IL FURIOSO/THE WILD MAN – WHY?

Gaetano Donizetti

Anyone could be forgiven for thinking that I have been hunting out obscure operas for English Touring Opera in recent years. I fully expect that opinion will be divided between those who pronounce our Donizetti operas 'welcome rediscoveries' and those who gleefully decide they are 'justly forgotten', even by the interval. The truth is that I look for operas that we have a good chance of doing very well, and which might move people who are open to feeling and thinking. I trust that as our reputation for doing operas carefully and beautifully finds purchase, audiences will come.

Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo was a collaboration between Donizetti and his friend Jacopo Ferretti, contracted in June 1832 for performance in Rome. Donizetti had already composed 41 operas, and only a month before his comedy *L'elisir d'amore* had triumphed in Milan. In this extraordinary decade many of the very greatest works of what we now call *bel canto* opera came to the stage, with Donizetti and Bellini leading the pack. As he worked on this new opera in Naples, Donizetti supervised revivals of at least three of his operas there (including *Anna Bolena*, performed by ETO in 2008). It's hard to conceive of such extraordinary proficiency and invention now.

The exotic background of this opera sets it apart from other work by Donizetti. It is a *semiseria* ('half serious'), like so many fine works of art that make us uneasy. The subject, taken from one of the tales recounted in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, was well known – Cardenio's wife betrays him with Fernando and he retreats to strange isolation. One of the 'lost' plays of Shakespeare, probably the result of a collaboration with Beaumont, is based on the same story; an anonymous dramatic version of the story was performed by a famous troupe in Rome in 1820. Donizetti responded vividly to this strange story. The premiere of his opera on 2 January 1833, featuring a brilliant and surprisingly young cast, was an instant success; within a few years it had been performed in at least 70 theatres in Italy, and many more abroad.

Baritone Giorgio Ronconi, who created the role of Cardenio

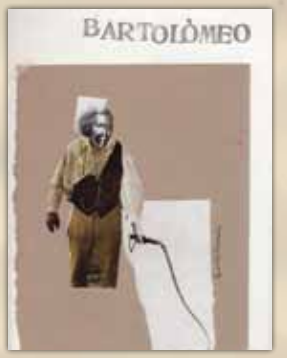
For me the opera's particular brilliance is the characterisation of Cardenio, a man driven to terrible extremes by the actual sight of his young wife in the arms of her lover – his brother, evidently. He flees the 'civilised' world and betakes himself to a remote Caribbean island (in Cervantes, he goes up into the wild Sierra Morena). When asked to account for his errant behaviour by the 'orderly' colonials of San Domingo (the island that is now split between Haiti and the Dominican Republic: in the background there is always this picture of a former paradise, now organised for the profit of a Spanish governing class and for the effective exploitation of a slave class), who perceive his 'wildness' as a threat, Cardenio explains that he married his wife, whose fortune had been lost, against the wishes of his father, and that this honourable action earned him his father's curse.

