

QUIXOTIC CAPERS AT THE OPERA

Following on their adventurous choice of *Hercules* last year, Richmond Opera went for a more familiar Handel work, *Acis and Galatea*, this year, but continued their exploration of the baroque repertoire by pairing it with a ballet-comique by Handel's French contemporary Boismortier, *Don Quichote chez la Duchesse* ('Don Quixote and the Duchess' in Michael Proctor's English version).

The pastoral *Acis and Galatea* was one of the works Handel furnished to English texts for the corrupt but cultured James Brydges, later Duke of Chandos, for performance in his palace at Canons, Edgware, following on his eleven so-called Chandos Anthems and preceding the first version of his oratorio *Esther*. The orchestra set about the Overture with gusto, presenting a foretaste of the story: the passion of Acis the shepherd and Galatea the nymph; the jealous interruption of the giant Polyphemus; and the hero's death and transfiguration. Even Handel never exceeded the level of inspiration he achieved in the ensuing music, and the singers made the most of it: Acis (Andrew Evans, his lyrical tenor a perfect match for 'Love in her eyes sits playing'); Galatea (Philippa Dodd in 'As when the dove laments her love'); both together (very congenially in the duet 'Happy we'); Polyphemus (Tony Moss, his resonant bass exulting in 'O ruddier than the cherry'); and Damon (Acis's friend, a rôle shared by Hazel McCulloch and Philip Thornton, in 'Shepherd, what art thou pursuing?'). The chorus (four singers on stage, four off) reflected the various moods: carefree abandon in 'O the pleasure of the plains', sadness in 'Wretched lovers' (reminiscent of *Dido and Aeneas*) - and resignation in 'Galatea dry thy tears' as her lover is magically changed into the 'gentle murmur' ring streams' of a fountain. Imagination was shown in the portrayal of this, as in the scenery and charming choreography, although perhaps the straying 'sheep' earlier were a shade lifeless before Damon rounded them up!

Highly successful in his day – a sort of Lloyd Webber- Boismortier could not hope to match Handel for musical inventiveness, but the cast compensated by taking full dramatic advantage of Favart's preposterous reworking of Cervantes's fanciful original, assisted by a hobby-horse Rozinante, Japanese costumes (! for the grand finale), et al. This episode from Book II became a series of jokes played on the heroes by the Duke, alias Merlin (Tony Moss again) and Duchess, alias Altisidore (Emilie Taride). The sadly deluded Don Quixote was Mark Fletcher, whose counter-tenor, aided and abetted by a real tenor on the lowest notes, conveyed the right degree of eccentricity, completed by the exaggerated forceful high notes. Also according with Italian operatic convention, Sancho Panza was a soprano, Ruby Nightingale, whose liveliness of voice and gait was totally credible. (For good measure she acted as assistant to the new Director, Ruth Knight.) Emilie Taride was, as usual, equally consummate as singer and actor – in both the characters required here. (One day perhaps we will hear her in her native French!) The supporting cast of Kate Clelland (the peasant woman 'framed' as the Don's love Dulcinea), Luke Reader (Montesinos, the wizard holding the real Dulcinea captive), Dawn and John Rolt, Hazel McCulloch (again) and Alison Williams, together with a bevy (?) of dancers from the Richmond Academy of the Dance, all entered into the spirit. Luke added spoken pre- and post-ambles. The singers took a little while to synchronize, but the orchestra rose to the challenge under Lindsay Bramley's clear direction. Jocelyn Slocombe was joined by a new Leader from Canada, Fiona Huggett, and Giles Kennedy was an efficient new continuo 'cellist. The Boismortier had the added colour of an uncredited trumpet.

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