

I Due Foscari

Chelsea Opera Group

The redoubtable Chelsea Opera Group is famous for performing rare operas by well-known and less well-known composers. This year the audience was treated to one of the former types of operas, Verdi's early *I due Foscari*. It was performed at the Cadogan Hall, London on Sunday 9 June 2024 at 6.30pm.

This work was number six in his long catalogue of operas and follows the better known *Ernani* a year later, in 1844. Both had librettos by Francesco Maria Piave and both Verdi and Piave were keen to base the plot on Byron's play, *The Two Foscari*. Verdi was particularly keen to seek more operatic juice for his music than Byron's exploration of the dark underside of picture-postcard views of Venice. This effort was made by augmenting the character of Jacobo Fiesco's wife, Lucrezia so that her dramatic interventions become significant drivers of the action.

Verdi also began to introduce a number of new innovations in his score, which makes the pleasure of listening so rewarding. He developed a type of *Leitmotif* for each of the principal characters, ahead of Wagner's more defined ones and he increased the interest in his orchestration by numerous small touches, not least the delightful the duet for solo viola and cello at the start of Act Two.

The plot demands three strong characters; Jacopo Foscari, who has been accused of murder and sent into exile; Lucrezia, his wife and the Doge, Francesco Foscari, Jacobo's father. The opera develops along the lines of Jacobo, now returning to face clemency instead of pardon. His father can do nothing to stop proceedings and his wife has various temper tantrums in supporting Jacobo's predicament.

This plot goes against the usual love affair/triangle that opera audiences were so used to and, although it had some success in early years it faded into obscurity. The opera, nevertheless, gives full reign to the three principals and they took their individual opportunities with open arms. Verdi supports them, as far as the story allows, with four minor roles, all taken with relish. The orchestra has the delightful innovations mentioned above and some of Verdi's house-style of fun and passion among the chorus.

Jacopo Foscari was sung with dignified outrage by the Argentine born tenor, Pablo Bemsch, strong and true to the need to express his anger at his treatment by everyone except his wife. She, Lucrezia, was sung with great passion and awareness of her key role in the plot by the British-Armenian soprano, Anush Hovhannisyanyan. She terrified me anyway. A truly powerful voice with an enormous future. The unwitting Doge of Venice, Francesco Foscari, was sung by the Ukrainian baritone, Andrii Kymach, with a rich, pungent tone, expressing his sorrow at his inability to show his son more compassion. All three thoroughly deserved their applause at the end. There was no weakness elsewhere among the supporting class: Andrew Henley, tenor, Emyr Wyn Jones, bass, John Vallance, tenor, Georgia Mae Bishop, mezzo-soprano, and Kevin Hollands, bass. The chorus sang lustily and projected a rich tone

essential in Verdi. The whole enterprise was fortunate to be conducted by the highly gifted Matthew Kofi Waldren, building himself a fine reputation in the operatic world. His control over proceedings bought forth my admiration in the way he obtained wonderful playing and singing from the orchestra and chorus while, at the same time, needing to co-ordinate with his singers who were, at all times, singing away from his baton into the audience. A great gift and one that will carry his career forward with confidence and success. Bravo to everyone. I can now cross off a Verdi opera I am unlikely to meet in the opera houses of the world.

Edward Clark
Musical Opinion