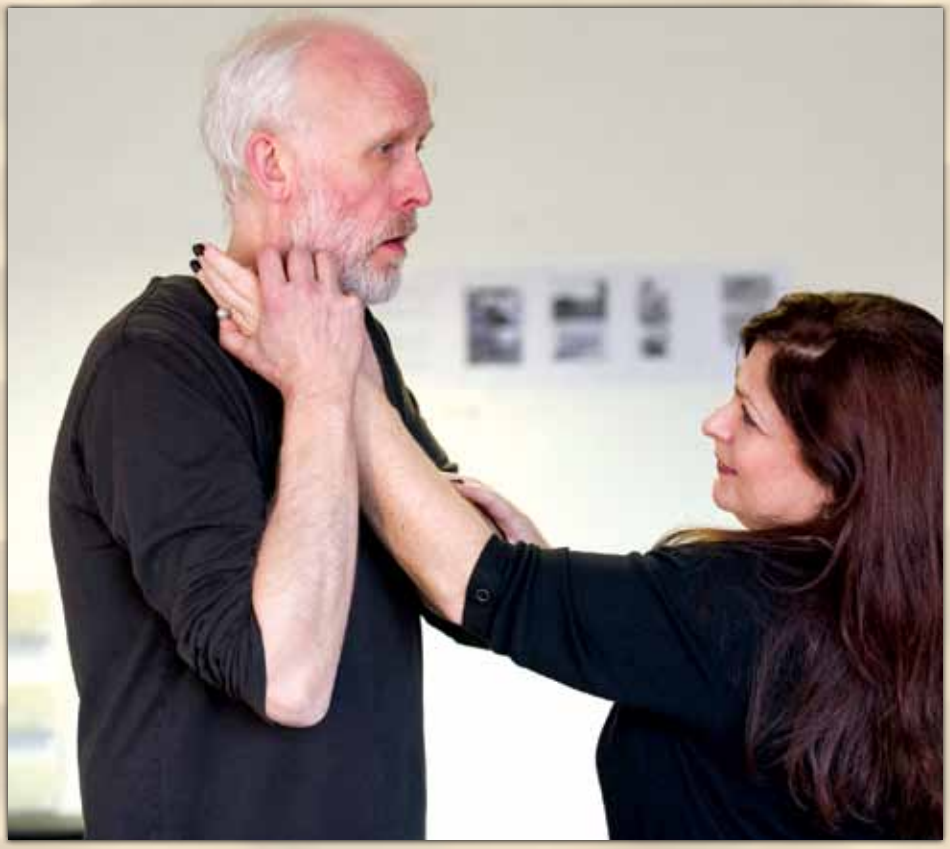
Cardenio has lost his patrimony, his love, and his belief in order. This makes him the object of pity (Marcella) or revulsion (the Spanish governor). It also makes him a very unusual character in opera, dominated as it was at the time by unjustly accused and much lamenting heroines. There is nothing simple about him; it is clear that he still loves, deeply, and desires to do good, even though he knows he has been basely betrayed. Even his betrayers, it turns out, desire to do good; when their illicit love brings them no happiness, both wife and brother set out in search of him, and are brought to this island in the course of a terrible storm, as if heaven itself were seeking to be purged of wrong.

When first I heard the brilliant act one finale, full of conflicting desire, I knew the piece had real quality. Following the slow reconciliation of husband and wife, including that wonderful scene when he feels himself struck blind, I knew that this was Donizetti at his most psychologically probing, and in a way his most personal. Then, when I looked in some detail at the comic relationship between master and slave, between the profoundly confused Cardenio and the eminently sensible boy Kaidamà, I saw something very unusual in opera. I remember thinking that there was a quality of a late Shakespeare 'semiseria' like *The Winter's Tale* or *Cymbeline* – and it helped me to understand that despite his famous proficiency, despite the frantic business that opera has become in this period, Donizetti wrote with as much variety and interest as other composers we are inclined to call geniuses.

Though fantastical, I find the opera true. I think that Donizetti set an important precedent with this rich portrayal of a man on the edge of madness, using with remarkable expressiveness the special qualities of the low voiced male. This

Costume sketches by Florence de Maré





Craig Smith and Sally Silver in rehearsal for The Wild Man of the West Indies. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith

is no buffoon, no simple father or jealous tyrant: something happens here that leads to Verdi's most profound characters.

These are big claims, I guess. I am sure, though, that this opera has a special eloquence, and that for all the complexity of some of the characters it reveals itself with a beguiling simplicity. Just as its first success was assured by its interpreters (the soprano, who had been the first Giovanna in *Anna Bolena*, died in the theatre only 2 yeas later – aged 23 – as she prepared to sing Adalgisa in *Norma*; the first Cardenio was the young Giorgio Ronconi, a singing actor whose extraordinary career included the first *Nabucco* a decade later), I also had in mind from the start that English Touring Opera had a good chance to revive interest in this opera with the virtuosity of Craig Smith (our *Boccanegra*, a true Verdi baritone), Sally Silver and Nicholas Sharratt in the opera's most exacting roles.

I hope that you discover in it the pleasure and thoughtfulness it has brought to me.

James Conway