



Society : St. Albans Operatic Society
Production : Die Fledermaus
Date : April 2001
Venue : Alban Arena
Report by : Joe Burgh with Dorothy Lawson

Report

What a wonderful way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the society by performing again this most golden of operettas. Congratulations too for continuing the tradition of guest entertainers at Prince Orlofsky's party even if, because of the late start caused by a combination of traffic chaos and the Charity Night speeches, it meant that we were in the theatre until early eleven.

Everything about this show is a gem from the very first notes of the Overture onwards. The orchestra under the baton of Adrian Brown displayed excellent musicianship from the beginning and the individual woodwind players although very exposed played beautifully. Adrian had perfect control of the transitions (the oboe in particular showed playing of the highest order) and it was interesting to see him coax more from the strings with his left hand.

In this version of the show, the Eisensteins have a small army of servants so as to use as many of the chorus as possible and it is inevitably difficult for a director to find enough for them to do to look realistic. In the Act I opening, the words came over well but the dusting, etc was very desultory! When the time came for the chorus to sing, they did so with accuracy and verve which continued throughout the piece.

As Adele, Melanie Roberts had a good 'common' accent to distinguish her from the bourgeoisie in her speaking, she carried this through to her music and into Act II where she cleverly used both the 'common' and the 'pretend actress' accents very well. Adele has two marvellous solo numbers in Acts II and III and Melanie's phrasing and top notes in the Laughing Song were a joy as were the variety of characters and super singing in Act III. A lovely performance all round.

Margaret Sawyer was a stunning looking Rosalinda with the right mixture of dignity and coquettishness. Her dialogue was lovely and she sustained the 'Hungarian' accent consistently when it was needed. She even managed to persuade us (well nearly!) that she genuinely couldn't recognise her husband disguised as Blint. Whether in solo, duet or ensemble pieces, Margaret's singing was right up to the standard one would expect. How fortunate the society is to be able to cast two lead sopranos of the calibre of Melanie and Margaret

Gabriel Eisenstein is a comfortable bourgeoisie and Tom Evans was just that. Until it was brought home to him, he was obviously unaware that his philandering was his entitlement as a gentleman and that his wife's feelings were as nought. At the reconciliation, he did convince that his repentance was genuine - at least for the time being! Vocally, Tom sang easily and accurately with good diction.

It is often alleged that Dr Falke is the true 'star of this operetta and certainly, he is the weaver of the intricate series of plots and sub-plots. Clive Webb was a good contrast physically and vocally to Tom Evans and he took centre stage with aplomb when required. He had the right easy relationship with the Prince as with the other characters and convinced us

that he had the authoritative air necessary to persuade the others to conform to his machinations.

Nobody felt uncomfortable with Pam Homan as Prince Orlofsky as sometimes happens when the audience is unsure whether it is being played by a man or a woman. Pam was so perfectly natural that she was accepted from the beginning and she sang "Chacun a son Gout" beautifully - it is not always the case by any means that one hears all the lyrics of this number but here we did and were delighted. When Pam eventually smiled, it was a delightful smile and the audience was relieved that it had happened.

Ida like Adele and in the person of Yioda Panayiotou had the right mixture of accents and a lively face. She was the perfect foil for the major principals without ever detracting from their performances by overdoing hers.

Alfredo is one of those roles where it is only too easy to go completely over the top but Mike Fooks resisted the temptation. He looked and sounded right from his first entrance and retained the accent and character throughout. His singing was certainly good enough to convince us that he was an opera singer of sorts and in his acting, he portrayed the air of affronted innocence required in his dealing with Frank.

Barry Sawyer did, I think, go a bit 'OTT' with Dr Blint but with a character like that, what else could one do?! He never allowed the 'business' to make his dialogue unintelligible and his singing in his ensemble pieces was firm and accurate.

John Hope was a dapper Prison Governor, wasn't he? He was an excellent contrast to Eisenstein in their scenes together where between them, they extracted all the comedy without going totally over the top. He managed his drunken scenes in Act III very well - we particularly liked his using his scarf as a lever for drinking coffee - not original but very effective.

Another drunk - David Berridge as Frosch - displayed his more plebeian side as a contrast to the perhaps, aristocratic behaviour of the others. He had wonderful rubbery legs and kept in character despite his antics. His dialogue was always understandable and overall, he gave a beautiful cameo performance.

The chorus were well drilled and, although it was a shame that so many younger members of the company chose not to be involved in what I suppose they would describe as a boring operetta (how silly of them!), they moved well with choreography which never tried to be too clever and was within the competence of the performers. The chorus singing was of a good standard (perhaps that is why so many youngsters shy away - they don't often sing in harmony these days) and fully supported the principals in the ensemble numbers.

Matthew Gregory's Toreador Song showed how he has developed since we first saw him as a teenager. What a good display of baritone bravado! The orchestra (Richard Tait in particular) obviously relished the opportunity to romp through the "Trish Trash Polka" and what a good performance it was - here are not many societies with the space (or the money!) to support so large a band and with the forces at his command, Adrian Brown showed once more his skill at bringing out the best in his players.

The costumes - Adele's red dress and Rosalinda's black dress in particular were gorgeous and the company wore them well and with the right accessories, hair styles, shoes, etc. One small point, Eisenstein kept on his grey spats when wearing white tie and tails!

The scenery too looked very good and the stage crew are to be congratulated on their swift and accurate work - especially the transition, back to Orlofsky's for the final scene. Props, etc were well managed - except for the footman who broke the spell just before "Brother Mine" by walking across the stage during a wonderful pause created by the MD. Martyn Knight's production showed some lovely touches and he obviously had the confidence of his performers, aided no doubt, by his worthy assistant Don Scott. Congratulations once again on a most enjoyable evening and we look forward eagerly to "Chess".