

I puritani Bellini

WELSH NATIONAL OPERA

Music ★★★★★
Staging ★★★★★

Review by Peter Reynolds
Photography by Bill Coope

Reviews of Bellini operas don't usually start with the conductor. However, at the first night of Welsh National Opera's new production of Bellini's *I puritani* (part of the company's new Madness season), Carlo Rizzi's conducting touched a level of intensity and understanding that might not unreasonably be described as great.

'Can you think of one real conductor who has shown an atom of passion for Bellini?' wrote record producer John Culshaw in 1967. Well, here was a real conductor, bringing a huge sense of passion to Bellini. Rizzi allowed the performance to breathe and inhabit its own space: rarely can

Bellini's final masterpiece have been as lovingly conducted, allowing every singer to give full expressive weight to their performances.

I puritani is merciless in its demands on its principals. For several seasons now, WNO have been fielding strong casts for productions of Rossini, Donizetti and early

Verdi – and they have achieved this again here. The star of the night was undoubtedly soprano Rosa Feola's sensational performance of Elvira, effortlessly negotiating the role's demands and bringing a new sensibility to our understanding of it. Her performance was neither a display of vocal pyrotechnics nor a study in the

Time slip: 17th-century perspectives





▲ Annelise Miskimmon's production bring contemporary resonance

hysteria of madness, but a multi-faceted approach taking us, degree by degree, through the different stages of Elvira's breakdown. In her and Rizzi's hands, the static second act (for which Bellini and his librettist Pepoli have been much criticised) became a gripping psychodrama.

The other male roles brought a strong range of vocal colour to the production. Elvira's spurned Puritan lover, Ricardo, and feckless Catholic lover, Arturo, were strongly projected by David Kempster's grainy baritone and Barry Banks's ardent tenor. Bass Wojtek Gierlach's Giorgio had a rock-like solidity and consistency, contrasting well with Simon Crosby Buttle's Bruno.

Coming during the week when the Stormont assembly teetered on the edge of collapse, Annelise Miskimmon's production could not have been more timely, with the action split between contemporary Northern Ireland and Cromwell's Commonwealth. The production starts with designer Leslie Travers's drab setting in a contemporary community hall, moving for the second scene to the striking contrast of stark, black-and-white 17th-century



▲ Rosa Feola gives a sensational performance as Elvira



▲ Ardent: Barry Banks as Arturo

Puritan costumes. Initially the action felt over-fussy, but things soon settled down and the production gained in power and dignity throughout the evening.

The opera's final climax, returning to

contemporary Ireland, subverts Bellini's happy ending and gave the final scene a chilling power, bringing to a close one of the most impressive of recent WNO productions. ■