

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

Eve Queler presents a bel canto gem

"*Anna Bolena*," by Gaetano Donizetti; Opera Orchestra of New York, Eve Queler, Music Director

Kudos are due to conductor Eve Queler for breathing new life into Gaetano Donizetti's masterpiece drama of the Tudor Renaissance, *Anna Bolena*, at Carnegie Hall on April 7. While the opera is being generally revived in concert productions in several cities, this particular New York performance should make it clear that the Metropolitan Opera and other companies are missing the boat by not staging it regularly.

Carol Vaness in the title role of Henry VIII's second wife Anne Boleyn (*Anna Bolena*) contributed much to its success, her magnificent Italianate soprano rounded from the lowest notes to the highest coloratura. Dramatic mezzosoprano Melanie Sonnenberg in the "pants" role of the page Smeton also sang gloriously.

One could not, however, help mentally recapitulating the performance later, after the master class on lowering the pitch back to Verdi's A-432 by tenor Carlo Bergonzi, held next door in Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall on April 8. Bergonzi demonstrated, for example, that a mezzosoprano who sounds like a soprano at "standard New York pitch" of A-442, can blossom to a distinct mezzo color at A-432, the pitch of Donizetti, Rossini, and Verdi.

Young Italian mezzo Gloria Scalchi, singing the fiendishly difficult role of Anne's friend and rival Lady Jane Seymour, would have benefitted greatly by Donizetti's original pitch, for she often sounded simply like another soprano next to Miss Vaness.

This presents a dramatic problem, because Donizetti intended two distinct voice types in order to show us two different moral qualities.

Classical drama

Anna Bolena was Donizetti's first success in 1830. The New York performance made clear that a great opera has found a little public, to paraphrase Schiller. This fine work has been wildly underappreciated by both illiterate producers and audiences since the turn of the century. *Anna Bolena* was very popular from 1830 to 1870, when audiences were better educated.

To reduce it, as commentators do, to the sad story of Queen Anne Boleyn, jilted by the venal English King Henry VIII for her distracted friend Lady Jane Seymour, shows a brain shriveled by too much TV soap opera. Donizetti, as Verdi after him, was engaged in deep study of the German republican and dramatist Friedrich Schiller and his theory of Universal History. Donizetti here shows us all the reigns of the Tudor monarchs.

Had Donizetti shown us this literally, *Anna Bolena* and his subsequent, related Schiller operas *Maria Stuarda* (1833) and *Roberto Devereux* (1837) would have been merely didactic. Instead, Donizetti constructed the drama classically, so as to force us, the audience, to come to these conclusions in our own minds.

The point is not that Anne Boleyn is a wronged heroine: Anne herself is grandly corrupt. She used sex to cause the destruction of Henry's first wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon, and not out of any love for Henry as a man, but out of lust for the throne. That is Donizetti's reason for presenting Anne's real lover, Percy: not for ro-

mantic subplot, but to reveal Anne's inner venality.

Compassion awakens Christian love

After Anne, we see the members of the court, each more venal and selfish than the next. The pageboy Smeton and his puerile infatuation for the queen, which ruins her, are metaphor for the whole court, each of them a selfish child. Lady Jane Seymour tells us plainly that, while she's upset about hurting her friend Anne, what she really wants is "love and glory," i.e., Henry as a sex object and his throne. Percy is swayed by each passing emotion, with no self-control. Next to these, the murderous Henry looks at home.

What makes Anne Boleyn a heroine is that she alone *changes*, and becomes a better person, by realizing that all are doing wrong, and by repenting.

Anne's shift occurs at the point she feels Christian charity, first awakened by love for her friend Jane, as Anne realizes with horror that Jane will suffer the same fate as she, when Henry's eye roves again. As Jane descends lower and lower into her passions, and urges Anne to lie to save her skin, Anne recalls how she herself had stolen the husband of Catherine of Aragon. She realizes that so long as people act this way, there is nothing to prevent the vicious cycle from repeating.

We see, through her eyes, a vision of England past, present, and future: the cycle of sin which must be broken by Christian charity, as Anne tells us at the end; but since she has realized it only after setting England on the road to destruction, she must die.