

Good evening, Vicar

Last month I cited what I thought might be the motto of artistic criticism, 'Quot homines, tot sententiae', but I make no pretence to be a serious critic. If I were to do so there might be a risk that the editor instruct me to attend specified events and I do not seek an aleatory cultural life. I live within my comfort zone as I have no wish at this stage of my life to expose myself to experimental or improvisational theatre or performances that require audience participation. This process of self-selection means that I am more often elated than despondent after a visit to the opera house, concert hall, or theatre. As an eleemosynary amateur I claim this right and regular readers (I know of at least one) will have noted that unless I'm discussing musicals my mood is generally positive. I guess what is going to please me and most times I am correct.

Never was this more so than in the case of *La Fille du Régiment* at the Royal Opera House. There were three reasons for my booking. I had never seen the opera which was last performed at Covent Garden in 1966; the tenor role was to be sung by Juan Diego Flórez; and it was a Sunday matinee. Donizetti's opera is sung in French and the tabloids gave space to the show because Dawn French played a ten-minute non-singing cameo role as the Duchess of Crackentorp. Her French was just passable and big laughs were reserved for her imposing presence and the way she lapsed into English – at which point the English surtitles became French. There were many foreigners in the audience who were probably unfamiliar with the Vicar of Dibley and there was no applause as she appeared. Apparently, on the opening night, the less disciplined corporates had squealed in their excitement and received her ecstatically.

Flórez did not disappoint in the famous first act aria, 'Ah! mes amis' when he delivered nine top Cs thrillingly, precisely, and effortlessly. The man has everything including matinée idol looks. His repertoire concentrates on Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini and this very sensible singer has eschewed the attractions of Verdi and Puccini until he feels he is ready. Instead of the over-reaching achieved by Roberto Alagna, say, we witness in Flórez a tenor comfortable at the peak of his powers in his chosen genre. Yet even he was upstaged by Natalie Dessay who,



Natalie Dessay as Marie in *La Fille du Régiment*



Juan Diego Flórez as Tonio



Dawn French (left) and Felicity Palmer

Alan Frost finds operatic near-perfection in *La Fille du Régiment* at Covent Garden.

directed by her French compatriot Laurent Pelly, gave a masterclass in how to steal a comic opera.

As the programme intimates, the gamine she played was an astounding amalgam of the comic style of Marcel Marceau, Fernandel, Charlie Chaplin, Ian Carmichael, Buster Keaton, and Stan Laurel combined with the cross-dressing traditions of Hettie King and Marlene Dietrich. Her singular funniness was enhanced by the way she ironed clothes, pegged laundry, peeled potatoes, or was carried aloft by the chorus while delivering some challenging coloratura from the bel canto repertoire. Pelly's production was a perfect backdrop for her unique talent and it was a joy to watch her and Flórez in one of the most sparkling productions at the Royal Opera in many years. But, knock me down with a feather, my research shows that she is 41 years old. Quelle dame!

It's worth mentioning that Felicity Palmer, at 62 years old, sang the Marquess of Berkenfeld with her own inimitable brand of humour and I am grateful that ageism is unknown in these parts of the arts world. Indeed, Donald Maxwell, a sprightly 58-year-old, demonstrated impeccable pantomime timing as her majordomo Hortensius. The other character part of Sulpice, a sergeant, was also double-take perfect but so it should be as Alessandro Corbelli is a youthful 54. The singers were supported in the momentum of their manic madness by conductor Bruno Campanella in the pit.

Some might feel that an opera written in 1840 is anachronistic – and it is. The style led some years later to Gilbert and Sullivan's great parodies of the style and the policeman's chorus in *The Pirates of Penzance* can trace its ancestry directly from the soldier's chorus of *La Fille*. Nevertheless, it's well worth seeing. Interestingly, the two serious arias of Marie, wistfully and beautifully sung by Miss Dessay, heralded for me the much later soprano arias of Verdi. If you missed it I commiserate – but I shall remember January 2007 for this near-perfect performance.