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Il castello di Donizetti

by George Loomis

Seasoned operagoers know that the Mad Scene in *Lucia di Lammermoor* was meant to include a glass harmonica (even if the part is usually played on the flute). But who knew that Donizetti tried out the instrument, with its eerie, disembodied sound, in an earlier opera, *Il castello di Kenilworth*, from 1829? Indeed, who knows about *Il castello di Kenilworth* at all? In the 1970s the soprano Beverly Sills assembled a "Tudor Trilogy" of Donizetti operas about Tudor queens that has proved enduring. And here is another Tudor opera, with a plot structured around a love triangle consisting of Elizabeth I, the Earl of Leicester, and his secret wife Amy (Amelia) Robsart.

These are the sort of discoveries one expects at Donizetti Opera, a festival in the composer's Northern Italian hometown of Bergamo. Yet the main attraction is to experience operas by this melodically gifted and dramatically compelling composer in high-quality performances. The festival itself, which this year ran from November 20 to December 2, is nothing new, but under the artistic director Francesco Micheli it now emulates such august models as the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro and the Festival Verdi in Parma. Last year, Riccardo Frizza, an authority in the so-called bel canto repertoire, was appointed the Donizetti festival's music director, and the casts of this year's festival (Micheli's third) included several acclaimed bel canto stylists.

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It wouldn't be unfair to think of *Il castello di Kenilworth* as a warmup exercise for *Anna Bolena*—which by critical consensus inaugurated Donizetti's maturity a year later—and the two other better-known Tudor operas. As Donizetti's first opera featuring a clash between two women, it prefigures the confrontation between Elizabeth and Mary Stuart in *Maria Stuarda*, while the love triangle, in which Elizabeth loses out, looks forward to *Roberto Devereux*. The action of Andrea Leone Tottola's libretto, derived from Walter Scott's novel via an Italian play by Gaetano Barbieri and an *opéra comique* by D. F. E. Auber and Eugène Scribe, involves little more than Leicester's efforts to conceal Amelia from Elizabeth by hiding her in Kenilworth castle; unfortunately for Amelia, Leicester entrusted her to his henchman, Warney, who has designs on her.

Carmela Remigio in Il castello di Kenilworth. *Photo: Rota / Donizetti Opera.*

Issues of state are hardly touched, but the libretto give rises to some fine confrontational scenes, including the brilliant second-act finale in which Elizabeth, knowing that something is amiss and outraged that she is kept in the dark, orders that Amelia be imprisoned. Not surprisingly, given the opera's chronological proximity to *Anna Bolena*, much of the music is first-rate and demonstrates that Donizetti has stepped well beyond the long shadow cast by Rossini, who was the dominant force in Italian opera when Donizetti came of age. A case in point is the naive Romantic charm of the aria with glass harmonica in which Amelia nostalgically recalls happier days when Leicester told her he loved her. Carmela Remigio brought out its wistfulness, and elsewhere she sang with dramatically charged coloratura and focused intensity, not least when warding off Warney.

Each of the operas of the so-called Tudor Trilogy ends tragically with an emotionally shattering solo scene for the prima donna. By contrast, although it too concludes with a such a scene, *Il castello* follows the practice of eighteenth-century *opera seria* and ends happily, as Elizabeth relents and gives the married couple her blessing. The great Donizetti scholar William Ashbrook wrote that, especially in this scene, Elizabeth's melodies are "extrovert and ceremonial rather than expressive of deep personal emotions." Yet here, on November 29, the scene made a profound impact, thanks in part to Maria Pilar Pérez Aspa's staging. Earlier the production had made little impression, although more because of the plain sets and unimaginative lighting than because of failings in her direction. But here, a grate rose up that separated Elizabeth from the others, thereby detaching her from the general rejoicing and emphasizing her loneliness.

Jessica Pratt and the cast of Il castello di Kenilworth. *Photo: Rota / Donizetti Opera.*

Of course, this would hardly have mattered if the singer were inadequate, but Jessica Pratt rose superbly to the occasion, digging beneath the extensive coloratura (which she articulated brilliantly) to project with gleaming tone the scene's emotional core; she even made the offbeat syncopations in the scene's *cabaletta* seem like sobs. The parallel to Elizabeth's final scene in *Roberto Devereux* following the execution of the Earl of Essex is unmistakable. If there were moments when Pratt's singing needed more concentration, this scene was not one of them, and, indeed, such moments were few. A stronger vocal and dramatic presence than the tenor Francisco Brito brought to Leicester would have been welcome, but he did well in his interesting opening aria with its two *cabalettas*. Much better was Stefan Pop, whose sizable, burnished tenor was heard to fine advantage in Warney's music. Riccardo Frizza conducted with authority and an obvious appreciation for the score's strong points. At a time when some young Italian conductors shun the bel canto operas for fear of being stereotyped, the commitment of an obviously gifted conductor like Frizza to the repertoire is most welcome.

