‘MY MOST EXACTING OPERA’

Gaetano Donizetti

In those terms Donizetti described *L’assedio di Calais*, an opera he prepared over five 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. 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*, also touring in Spring 2015, and *Pia de’ Tolomei*, which is in the pipeline) and John Black.

Photograph by Sandra Winiasz

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. In his character and fate are etched with brilliant clarity the conflict between personal love (his deep feeling for his son and concern for his son's survival) and duty to city and country.

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

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 demoralise the trapped citizens – the Stranger (he is never named) is a spy (or is he an outsider who must be construed as a spy by the desperately conforming citizens?), 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 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).

James Conway

Donizetti's Act Three

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 neutralised. The queen is a trifling role, and Edoardo's conversion is not credible. Much of the music is not of the same unwavering standard as 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 contemporary 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 is the first time we can be certain this alternative has been tried out on stage. Musically, it is seamless. Dramatically, we are not offered a lieto fine or happy ending, however incredible (something important to the Neapolitan censors). While we were at it, I must confess that I persuaded the maestro to insert one other exquisite number (the ensemble 'Raddopia 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. This leaves only a few minutes on the editing room floor, and no deflation of energy or concentration.

When a couple of critics and a handful of enthusiasts found fault with this approach when first we produced it in 2013, I took careful note, and consulted again some experts, including the conductor of the first full recording. Their

continues overleaf

clear verdict was that we had served the opera well, and made the right choices. The adding of a happy ending, or the elimination of one, was very standard practice in the various states of nineteenth century Italy (study of *Pia de' Tolomei* is interesting in this regard!). Overwhelmingly, people wrote and spoke to me of the strong experience they had in the theatre, and the feeling that this opera should be performed again and again – for me, the most important vindication.

These small liberties we have taken with love and respect. Many people have already asked me why we are performing this opera and *Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo*, both largely forgotten – and I can only answer that I think they are remarkable, robust works 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, though we have not laboured to make this into a sort of lesson. 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'.

Nor are the 'ideas' in themselves important: people under siege in this opera have a particular, dehumanising experience, resisting which sharpens character with some brutality. Our job was to reflect this history – which is not particular to any fancy of 'period' – and to be truthful to the music and text, which endure long after 1836.

This is the way we found to make the strongest possible case for Donizetti's 'exacting' opera.

James Conway

ETO cast members rehearsing for *The Wild Man of the West Indies*. Photo: Bill Knight