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Linda di Chamounix

Gaetano Donizetti

Maggio Musicale, Florence, Italy

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It's always a risky business for a simple country girl to fall for an aristocrat, especially one posing as a penniless painter or poet. Linda obviously hadn't read her opera guides, for madness lies ahead, but this being a semi-seria work rather than a full-blown melodrama, all seems resolved happily if somewhat improbably in the end.

In a foretaste of more realistic settings by composers of the next generation, life is hard in Donizetti's village of Chamounix in the mountains above Annecy, and during winter, the young men and women travel to Paris to make their living on the streets, playing a hurdy-gurdy, begging or worse.

Linda has fallen in love with Carlo, the above-mentioned aristo, who, having revealed himself for what he is, has installed her in a fashionable apartment in the capital. Enter Linda's admiring young swain Pierotto, who fails to see anything suspicious in the arrangement, and Carlo's dastardly marquis uncle, who has designs of his own, which do not involve redecoration.

Carlo is unable to resist his mother's insistence that he marry instead a woman of his class. Linda di C goes nuts, cue abbreviated *Lucia di L* style aria, but Carlo relents, Pierotto sings a nostalgic song that restores Linda to some degree of sanity and she marries her weak-willed lover. Good luck with that.

It's an opera challenging in its vocal and dramatic demands, and the sensible staging by director Cesare Lievi succeeds due to commendable performances all round led by Australian Jessica Pratt as Linda and Fabio Capitanucci as the Marquese di Bosifleury.

Although Linda's opening cabaletta, "O luce di quest'anima", is the most famous number in the work, it is the second of the three acts that is particularly punishing for the soprano, not only for the mad scene, that Pratt negotiates with an apt mixture of wistful, wishful-thinking and fury, but also for its prolonged high tessitura. There is no lack of power or richness in her lower register, no unevenness in the range, but she seems to have a turbo-charger that kicks in at the top, crowned with a perfect E-flat at the end. Stunning.

The role of the Marquese poses other difficulties. For the lecherous old man reappears at the end generously to celebrate Linda's wedding to Carlo, his nephew and rival. Capitanucci steers an impeccable course through the characterisation: he appears as a preening, sarcastic and vindictive coward in act 2, baring his teeth like a cartoon villain. Here he resembles a better-dressed, less boorish Baron Ochs, but Capitanucci crucially doesn't overdo the devilment, enabling his re-emergence in the third act as a light-hearted well-wisher. There's no harm in appearing ridiculous, or inconsistent, he implies, if your purse and your ego can pay the price. His performance is a joy.

There is something in Francesco Demuro's casual manner and expression as Carlo to suggest a slippery character, and if he exercises his sweet, light tenor at times as if stepping simultaneously on eggshells, this only reinforces this young nobleman's lack of backbone.

Demuro's best moment comes in his duet with Michele Perusi's Prefect—a bass role that would have represented that of the village priest had censorship allowed. Baritone Vittorio Prato has great clarity of expression as Linda's father Antonio.

The opera, one of Donizetti's last, has its longueurs, but is distinguished by subtle orchestration, such as the hurdy-gurdy sounds in the lower strings, and many fine duets, none finer than that between Linda and the excellent Teresa Iervolino as Pierotto.

The production recorded in Florence in January 2021 is well conceived but perhaps inevitably suffers from its COVID limitations, with a couple of slightly awkward moments suggesting lack of rehearsal time and a masked chorus singing from hand-held scores. A booklet includes an exemplary introduction to the piece by distinguished musicologist Professor Marco Beghelli.

Reviewer: [Colin Davison](#)