

I due Foscari

Chelsea Opera Group at Cadogan Hall, London, June 9

Paradoxically, *I due Foscari* is both highly dramatic in spirit and deficient in dramatic substance. In the manner of a Classical tragedy, the action is concentrated, the audience joins the action at an advanced stage in proceedings and the protagonists are *in extremis*. Their emotions—especially those of Lucrezia, wife of the wrongly condemned Jacopo Foscari—are given intense musical expression. Yet events remain essentially static, the characters are severely constrained in their evolution and the libretto offers Verdi little opportunity for the exploration of external and internal conflict, such a defining feature of his later mastery.

In Chelsea Opera Group's concert performance this paradox was resolved to some degree. The score's succession of compact scenes is fast-moving, even precipitous, and in the comparative intimacy of Cadogan Hall its many bold passages achieved a visceral impact. At its more reflective moments the mood of the piece, and not just the presence of a paternal Doge, can presage *Simon Boccanegra*; the sensitivity of Matthew Kofi Waldren's conducting and the playing of the excellent (amateur) orchestra came especially to the fore in the contemplative writing for solo clarinet, divided cellos, and a duetting viola and cello.

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The senior Foscari, Francesco, was sung by Andrii Kymach, still in his mid 30s. His voice, on the dark side for a Verdi baritone and impressively, sometimes relentlessly sonorous, was more suggestive of the Venetian potentate than of the vulnerable 'vecchio cor' apostrophized by the ageing Doge in his aria. The role of his son was taken by Pablo Bensch, who last appeared with Chelsea Opera Group in its 2019 *Mefistofele*. He is a singer of exceptional elegance, a kind of *tenore di grazia* with additional firepower, and his tone, appealingly plaintive, was well matched to the character and his plight. The nervous energy of his wife Lucrezia is famously captured by the orchestra in a frenetic recurring motif. Anush Hovhannisyan declaimed with intent and applied *bel canto* finesse to the role's often spiky coloratura. She was gratifyingly adept at integrating ornamentation into her line, which, while tending to sing sharp in Act 1, was consistently finely honed. Emyr Wyn Jones's close-grained bass-baritone and powerful personality made it regrettable that Loredano, Francesco's ambitious nemesis, remains somewhat on the sidelines. As Barbarigo, who finally delivers a crucial message, the tenor Andrew Henley gave strong definition to his words and music.

Waldren, clearly and justifiably focused on running a tight and purposefully steered ship, could perhaps have allowed for greater lyrical expansion in the rolling ensembles that punctuate the latter part of the opera. At those points of convergence, as elsewhere, the chorus—which sang in notably well-coached Italian—made an alert and committed contribution.

YEHUDA SHAPIRO