; Ben Wager, Enrico; and Taylor Stayton, Percy. Nicholas Masters and Noah Van Niel were scheduled for all performances as Rochefort and Hervey respectively. Meade, who won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions' Grand Prize in 2007, was a revelation as Anna. She has already sung the *Ernani* Elvira at the Met and her future plans include a *Bolena* (as well as a *Lucia*). Perhaps AVA's production was a sort of try-out for upcoming work at a major house. Meade's voice is powerful and her technique is well grounded. She sang the long and grueling role without any hint of tiredness and sailed through "Coppia iniqua" as if to the manor born. Her legato and her ability to rein in her large voice for the more introspective passages such as "Come, innocente giovane" and "Al dolce guidimi" were also perfect. Equally impressive was the rich bass of Ben Wager, who looked every bit a young Henry.

Taylor Stayton, the tenor, was also impressive if not quite as advanced in his career; his is a memorable, forward voice with a distinctive timbre. The often cut and very difficult "Vivi tu" was included for him and he managed the high notes and runs with ease. If the others were not quite on the same level, it may be because they are still young, at the threshold of their careers.

The full orchestra was conducted by Cristofer Macatsoris, AVA Music Director. Macatsoris obviously knows what he is doing, but Act II was orchestrally muddy and under rehearsed, with questionable tempi, and it required a mid-act pause to retune. Word was that there had been no full run-through with orchestra and orchestra members did not know when the final curtain would come, because they had not played through the whole score. The score was reasonably complete, with major cuts in choral passages (there was a minimal chorus), cuts of some repeats and the overture, which is of course often cut.

All told, I enjoyed this *Bolena* as much as the professional *Lucrezia,* and for me Angela Meade is a better singer in this repertoire than Ms. Radvanovsky or Ms. Fleming. The intimacy of the small theatre helped too. *Anna Bolena*, by the way, is scheduled for the Metropolitan in the 2010-2011 season with Anna Netrebko, and it is not stretch to imagine that Ms. Meade will cover Ms. Netrebko in the role.

Sunday Afternoon. A ticket to the performances of *Lucrezia Borgia* with Renée Fleming was harder to get than a seat on the dais for the inauguration of President-elect Obama. Non-subscribers were out of luck and series subscribers had to buy a minimum four-opera series (out of eight productions) to get close to a Fleming *Lucrezia* ticket. Only through the good offices of a friend and a friend-of-a-friend who is a long time patron did seats finally come through (one was in a center box with Mrs. Domingo). Suffice it to say that all of the Fleming performances were soldoutissimi. The production had been in the works for Fleming for ten years, or roughly since the time of the famous La Scala *Lucrezia* when the celebrated soprano was roundly booed and the conductor, Gianluigi Gelmetti, fainted and fell into the orchestra pit. I was in the Scala audience that evening and remember it well; it has become part of operatic lore. Why Fleming aroused the ire of the *loggionisti* that evening is a matter of speculation that endures to this day (chauvainism? poorly written embellishments? weak performance?), but Fleming herself explained to an interviewer that now she needed to 'get back on the horse'.

How was she some 12 years after the Scala debacle? Beautiful, alluring: a perfect vision of a woman who is at once lovely enough to attract the young Gennaro romantically and old enough to be his mother. In Act II her hair was swept up in a diva do, much as she appears in the advertisements for the products she endorses, but in Act III her hair was semi-spiked to match her son. Vocally she was fine, but not great. I have never thought that bel canto was her métier, even though she is obviously attracted to the repertoire and has assayed *Il Pirata* at the Met and will sing Rossini's *Armida* there next year. Her technique is secure enough to make it through the showy final cabaletta, and she pulled up low notes that I did not know she had to great effect. And yet, somehow it lacked the visceral excitement that great bel canto singing can create. Fleming's performance was proper and perfectly competent without being moving. The audience cheered of course--and no one booed.

Curiosities: At the end of this production, Lucrezia slits her throat. If there was blood in the Radvanovsky performance, I missed it, but stage blood certainly bathed Madame Fleming's neck and upper torso, making for a gruesome finale. Grigolo, on

the other hand, left his short sleeved tee-shirt on with Fleming, disappointing many who looked forward to seeing his ample abs, which had been well described in some of the reviews.

