

Un giorno di regno

Chelsea Opera Group at Cadogan Hall, London, October 12

Like *Alzira*, revived at the Buxton Festival last year, *Un giorno di regno* is one of the early Verdi works that has barely dared speak its name. Famously written as the comic follow-up to the composer's first opera, *Oberto*, when he was grieving for his dead wife and children, it failed miserably at its one and only performance at La Scala in 1840. Fortunately, *Nabucco* came two years later. *Un giorno di regno* now seems to be emerging from the shadows, and this imaginatively cast concert performance by Chelsea Opera Group, using the new critical edition by Francesco Izzo, will be followed next summer by a staging at Garsington. If *Un giorno di regno* is hardly a revelation, it is far from being a botch job. The young composer was yet to assert his originality against Donizetti and Rossini, and, despite some delightful instrumental touches, the orchestra—clearly designed for a theatre pit—is too heavy on the wind and percussion; but a distinctive Verdian momentum pulses through the score, and, notably when disparate feelings are being expressed in a duet or larger ensemble, there are moments when the drama (more than the comedy) really lifts off.

Tom Seligman certainly conducted a spruce, springy and sparkling performance, and the precision of the orchestra, predominantly an amateur band, was a joy. It has to be said that Felice Romani's libretto, originally set as *Il finto Stanislao* by Adalbert Gyrowetz in 1818, is disappointingly inconsequential. Nothing very much happens for the first 40 minutes of the opera and too little is done in its two-hour course to realize the potential of the characters—even the central couple of Belfiore and the Marchesa del Poggio. She, though, is undoubtedly the more interesting of the two. Sarah-Jane Lewis sounded gorgeous in the lyrical passages, and she can turn a phrase—both notes and words—with heart-easing eloquence, but she seemed cautious in the showier writing. As her true love in disguise, George von Bergen sang with suaveness, dash and a plentiful supply of voluminous high notes. The juvenile leads were Paula Sides as Giulietta, the most vivid personality on the stage, playing skilfully with bel canto light and shade, and Luis Gomes,

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who brought confident, long-breathed radiance to his aria 'Pietoso al lungo pianto', which, with its cabaletta, is perhaps the work's most satisfying showpiece. There was plenty of contrast between the two *buffo* roles: John Savourin, with his easily flowing bass-baritone, made an elegantly obsequious Barone di Kelbar, while Nicholas Folwell brought formidable power and bite to La Rocca. The chorus, trained by Lindsay Bramley, expressed its glee and incredulity smartly, and, at the fortepiano, Davide Levi was anything but dry in the only Verdian instances of *recitativo secco*.

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