

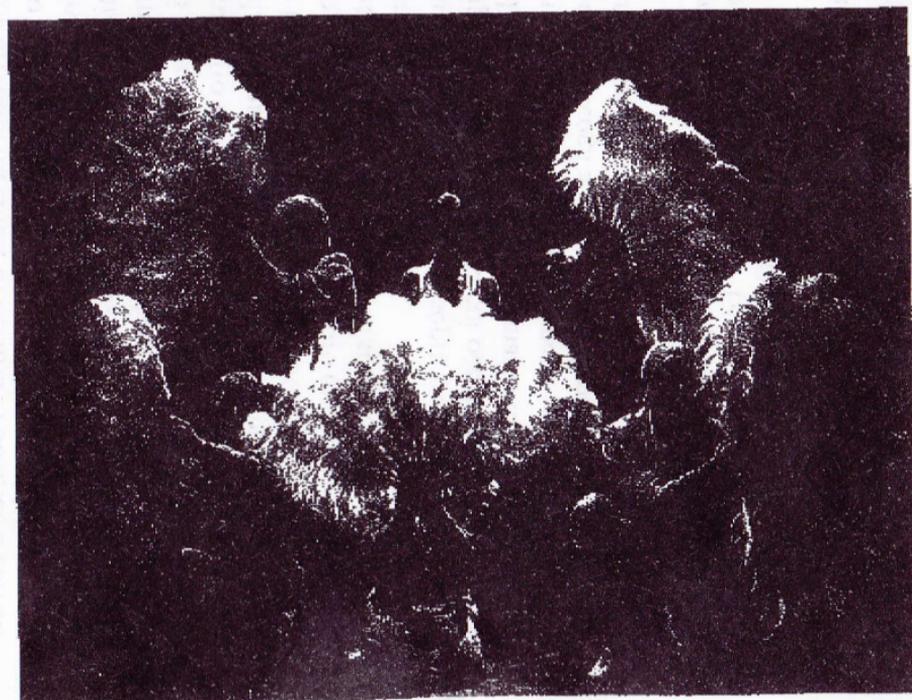
Ireland

Wexford

All change at the WEXFORD FESTIVAL this year, with the old Theatre Royal demolished and the new Wexford Opera House beginning to rise from the rubble, Michael Hunt established as the new Chief Executive, and the Orchestra of the Wexford Festival Opera making its debut in place of the East European orchestras that have dominated the festival for several years. Under the artistic directorship of the Canadian David Agler, there is thus still an Irish basis for the festival, reinforced by casting in the operas and in the choice of lunchtime recitalists. Gloomy expectations that the 55th festival might be something of an anticlimax were confounded by the Wexford genius for improvisation. DUN MHUIRE, a hall used for bingo and dances, had been skilfully converted into a passable replica of the Theatre Royal, even to the scrim in the interval, and proved to have good acoustics in spite of the absence of a pit. So, although there were only two operas instead of three, this festival's unique atmosphere was maintained and standards of performance were agreeably high.

Donizetti's *Don Gregorio*, a *melodramma giocoso* in two acts, is the 1826 Naples revision of his 1824 Rome *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* ('The Tutor in a Fix'), based on the popular comedy of that title by Giovanni Giraud (1807). Wexford performed the first version in 1973. The libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, who wrote *La Cenerentola* for Rossini, was revised for Naples by Andrea Leone Tottola, who replaced the recitative with spoken dialogue. The plot is a romp and keeps the fun going nearly all the time. The sternly moralistic Don Giulio has attempted to keep his two sons, now in their early 20s, away from the perils of the world outside their home, especially women, and has

■ Elizaveta Martirosyan as Gilda in Donizetti's 'Don Gregorio' at Wexford



engaged a tutor, Don Gregorio, to supervise them. Even so, Pippetto is in love with the servant Leonarda, and Enrico has secretly married Gilda, the girl next door, and has a baby son. What follows is akin to a Feydeau farce as the kindly Gregorio smuggles the baby into Don Giulio's house after Gilda, on a clandestine visit, has heard it crying.

The score is a continuous delight, in Donizetti's most Rossinian vein and often much funnier than Rossini. On October 25, Wexford performed the Naples version in a reconstruction by Maria Chiara Bertieri. Donizetti's additional numbers and revisions of others were incorporated, notably a dazzling quintet in Act 2. Roberto Recchia's direction was a model of slick timing and made hilarious play with cross-dressing and some sly allusions to other operas. Ferdia Murphy's set was ingenious and enabled the action to move swiftly. The young conductor Michele Mariotti obtained stylish and witty playing from the excellent (also mainly young) orchestra. His may well prove to be the most important conducting debut here since Vladimir Jurowski's. All the roles were well sung, notably the bass Bruno Taddia's Don Giulio and the baritone Paolo Bordogna's perscable Don Gregorio. Danilo Formaggia's Enrico occasionally emitted a high tenor bleat but otherwise was effective, and one can forgive Elizaveta Martirosyan a few stray shrill notes for the charm and brilliance of her singing of Gilda. Her final aria is virtually a re-run of 'Non più mesta' from *Cenerentola*, and none the worse for that.

The second opera, Conrad Susa's *Transformations*, was a very different affair. A landmark American theatre piece when it was first performed in Minneapolis in 1973, this 'entertainment', as Susa called it, takes its title from a 1971 book of poetry by Anne Sexton, who in her poems 'entered into the magical world of childhood to keep her own mental demons at bay'. She committed suicide in 1974. Her *Transformations* are of Grimm's fairy tales, giving them a modern twist which makes them even nastier. Child abuse, lesbianism and much else occur in these retellings. Some of Sexton's poetry is haunting and evocative, some deeply disturbing, and quite a lot pretentious and embarrassing. It is likely that Sondheim took the idea for *Into the Woods* from Susa's work and (in my opinion) succeeded better.

Susa's score borrows from a variety of American sources—dance music, film music, torch songs, the Andrews Sisters and Baroque models such as Monteverdi. The orchestration is for clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, keyboard, bass and percussion, and is adept and agile. Sexton's text is always clearly audible, but Wexford provided surtitles just in case. The first half is weaker than the second, which ends with a chilling version of 'Sleeping Beauty' (she becomes an insomniac). The vocal writing is mainly *parlando* but never becomes monotonous.

The composer was present on October 26 to hear an outstanding performance, sensitively conducted by David Agler, cleverly produced by Michael Barker-Caven with stunning sets and costumes by Joe Vanek, and well sung by a cast that included two first-rate Irish sopranos, Fiona McAndrew and Sinéad Campbell, and an equally fine mezzo, Paula Murrin. Names to note.

MICHAEL KENNEDY

Italy

Catania

'This story has no beginning and no end/It's not a story with a thread/connecting before and after/nor is it completely invented or completely true.' With these words Donatella Finocchiaro began her narration for the first performance, at the TEATRO MASSIMO