

The Middle East is up in fire! Tunisia started, Egypt's insurrection is smoldering, Yemen is on the brink, some think (hope) Saudi Arabia will follow.

Well, the Italian-French army has a special way to dwell with insurrection. They have hired Maestro Donizetti, who went to work and come up with a *compromesso*. Italians love *compromesso*, no matter what it is about ; So, tonight we have listened to the Israeli premiere of *La fille du regiment*, composed by Domenico Gaetano Maria Donizetti in 1840, which is all about the army and the war
Italian style

Gaetano Donizetti was born in Bergamo, an exquisite old city in Lombardia, composed actually by two cities the hilltop Medieval "Citta alta" expensive and secluded and the lower "Citta bassa" modern sprawling; they are connected by a funicular. Blessed by many historical churches the most important Santa Maria Maggiore, where he rests, and the "Palazzo della Regione" with a Duome by Tiepolo and of course the wonderful Teatro Donizetti. His father was the keeper of the pawnshop and miserably poor and possibly not interested in music. It is a miracle that Gaetano got to an English prelate officiating in the local chiesa who recognized the youngsters' genius took him under his aegis, and helped him pursue cembalo and voice lessons. Gaetano went on to conservatorio and soon was singing in the choir, playing the clavicembalo and beginning to compose.

He married early in and had three children, all of whom died (It is possible the children died of congenital syphilis) as he would die of the same scourge after a long bout with insanity only 51

years old. First hospitalized in Paris, then buried and reburied eventually with great honors in Bergamo. Donizetti achieved early fame and was well aware of his genius. His operas were presented on the important stages of Italy ; Napoli, Venice, Roma, Milano (but strangely not in Parma, considered the stepping stone of an opera composer or singer).

We do not know exactly when Gaetano started to compose. His first opera was presented in 1816: *Pygmalion*.

Donizetti has written seventy five (75 !) operas, symphonies, sonatas for piano and wind instruments, a requiem and more.

So roughly he wrote two operas per year, unlike Rossini, these are full length operas that required good and lengthy collaboration with his librettists and authors. Internet, telephone, copiers were missing in most of Italy (sometimes still missing today). How did he do it? Looking at his original scores, it seems that they were handwritten with ink and pen on hard paper. Few details are available of his schedule. Unlike Mozart, who could write full scores even after an evening of debauchery, his writing is careful with full details for instruments and voice. So why *L a fille du regiment*,

especially when you can choose among an “embarras de riches”:

Lucia di Lammermoor, l' Elisir d'amore, Don Pasquale, Anna Bolena, Lucrezia Borgia and other 70 operas? Well for one it was never shown in Israel, then it comes at the right time softening the tension and possibly easing Israel's way into the European Union. The libretto was written by two French obscure authors, as Donizetti was living in Paris and the opera had its premiere at the Opera Comique in February 11 1840. It is sung in French and the French public liked what they heard and kept coming for more. Still today it is a favorite of many opera houses, though I imagine you would not hear it in Salzburg or Bayreuth. It became famous for the aria “Pour mon âme”, which is the Everest of tenors, having nine high cs.

Pavarotti in 1967 left over the crest in company of Sutherland at the Met, a feast recently repeated at La Scala by Juan Diego Flores.

The story:

The Marquise of Berkenfeld is in enemy territory, but the sergeant of allied troops (they look like the 7th American infantry division, not like French army looked THEN with large operatic hats, buffon pants and high boots) reassure her that order will reign. Enters Marie "La fille du regiment" (the mascot), who is purchased by Tonio, an enemy soldier turncoats, who desires to marry her.

In the second act, which is lighter, funnier and full of good tunes we learn that Marie the Mascot is actually the illegitimate daughter of the Marquise of Berkenfeld. A hilarious singing lesson conducted by the Countess of Crackentorp and a near marriage ensue, but eventually the Marquise of Berkenfeld is moved by Maria's love for Tonio. Mazal tov and happy matrimonio.

Situate this in the context of the 19th century to understand the names of the aristocracy (Austrian) and the humility of Tyrolian-Italians, who were yet divided in 360 Ducati, small inconsequential paese, borgi etc. (Italia became a unified monarchy only in 1861 under King Victor Emmanuel II).

The voices:

Maria has a central, all encompassing role, she is a female factotum, she moves the play, the action, the singing, she jumps off the bar, on tables, dances, gets to be funny in the voice lesson and alluring when singing with Tonio. Maria was Hila Biaggio, an Israeli product (Tzabra like the fruit) carried well her large job; she has the comedy, the needed drama and the toughness of a soldier (after all she was a soldier in the Israeli army!) Her voice color is attractive and she has a good range, yet in the high register there were some hit and misses mostly overstraining. With a little loving care she will own Maria outright. The sergeant Sulpice was Vladimir Braun; Vladimir is a superb bass-baritone, a profundo that could descend in the inferno of the Verdi great roles, much at ease on the stage. We want to hear him again, and apparently we are not alone, since he has sung over 50 roles for the Israeli Opera. The Marquise of Berkenfeld was Monica Minarelli, an accomplished singer and actress, who played her role to the hilt and with great ease. The Duchess of Crackentorp: Elisabeth Kedem, who came from France and makes her home in Israel, has an interesting career as a dancer and actress. She carries her comic role with great ease. Caner Akin was Tonio. A Turkish tenor

singing in Israel bodes well for the political tension now reigning between the two countries. Caner has a pure sound, a full register of a lyric tenor, an attractive hue to his projection, there was at least one high c, the evening we were there (opening night).

Alberto Zedda, the conductor, is a mythic name in Italy. Maestro Zedda, a modest man of great achievements, is director of the Rossini Conservatorio in Pesaro (the birth place of Rossini) and director of the Rossini Festival for many years.

He conducts unobtrusively, but with a knowing hand formed by many years of Italian singing. Interesting and well soldered choir of males only and sympathetic support of the Rishon Lezion orchestra. One must mention the splendid Cello section and the beautiful short solo of the first cellist Doron Toister. The set and costumes of Julio Galan are attractive, the second act, especially clever with the garden set, creating a second movement stage.

The house was full and applauding vigorously. Well, you can't fight success.

Peter Hermes