Sunday Evening. A mere four blocks from the Kennedy Center is Lisner Auditorium of George Washington University, which was fortunate because there was only an hour between the final curtain of *Lucrezia* and the downbeat for *Maria Padilla* as performed by the Washington Concert Opera. There was mild irony too, because the young and unknown Renée Fleming sang Maria in a revelatory performance in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1990. This night's Maria was the equally young, but not quite as unknown Leah Partridge. Ms. Partridge has sung several leading roles with the Florida Grand Opera (Amina, Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare*, and upcoming, the title role in *Lakme*); she has also sung Gilda at the Deutsche Oper, and she will sing La Charmeuse in the 'Fleming' production of *Thaïs* at the Metropolitan this season. After a slightly shaky start as Maria, she got better and better, singing with fire, secure technique and undeniable power. Her Ines was Jennifer Rivera, a willowy mezzo whose credits include several roles at the New York City Opera as well as turns in Florida and Torino (European debut). She partnered Ms. Partridge well, especially in the wonderful duet in thirds "Di pace a noi bell'iride," but hers is a meaty role for the *seconda donna*, and she was exciting. The men were all competent and often exciting as well. Tenor Justin Lavender, whose work is well known in Britain, replaced the previously announced Bruce Ford in the exacting role of Maria's father, Don Ruiz. His voice is covered, but he possesses great technique and presence--and the requisite high notes. Bass-Baritone Mark S. Doss was an imposing figure as Don Pedro/Mendez. His work in this opera is mostly lyrical; Donizetti gives him two beautiful arias and a rousing cabaletta. Doss, whose repertoire ranges widely from Strauss to Verdi to Bizet to Wagner in both America and Europe, had some problems and seemed to get lost at one point, but in the end he rose to the occasion.

Those familiar with *Maria Padilla* have to wonder why it isn't performed more often. This 1841 offering is blessed with endlessly beautiful melodies and gives us Donizetti at his most intense. The ending is often seen as problematic because the censors at La Scala would not allow Maria to commit suicide as she does in the Ancelot play which is the basis of the libretto; apparently they even suggested that she die of a surfeit of joy, a suggestion rejected by the composer. Having seen the opera several times (most recently in Buxton and St. Paul with Brenda Harris), I myself find the end dramatically satisfying, for Donizetti's solution was to set Maria's joyous rondo finale (on receiving the crown from Don Pedro) against the menacing murmurs of the courtiers. Against Maria's momentary pleasure, the future does not bode well. I am not aware of another finale like it, at least since *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.

Of course in a concert version, the problematic ending (if it is) does not really matter. Leah Partridge sailed through the final rondo with relish and astonishing vocal fireworks. There was no tiredness, no evidence of it all having been too much, and it is a very taxing role. Best of all was the conducting of WCO Artistic Director Antony Walker. This man knows his bel canto. He managed to whip his large chorus and orchestra into a perfect frenzy of excitement. Everything was taut and propulsive where it needed to be. Instrumental obbligati were perfect. I saw Walker conduct Rossini's *Bianca e Falliero* last spring, and I hope to hear his *Il Giuramento* next May. The visceral excitement which lacked in *Lucrezia* was in this performance of *Maria Padilla* in spades, thanks to wonderful singing, but above all to Antony Walker's superb leadership. You wanted to jump up from your seat and shout in the

end...and many did. This time the standing ovation was deserved.

Of course Donizettians will not be surprised to learn that these three operas performed in the space of 48 hours contain endless pleasures and confirm what we already know--that the invention and variety of Donizetti's works continue to amaze after almost two centuries, and that Donizetti's work lives today, perhaps even more than it did in his own lifetime. At the same time I was in Washington and Philadelphia visiting with Lucrezia, Anna and Maria, Donizetti Society member Alan Jackson was in San Francisco attending *Elisir*. And *Maria Padilla* has been scheduled for Wexford in 2009. One hundred and sixty years after his death, Donizetti keeps on bring us immense pleasure and continual insight into the human condition.

Charles Jernigan

Maria Padilla – what came next... (by Pip Clayton)

We are all left wondering what happened to Blanche de Bourbon. Would Maria kill her? (Would the censor die of a paroxysm of joy?)

What does history tell us?

Firstly there was another royal princess who journeyed to Spain to marry Pedro the Cruel. This was Joan of Lancaster daughter of Edward III of England, he wanted an alliance with Spain as a buffer to his war with France. She may have got off lightly, she never arrived, her retinue passed through towns where the plague had a hold and she succumbed to the Black Death at Bordeaux in August 1348 at the age of thirteen.

So Blanche de Bourbon did marry Pedro in 1353 but he repudiated her virtually after the ceremony, and, according to the records, married Maria Padilla the same year. They had five children. Edward III still wanted his alliance and he got it when two of those children married two of his sons: Isabella wed Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, and Costanza became the second wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Pedro was murdered in 1369 by his illegitimate half-brother who took the crown as Enrique II of Castille. Maria Padilla died widely mourned by the people either in 1361 or 1365, records differ. Both she and Pedro are interred in the Cathedral at Seville. Blanche de Bourbon died in 1361 and is buried in the Convent of St. Francis at Jerez.

Pedro the Cruel = Maria Padilla
Costanza of Castille =John of Gaunt
Catherine of Lancaster=Henry III of Castille
John II of Castille=Isabella of Portugal
Isabella of Castille=Ferdinand II of Aragon
Catherine of Aragon=Henry VIII
Mary I of England

So you see, history certainly repeats itself. DNA proves it. Pedro the Cruel had a worthy heiress, we know her as "Bloody Mary"...