Enrico di Borgogna

at last!

His first truly professional opera, mounted at the Teatro Vendramin di San Luca in Venice on 14 November 1818, this opera semiseria in two acts has taken its time to reappear. Though manuscript versions of small sections of the music survive and there are two complete such scores, no autograph has surfaced. As such, *Enrico di Borgogna* has had a tantalising presence in the lists of his works. Composed in the middle months of 1818 to a libretto by his fellow Bergamasc Bartolomeo Merelli, Ashbrook (in his book of 1982 p284) offers a brief but succinct account of the score including the surprising fact that Enrico's Act I cabaletta contains *"substantially the famous melody of Anna Bolena's 'Al dolce guidami'*. Thus some excitement awaits us in Sweden next summer. With a plot mildly evocative of *Zelmira* or *Bianca e Fernando* but far more inocuous, it is a rescue opera of sorts with a "semiseria" label simply because the role of Gilberto has been given to a buffo.

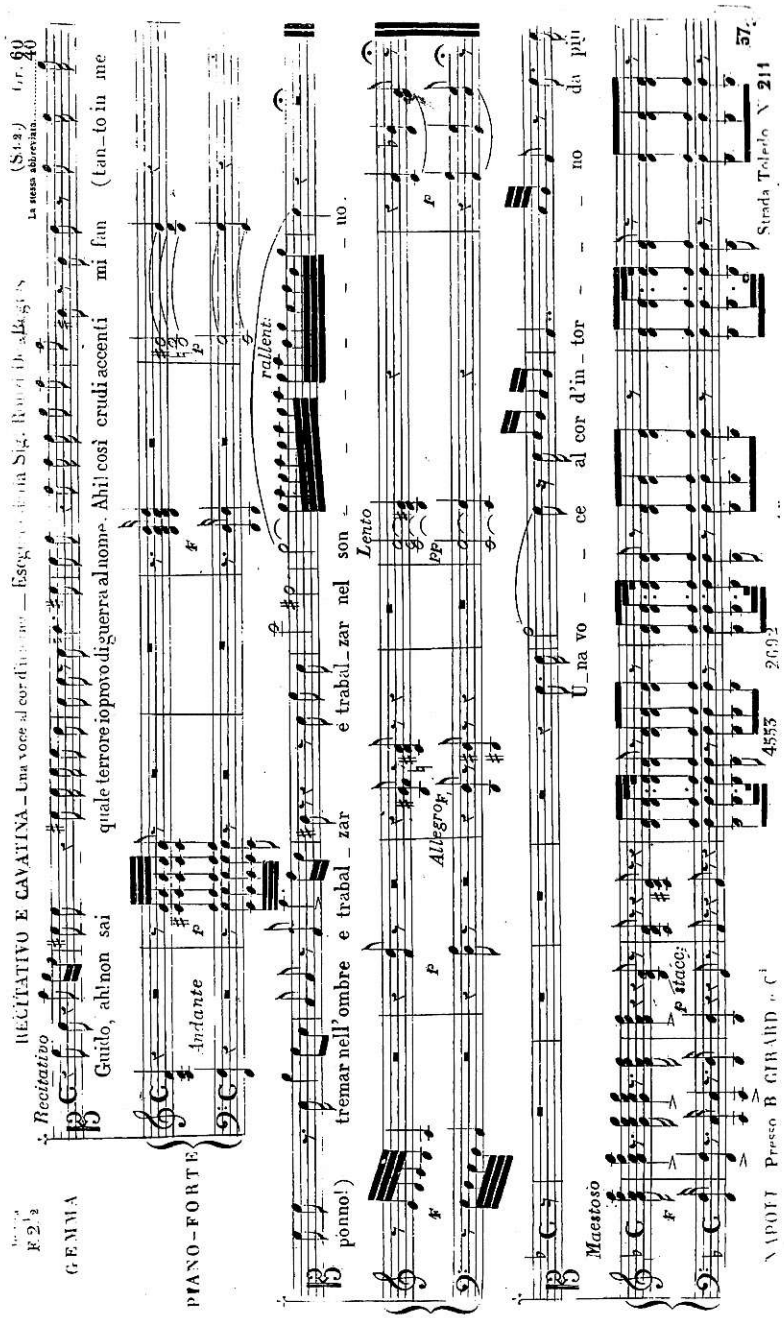
Donizetti's original cast included Fanny Eckerlin in the title (trouser) role of Enrico; Adelaide (not of course Angelica) Catalani as Elisa; and Giuseppe Spech as the villain Guido. There is an interrupted wedding, a castle under siege, and everyone lives happily ever after. The one item that seems to have made a real mark on audiences is Enrico's cavatina 'Elisa! Elisa! O me infelice' followed by the triple-time larghetto 'Care aurette, che spiegate' of which several manuscript copies exist.

