

## Maria de Rudenz

*Gothic Opera at Battersea Arts Centre, London, November 1*

Gothic Opera and Battersea Arts Centre make unsettling bedfellows. The one is a shoestring company that excavates undead corners of the operatic repertoire and exhumes gemstones from the tombstones; the other is a crumbling labyrinth on Lavender Hill, at the back of which stands a Grand Hall that's still in need of surgery following a fire in 2015. The two were made for each other.

Donizetti's rarely seen opera *Maria de Rudenz* (1838) was withdrawn soon after its premiere, apparently in response to the shocked reaction of audiences who objected to its dark material. This is odd because the subject matter is far less disturbing than that of the composer's *Lucia di Lammermoor* three years earlier.

Does it deserve its obscurity? Opinions may differ, but if the music is anything to go by then certainly not. The scenario is another matter. It is narratively flaky with too many underwritten characters and structural inconsistencies such as the disappearance of the second female lead, Mathilde, from large swathes of the action and the mystifying absence of the romantic hero (a tenor, to boot) from the dramatic final scene. Is he dead by some



Lorna McLean in the title role of 'Maria de Rudenz' for Gothic Opera

nefarious hand? If so he wouldn't be the only one, but we are never told. The prologue, too, is a damp squib as an agitated Corrado merely narrates what the audience surely needs to see: events that led him to bury his beloved Maria alive and then flee, albeit having arranged for her to be saved once he's gone.

If the libretto is not Salvatore Cammarano's finest hour (that would be *Lucia*) the score is prime Donizetti. Even in Leon Haxby's reduced orchestration for string quartet, clarinet and organ it sounded luxurious, and the three principals I heard in this double-cast production brought dramatic fervour and vocal excellence of a standard that easily surpassed the trio who'd sung a day or two earlier in Verdi at a major London house.

Lorna McLean, whose Fach is closer to dramatic than bel canto lyric, was unlikely casting as Maria but she electrified the

house with her impassioned, enthralling singing, while the New Zealand baritone Kieran Rayner caught every facet of Corrado's conflicted personality in his vivid and stylishly sung account of the opera's most substantial role. Yet it was that mysterious vanishing tenor, Enrico, who lifted the performance to a peak of excellence thanks to the tonal beauty and rock-solid technique of Davide Basso, a UK-based Italian tenor who on this showing deserves a much higher profile.

Some decent secondary performances plus an outstanding ensemble of six chorus-cum-comprimario artists completed a memorable cast, all conducted with a sure hand by Anna Castro Grinstein, and all splendid in a theatrically assured production by Lysanne van Overbeek with set and costume designs of ingenious economy, simple yet spectacular, by Nate Gibson. If he was on fire, though, it was Luca Panetta who sparked his flames into life with a dazzling exhibition of the lighting designer's craft. With an artist's eye and a technician's expertise (not to mention a liberal use of diaphanous drapes and smoke haze) he created evocative locations of gothic magnificence.

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