



Mary Stewart after a tragedy by F. Schiller libretto G. Bardari Music by Gaetano Donizetti. This hair raising Opera had a difficult time coming alive on stage. Politically loaded with Christian Protestant conflicts the Italian censorship (it was taking place before Italian's independence in 1865 ?) twice banned it, forced Donizetti to change it's name and context and finally let it be produced at La Scala di Milano in 1835.

The libretist Giuseppe Bardari was a 17 years old student with absolutely no previous experience and Donizetti had to work "Very closely with him" "Now 175 years later in our open society questions might be asked ; Was Donizetti a homosexual ? and was this an amorous choice rather than professional ? I might get some answers in the mail I think. The story is well known mainly since Sarah Bernhardt and later Glenda Jackson among others starred in the

movie productions. Malibran the most famous Italian Diva sang it too and had met an early death (32 years old).

A word about La Fenice. It is one of the most venerated opera houses in Italy and many world premiere took place there since it opened in 1792. It was destroyed in 1836 and rebuilt in 1896. About 6 years ago an electrician foreman anxious that his crew did not have enough work caused a major circuit break down and set the opera house on fire (that is not a an opera synopsis but a true story and he of course went to prison) La Fenice (it means the phoenix)... true to its name, was resurrected and opened for music and business 2003.

It is a magnificent opera house. hosting about 500 spectators in the orchestra and a good many in its five balconies. Every thing is covered in gold the ceiling with its working cloak !! (a good idea in Italy) the balconies when the frescoes left some free room. The savings went on the central bronze candelabra which looks like a poor cousin in this sumptuous hall. The acoustics are excellent even that a I was sited in the last row with my critic invitation little did they know that "PerformArts" is the most widely read opera journal.

So Mary Stewart Queen of Scotts flees to England as her Lords revolt and lands in Jail courtesy of her blood relative Queen Elisabeth. An historic confrontation ensues, where political and religious motives are shadowed by a desperate amorous rivalry two ladies ; one man the Count of Leicester.... The tragic end decapitation of Mary Stewart is not unfamiliar to the French public.

This opera staged in two acts is one of the most powerful vehicle for female singers. Maria Nocentini was Maria Stewart a powerful hall filling voice with dramatic accents that wrenches your heart. The confrontation scene with Elisabeth, the splendid Maria Piscitelli, was one the memorable moments of operatic canto. In the last scene Mary Stewart has resigned to her fate, she is magnanimously forgiving her murderers. The pathos, pain and sheer vocal beauty of the music and Nocentini singing keeps you riveted unwilling to leave. Unfortunately as is often the case in Italian and other Opera houses the male voices are not at par. We are left looking for the return of great barytons. A word about the stage work so economical high tech where simple white black benches conveyed the drama of the singing (Denis Kreif). The jury scene all mournful, set in shadow is masterful and foretells damnation.

La Fenice is back in splendor, hopefully here to stay.

par Peter Hermes

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