

Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo* Soars in Vienna

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Five nights in Vienna; two immense plates of wiener schnitzel with warm potato salad; one fish dinner at Umar; one Cassoulet with pork cheeks and one lamb shank and vegetables. Pastries at Sacher. Five bottles of red wine and too many beers—and four complete operas, three of them new to me. It was a great way to combat the cold and gloom of a middle-European mid-winter.



Theater an der Wien

On our last evening in Vienna we saw a concert offering of a work new to me—Niccolò Antonio Zingarelli's take on the Romeo and Juliet story. Zingarelli's was the earliest of the several operatic versions I have heard—by Vaccai, Bellini, Gounod, Delius and Bernstein. Zingarelli (1752-1837) is mostly unknown today, and if he is known to opera fans at all, it is probably because of his importance as a teacher in Naples in the early years of the nineteenth century; his most important pupil was Vincenzo Bellini, but he also taught Giuseppe Balducci, Michael Costa and Saverio Mercadante among others. Zingarelli wrote around 40 operas, 25 of them extant, many quite successful in their day, but the most important was *Giulietta e Romeo*. Composed for La Scala in 1796, it set a pattern that both Vaccai and Bellini would follow in their own versions of the story. Originally, it was composed for a castrato Romeo (Girolamo Crescentini), but the tradition of using castrati in opera was already coming to an end, and in the early years of the nineteenth century some of the greatest sopranos of the day made Romeo a pants role, including Maria Malibran and Giuditta Pasta.

The librettist was Giuseppe Maria Foppa—the same Foppa who wrote the libretto for Spontini's *Le Metamorfosi di Pasquale* which we had just seen a few days earlier in Venice, and several of Rossini's early Venetian operas (he wrote around 150 opera libretti). Drawing his version from French sources, based ultimately on Renaissance versions of the story including Shakespeare, Foppa generally follows the familiar story, but reduces the number of characters (e.g. no Mercutio) and changes others. Friar Lawrence becomes a friend named Gilberto (another castrato role), perhaps because a religious figure on the Italian stage was not tolerated at the time. Shakespeare's unforgettable Nurse is replaced by one of those generic companions of the prima donna (Matilde) so common in Italian opera, and Juliet's father Everardo assumes greater

importance than in some other versions. Foppa's libretto is so telescoped and moves at such breakneck speed that the story might be hard to follow if one did not already know it.

The three-act structure (done in two parts in our performance) is a template for serious bel canto operas to come even while much of the music reaches back to the eighteenth century, as does the convention of having two major roles sung by castrati (Romeo and Gilberto). Except for Teobaldo (Tybalt), who dies in Act I, each of the characters gets two arias, except for Romeo, who gets more. The use of the chorus is very predictive of bel canto; Romeo's prayer "Ciel pietoso, ciel clemente" is the template for all of those prayers which will populate Italian opera through at least Verdi's *La Forza del destino*, and is directed at the Christian god unlike all of the prayers in earlier operas, directed to pagan gods. (Andrea Leone Tottola used the same opening words for a prayer in Rossini's *Zelmira* some years later, and the same words begin a *preghiera* in Verdi's first opera *Oberto* in 1839, over forty years after Foppa used them.) But it is Romeo's tomb scene which attracted the most important female singers of the early nineteenth century once the sun had set on the castrati and which is also a template for so many similar scenes with chorus (and often an *en travesti* female singer) which we find in Rossini's serious operas. It goes without saying that Foppa's multi-part *scena* for Romeo will be reflected in the libretto that Felice Romani wrote for Vaccai and revised for Bellini.

The tomb scene occupies all of Act III and belongs to Romeo, with a long accompanied recitative, an arioso ("Idolo del mio cor") and a lovely, lyrical aria ("Ombra adorata, aspetta") which became the most famous piece in the work, and was certainly a model for similar arias in the Romeo and Juliet operas of Vaccai and Bellini. Its 'feel' is very Bellini-esque, although the perfect, long, memorable melodies which Bellini created were beyond Zingarelli's more limited genius.

There are many versions of this opera since it was revised for performances in various cities. I think we got the one used when the work received its first modern performances at Salzburg's Whitsun Festival in May, 2016, with several of the singers heard in Salzburg singing again at the Theater an der Wien on January 27, 2018. Chief among them was the wonderful Ann Hallenberg as Giulietta. As in Salzburg, Irini Karaianni sang Mathilde (her first "sherbet" aria, "Parto, sì, ma nel partire" was particularly lovely). Counter-tenor Xavier Sabata, whom we had heard three nights earlier in Handel's Publio Cornelio Scipione, sang the not so minor role of Gilberto. He was suffering from a cold (as announced from the stage), but sang anyway, and reaped the audience's thanks, although the lower ranges were obviously affected. Tenor Daniel Behle was very good as Giulietta's father Everardo. (The father, as in many Rossini serious operas, is a tenor in this work, and he has two arias which sound like the tenor-father arias which Rossini will write in *Tancredi* and other works.) The central role of Romeo was supposed to have been sung by Max Emanuel Cencic as in Salzburg, but it was announced a couple of days in advance that this role would be substituted by Yuriy Mynenko, the Ukrainian counter-tenor whom we had heard a few nights earlier in the role of Scipione in Handel's opera. Romeo's music is the most difficult in the opera, and Mynenko sailed through it without any sign of having stepped in at the last minute. His voice is big and beautifully toned, and he showed that his technique was equal to almost any of the ornate music which composers liked to give to star castrati. It is hard to imagine that Cencic would have been better.