The opera (exceptionally geographically challenged) is set in the Alps, near Arles or so it says (!) The disposition of the roles is as follows:

ENRICO	**Conte di Borgogna figlio di**	**mezzo-soprano**
PIETRO	**solitario**	**tenore**
ELISA	**amante d'Enrico**	**soprano**
GUIDO	**usurpatore di Borgogna**	**tenore**
GILBERTO	**buffone**	**basso comico**
BRUNONE	**cortegiano di Guido**	**basso**
NICOLA	**paesano amico di Pietro**	**tenore**
GELTRUDE	**confidante di Elisa**	**soprano**

The existent manuscript copies of the full score are conserved in the Royal library of Copenhagen and in the Bibliothètheque Nationale in Paris. The performing edition is by Anders Wiklund

	Sinfonia	**ACT I**	
1.	**Introduzione**	**Coro/Nicola/Pietro**	**1-32**
2.	**Scena, recit e Cavatina**	**Enrico**	**33-42**
	recit dopo	**Enrico/Pietro/Brunone**	**43-49**
3.	**Terzetto**	**Enrico/Pietro/Brunone**	**50-65**
	recit	**Nicola**	**66**
4.	**Cavatina**	**Gilberto**	**67-74**
	recit	**Gilberto**	**75**
5.	**Scena e Duetto**	**Guido/Gilberto**	**76-92**
	recit	**Guido**	**93**
6.	**Cavatina**	**Elisa con coro**	**94-106**
	recit	**Elisa/Geltrude**	**107-110**
7.	**Scena e Duetto**	**Elisa/Guido**	**111-127**
	recit	**Geltrude**	**128**
8.	**Finale I°**	**Gel/Eli/Enr/Pie/Gui/Bru/Gil con coro**	**129-180**
		ACT II	
9.	**Introduzione**	**Brunone con coro**	**181-191**
10.	**Recit ed Aria**	**Pietro (Brunone/coro)**	**192-206**
	recit	**Enrico/Gilberto**	**207-212**
11.	**Recit ed Aria**	**Elisa**	**213-221**
	recit	**Guido**	**222-223**
12.	**Aria**	**Gilberto**	**224-230**
	recit	**Elisa**	**231-232**
13.	**Duetto**	**Elisa/Enrico**	**233-247**
	recit	**Elisa/Enrico**	**248-249**
14.	**Sestetto**	**Eli/Enr/Gui/Pie/Brun/Gil**	**250-280**
	recit	**Geltrude/Elisa**	**281**
15.	**Recit ed Aria**	**Guido con coro**	**282-295**
	recit	**Geltrude/Guido**	**296**
16.	**Coro**		**297-301**
17.	**Recit e Rondo: Finale 2°**	**Enrico con coro**	**302-315**



An opera for a commemorative year
Gemma di Vergy

What is it that Tamas sings?

Mi togliesti a un sole ardente,
ai deserti, alle foreste,
perché fossi ognor languente,
qui fra nembi, e fra tempeste:
mi togliesti e core, e mente
patria, nome, e libertà.

Words as bitter as any in the litany of libretti but set to a *tempo di polka*! Here we have all the contradictions of the melodramma romantico.

And those of the composer too? *Gemma di Vergy* is perhaps the most puzzling of all Donizetti's operas, its fate anomalous, initially more popular than almost any other of his day but then dropped, its text winning plaudits from radicals and derision from critics and its fabulous *arie* soon forgotten, its anti-hero - a Saracen slave - cherished by dissidents, its repudiated heroine stretched to the limits and then repudiated by the stage. [i] Yet the most singular feature of this opera is wholly modern: can our knee-jerk response to Arab protest – to an "Arab Spring" as we have been cajoled into calling it - have been valid to the composer's lyrical world? We have listened carefully to *Il furioso* with its aspirational undertow of human rights (whose success at La Scala a year earlier prompted the contract for *Gemma*) can such imponderables as racial harmony and political emancipation - all those keywords we tap-in so eagerly - have been much more than an operatic modus vivendi? Donizetti's librettist, Giovanni Emanuele Bidèra, was shadowy, almost a non-person, a *nullity*, or so we are told, a cipher, a substitute, a last resort - but his text for *Marino Faliero* extols genuine subversion. Have we failed to pay attention or have we got the wrong end of the stick? Ashbrook pours cold water over the pretensions of the despised Bidèra and insists that Donizetti wrote a lot of the verse of *Gemma* himself. Well he may have done, or he may not have done. What has been said of this dim poet? "*...di statura letteraria molto mediocre, pasticcione rimatore che non riusciva a tenere il conto della metrica*" [ii] How absurd. Bidèra was born in 1784 in multicultural Palermo where the fate of a Saracen slave still struck a chord, as no doubt it still does. For many years there was no record of Bidèra's death.[iii] History avenges him, where the plot of *Gemma di Vergy* is concerned, he is still alive.

