Donizetti's *Maria de Rudenz*

Battersea Arts Centre, London, November 1, 2024

Photos by Craig Fuller, courtesy of Gothic Opera

Alan Jackson, November 3, 2024


Maria (Lorna McLean)

Maria de Rudenz was first performed at La Fenice, Venice in January 1838 with a stellar cast including Carolina Ungher, Giorgio Ronconi and Napoleone Moriani. It satisfies Donizetti's wish expressed in a famous letter written in 1835: "I want love, for without this all subjects are cold, and let it be violent love". There is certainly plenty of violence, enough to concern the Venetian censors who demanded a reduction in deaths from four to three, though this didn't prevent the opera from being a fiasco. As it also has a heroine who pretends to be a ghost it is a good choice for Gothic Opera.

A problem for us today is that Cammarano's libretto, anyway none too long, places important lines of explanation and motivation in recitative passages and that Donizetti compounds the difficulty by not setting some of those lines. This leaves us with a plot that raises too many questions for us to understand it fully. In outline there are two brothers, Corrado and Enrico who both love the same woman, Matilde. Corrado had previously eloped with Maria, but then abandoned her in the Roman catacombs, intending that she should die there. Repenting somewhat he arranges that a guide rescues her. Maria returns to Rudenz castle still in love with Corrado and finds him about to marry Matilde. Corrado stabs Maria who seems to be fatally wounded, Maria kills Matilde, Corrado kills Enrico in a duel and originally Maria also killed Corrado but the censors spared him! Maria, thought dead pretends to be a ghost in order to confront Corrado, tears off her bandages thus ensuring her own death. There are also issues of inheritance, paternity and motivation. So, plenty of blood and gore and a ghost to give Gothic Opera something to get their teeth into. And full marks to them for this revival, the opera's first UK staging – it was given in concert in London by Opera Rara in 1974 and there have been a handful of modern performances in Europe.

Musically there is much to admire even if it doesn't have the sheer memorability of, say, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. A feature of Donizetti's development is that in the big duets (two for Enrico and Corrado, one for Corrado and Maria) Donizetti mainly gives the characters different music to express their individual texts (an exception is the cabaletta of the second Enrico/Corrado duet when both are expressing similar emotions and intentions). The best-known number, maybe the only reasonably well-known number, is the concertato of the Act I

finale, and this is because following the opera's failure in Venice Donizetti lifted it to become a trio in his next opera *Poliuto*. Corrado's beautiful opening aria, a two verse romanza was recorded in 1921 by the great baritone Mattia Battistini, though this is hardly a good example of a smooth legato line, one of the usual markers of bel canto. The opening off-stage prayer was also used later, somewhat modified, in *La fille du régiment.*



Maria (Lorna McLean)

Gothic Opera provided a really excellent cast which did full justice to Donizetti's score. Understandably there was only a very small orchestra (single strings, a clarinet and an organ) and chorus (soprano, mezzo, two tenors and two baritones). Both were first-rate, though I did find the clarinet a little too prominent in places. The opera starts with possibly Donizetti's most violent orchestral opening gesture and here I did miss bigger forces. But for the most part the orchestral arrangement by Leon Haxby worked very well.

There were two casts. My Maria was Lorna McLean, a powerful soprano with the ability to sing any note in her range at any dynamic, so there was volume when needed and also some beautiful soft high notes when moulding Donizetti's grateful vocal lines. Tenor Davide Basso likewise combined spinto power with graceful lyrical phrasing as Enrico as did Kieran Rayner as Corrado. His opening aria provided me with much more bel canto pleasure than the Battistini recording mentioned earlier. All three acted convincingly under the direction of Lysanne van Overbeek and conductor Anna Castro Grinstein set and maintained appropriate tempi ensuring admirable ensemble and tension. I think a couple of cabaletta repeats were cut – in theory regrettable, but understandable as the cast was repeating the performance just 24 hours later. Small parts were capably taken by Béatrice de Larragoïti, Gheorghe Palcu and Jamie Formoy. The sets by Nate Gibson were atmospheric with plenty of Halloweeny drapes and helped by the still distressed walls of the Grand Hall of Battersea Arts Centre (the building suffered a serious fire many years ago). Nate Gibson also designed the attractive and

suitable costumes, thankfully not a modern army uniform in sight, and Luca Panetta's lighting added to the gothic effect.



Chorus, Matilde (Béatrice de Larragoïti), Corrado (Kieran Rayner)

The chorus were treated as individuals and deserve a mention of their own: soprano Valerie Wong, mezzo Katey Rylands, tenors Alexander White and Jamie Formoy, baritones, Joe Ashmore and Samuel Snowden. The orchestra members were Guillermo Ramasasa (clarinet) Daniel Jung and Lorenzo Narici (violins), Noemi Foschi (viola), Erland Vestby (cello) and Joshua Simöes (organ).

I should add that friends who saw the alternative cast (Daniella Sicari, James Beddoe and Theo Perry) were equally impressed. Gothic Opera have done Donizetti proud. *Maria de Rudenz* proved very worthy of revival. The audience was clearly absorbed and expressed its appreciation warmly. It shows how these nearly forgotten operas can work given a team that believes in them and takes them on their own terms. I look forward to seeing Gothic Opera again.