

O, MY CITY

Notes on The Siege of Calais by director **James Conway**.

“My most exacting opera.” In those terms Donizetti described *L'assedio di Calais*, an opera he prepared over 5 months (a very long time for this proficient man of the theatre, though it was not his exclusive interest in the period) in 1836. Though its premiere was at Naples, it is clear that he had the taste of more cosmopolitan (and lucrative) Paris in mind as he fashioned it.

I knew nothing of the piece when I first saw it at Wexford many years ago. It had a huge impact on me then, and I made sure to see it both times it was produced at the Guildhall School thereafter. I have had much pleasure in the excellent recording made by Opera Rara, and was emboldened to ask the generous star of that enterprise, Welsh mezzo Della Jones, to coach some of the singers for this production. Any comments I make about the opera owe much to the scholarly notes appended to that recording by William Ashbrook (whose work on Donizetti has fired my appetite for all of his operas, including *Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo*, of which ETO plans the English premiere in two years time) and John Black.

I do not always find ‘patriotism’ edifying. This opera, however, embodies it in its most edifying form. What would you give up for your city, for your country, for your comrades and the way you live together? What makes citizens resist under siege, apart from fear of annihilation? What is life together worth, and what must we do about it? These biggest of questions are posed without padding in

this opera, posed with due regard for the attachments of family which can seem to be opposed to the claims of citizenship.

From the first moments – the dangerous, pathetic attempt of Aurelio to steal some bread described in the orchestral prelude – this is a serious, unusual opera. Donizetti may have resorted to the musico/mezzo soprano-as-hero, which was by 1830 old fashioned, but he responded to the lack of a suitable tenor in Naples with real genius: Aurelio is a flesh-and-blood hero, as rash as he is brave. No wonder the action within the walls begins with his father and wife imagining his death. Donizetti is remarkably sensitive to the extreme fluctuations of hope and flintiness among the besieged: overjoyed to find out that Aurelio has returned alive, Eustachio is quickly overtaken by his son’s questions about how long they can really hope to survive.

Eustachio is a strong presence with magnificent music. He sees more than he wants to, his knowledge of a grim fate does not impose on nobility and fairness in the present. Having read that he is the character in Donizetti’s work who presages Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra*, I was contented to set them beside each other in the season.

The intimate scenes, which centre on Eleonora, wife and mother, are carefully measured. Her very first scene, as we have seen, describes her grief at the loss of her husband, but her pride in his cause; her second scene, beginning the second act, conjures the energy that binds the small, ill-fated family, even in the midst of destruction. Set beside honour and loyalty is tenderness, and the impulse to pass something on to a child, even in a city destroyed by the ‘hollow cannons’ of war.



Rodin's sculpture *The Burghers of Calais*



Photograph taken in Stalingrad during World War II

The two large scenes in the besieged city are expert set-pieces, dramatically. In the first the frightened people succumb to the temptation to blame the leader who calls on them to be stronger than they are. Clearly the besiegers use more than force to demoralize the trapped citizens – the Stranger (he is never named) is a spy, whose fate is left to the imagination once he is exposed. In the second, the terrible terms of the besiegers are declared by a different sort of messenger – the privately humane strategist Edmondo (a small character of great complexity). The acceptance of those terms, the fatal pledges of the burghers of Calais, is given austere magnificence by Donizetti, culminating in that moving hymn ‘O sacre polvere’ (O sacred dust/earth).

Donizetti was dissatisfied with the third act of his opera, and indicated that he would have liked the opportunity to rewrite it. The original, short third act, set outside the walls, included a short scene in which Edoardo waits for his queen (misnamed Isabella, possibly in honour of the Neapolitan queen whose name-day was the occasion of the premiere), a ballet sequence marking her arrival, and then a happy ending in which the reputedly fierce queen now successfully intercedes for the victims.

Some of Cammarano’s text was censored, and neutralized. The queen is a trifling role, and Edoardo’s conversion is not credible. Much of the music is not of the same unwavering standard of the first two acts. In Donizetti’s lifetime the opera was often given without a third act, and there is evidence that a revised version, without ballet music and without English queen, was performed at Naples to the librettist’s chagrin.

Another, different attempt to resolve the perceived problems of the third act involved the provision of a few lines of linking recitative in order to move Edoardo’s *brillante* aria from Act 3 to Act 1, scene 1; ours will be the first time we can be certain this alternative has been tried out on stage. Musically, it is seamless. Dramatically, it does rather change things, as we are not offered a *lieto fine* or



Photograph taken in Stalingrad during World War II

happy ending, however incredible. While we were at it, I must confess that I persuaded the maestro to insert one other exquisite number (the ensemble ‘Raddoppia I baci tuoi’) from Act 3 into Act 2, so that the grave ending of the opera, with the men making heroic decisions for everybody, shows just how that affects the women they are leaving.

These small liberties we have taken with love and respect. Many people have already asked me why we are performing this opera, which is largely forgotten – and I can only answer that I think it is a remarkable, robust work of art. Others will ask why we have done it as we have – not in the pantomime costumes of a fantasy 14th century, a period with which neither Cammarano nor Donizetti had any particular familiarity. Samal Blak and I were inspired by the real experience of siege, in which chivalry is not conspicuous. Edward III was known as ferocious and effective, a sort of whirlwind: we found his spirit outside Stalingrad, the definitive siege of modern times. Inside the city we found the paranoia about fifth columnists, the desperate search for water, the unlikely survival in shelled buildings, the almost fantastic reverence for the motherland and the political project alongside the wretched struggle to survive. What is important about stage ‘settings’ is the way they make a poetic home for the music, the characters and their relationships. Nothing about it is ever ‘proper’.

This is the way we found to make the strongest possible case for Donizetti’s ‘exacting’ opera. **JAMES CONWAY**