Like any good festival, Donizetti Opera offers midday concerts of chamber music. I caught a pleasant one on December 1 at the Casa Natale (birthplace) of Donizetti that included the Orobie Woodwind Quintet playing arrangements of overtures by Donizetti and his teacher, Giovanni Simone Mayr, and arias by the appealing soprano Holly Czolacz; among the latter was "Al dolce guidami" from *Anna Bolena.* The reason for including it became apparent that evening during *Enrico di Borgogna*, the second of this year's two major productions. Like *Il castello di Kenilworth*, it was performed at the Teatro Sociale while the Teatro Donizetti undergoes renovation.

If *Il castello* found the composer "speaking in his own voice" (to use a familiar expression), he was still searching for it in *Enrico di Borgogna*, which was first performed in Venice shortly before

Donizetti's twenty-fourth birthday in 1821. To say that it shows the influence of Rossini would be a serious understatement, but presumably it also shows the influence of Mayr, although given the (undeserved) infrequency of Mayr performances, that is harder to determine.

Enrico, the second of Donizetti's more than seventy operas, earned a place on this year's program by virtue of the festival's two-hundred-year anniversary project: every year between now and 2042 (the two-hundredth anniversary of Donizetti's last opera), the festival will perform an opera that was first performed two hundred years before; for those years that saw more than one premiere, the choice will fall on lesser-known works. With the festival expanding to three operas per year in 2019, there is sufficient opportunity for balancing the fare. But the project is an ambitious one, especially since one wouldn't expect the early years to yield masterpieces.

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Luca Tottoto and Anna Bonitatibus in Enrico di Borgogna. *Photo: Rota / Donizetti Opera.*

And so this year it was *Enrico*, which shows Donizetti adeptly working within established Rossinian forms. Yet its musical numbers come off as generic, with nothing that really stands out. In Act I a fleeting reference to the tune Donizetti recycled for "Al dolce guidami" points the way to his later melodic style, but you've got to be quick to catch it, and the pathos of its later appearance is lacking. Further, the opera's genre as an *opera semiseria*, with its stock villain, stock *buffo*

character, pastoral setting, and happy ending, is not known for stormy passions (cf. Bellini's *La Sonnambula*). The villain is the Burgundian ruler Guido, who inherited the throne from his usurping father. He and Enrico (a trouser role), the rightful ruler, are both in love with Elisa, who returns Enrico's love. At the end Enrico gets both the throne and the girl.

Despite misgivings about the work, you've got to give Opera Donizetti credit for going all out with its production. Silvia Paolo's staging amusingly reimagined the opera as being mounted for its premiere at Venice's Teatro Vendramin (where the sets were by Andrea Belli), although it includes a figure representing a flustered Donizetti, whose frequent tinkerings become tiresome. But the wonderful soprano Anna Bonitatibus could hardly have been better as Enrico. She made her aria finale the high point, with the staging, as in *Il castello*, stressing poignancy over jubilation by having her sing it alone on stage.

Sonia Ganassi, an esteemed bel canto mezzo for years, made for a rather mature Elisa, and it didn't help that her costume made her look like a floozy, but she sang with characteristic authority. Levy Sekgapane sang Guido with a smallish but appealingly velvety tenor voice, and Francesco Castoro sang strongly as Enrico's father, Pietro. As the comic Gilberto, Luca Tottoto excelled in two Rossini-like patter songs.

Unlike *Il castello*, for which the orchestra was the Orchestra Donizetti Opera, *Enrico di Borgogna* had the period instrument ensemble Academia Montis Regalis, conducted by the eminent early music expert Alessandro De Marchi, in the pit, which was raised nearly to floor level in accordance with period practice. The players' softer, more transparent sound encourages a more natural vocal delivery, but this takes some getting used to by the singers. To De Marchi's credit, he persuaded his singers (with one notable exception) not to indulge in the widespread but stylistically gauche practice of interpolating sustained, unwritten high notes at the ends of numbers, often preceded by vocal *tacets*; in *Il castello* Frizza was more tolerant. The one exception was Guido's aria, sung just before his military defeat, when he held his last note so long that the Donizetti figure escorted him offstage. It seemed like an inside joke.

A scene from Enrico di Borgogna. *Photo: Rota / Donizetti Opera.*

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