But certainly there are oddities and absurdities in this text, lots of funny words and a funny plot by Bidèra. *When* did he write this libretto? It is hard not to get the impression that *Gemma di Vergy* has been dusted-off from an abandoned essay scribbled long-before and resurrected at the very last moment by a Donizetti desperate for a replacement for the recidivist Romani. And *when* ever could the music have been composed? There is no space in Donizetti's calendar! How can you write music like this at the drop of a hat? I suspect in fact that the opera is at least in part *assembled*, not only is the storyline discontinuous and illogical but certain items – in Act II the opening coro for instance and the second aria for the baritone - are perfectly generic and could have been written at any time whatsoever for any opera whatsoever (with the fustian texts by someone else?), the Sinfonia in any case is a fudge and yet another currant in a cake that - despite sublime moments – never demonstrates that forceful process of inspired evolution and dramatic surge so characteristic of this composer. A score in fact full of old and new concepts in a menu of undisguised confection.

There is so little that can be described as "new" in *Gemma*. Hence its success. If Italian opera indeed was obliged to adopt the language of cooking, then this opera would have to be prefaced by the words: *The mixture as before.*

Thus:

1 **Sinfonia**

ATTO PRIMO

2 **Introduzione**
Cavatina *Questo sacro augusto stemma/ Nella stanza, che romita* [B con coro]
Cavatina *Perchè Gemma soffra lieta/Mi togliesti a un sole ardente* [T con coro]
3 **Scena e cavatina** *Una voce al cor d'intorno/Egli riede? Oh lieto istante!* [S]
4 **Duetto** *Oh vergogna! Me infelice/Dio possente!/Perché Ripudiarmi* [S B]
5 **Scena e cavatina** *Ah! nel cuor mi suona un grido//Un fatal presentimento* [Bar]
6 **Finale 1°**
Coro *Assassino, che il ferro immergesti*
Scena e duettino *Tigre uscito dai deserti/Libertà mi diede e vita* [Bar T]
Quartetto *Un suo sguardo, ed un suo detto* [T Bar S B]
Concertato e stretta *Di ch'io vado in Palestina/La sposa, la sposa!* [Tutti]

ATTO SECONDO

7 **Introduzione**
Coro *Come luna che al tramonto* [MS Bar con coro]
Scena ed aria *Ecco il pegno ch'io le porsi!/Questo soave immagine* [Bar]
8 **Coro** *Vieni, o bella, e ti ristora* [MS con coro]
9 **Scena** *A voi grata pur son/D'Arles tu più non rammenti* [S MS Bar T]
Terzettino *È dessa in mio potere*
Quartetto *Quella man che disarmasti*

10 **Coro** *D'Ida è pari la beltà*
11 **Scena e duetto** *Non è ver, non è quell tempio/ Che più speri? Il nodo è infranto*
Taci, parto, lo schiavo fedele/Va ti attendo: seguirti s'io nieghi [S T]
12 **Gran' scena** *Eccomi sola alfine* [S]
Preghiera *Un altare, ed una benda* [S B T coro]
Aria finale *Chi mi accusa, chi mi sgrida* [S]

Everyone knows the recipe, the trio of ingredients: the baffled baritone husband, the upstart mezzo-soprano and the *vittima* primadonna. There is nothing unpalatable or indigestible either in the sequence of events or their musical facture except - of course - for the one alien spice: the savage Tamas, the "Tiger from the Desert", the so-called "*schiavo*" idiotically free to stir-up trouble, defy his captors and pour tartar into the mixer.[iv] Can it be that the composer's wish "to break the yoke" emerges here in tangible form as an operatic omelette whose substance endorses our current political drift? Tamas protesting furiously against his fate, against all fate, came then - and comes again now - or so it would seem, dressed in a *tricolore* - to symbolise both the composer's (?) own longing for change as well as that of the audience of his day.

Whatever the culinary wizardry the opera drops neatly on to the plate of regular fans. Happily for traditional audiences even Tamas conforms to the destiny of all tenors and falls fatally in love with the heroine, and just like all the others brings her to an unhappy end. Indeed the plot equates abject predictability with wry innovation, Gemma, for her part, manages to strike a bold modern note and even though she calls him her '*Mal genio del deserto*' is far from indifferent to the multicultural tiger, while all the men hate him vociferously there is a background cry from Gemma's *ancelle* pleading for his life! Of course such a challenge was never easy to put over on the operatic stage (especially with the generations of tenors we have been obliged to live with). The first Tamas seems scarcely to have risen to the task, Domenico Reina had a tepid press, "*non garba troppo alle orrecchie di coloro*" was a familiar comment and his costume was torn to shreds, he wore baggy red pants and an enormous turban so that he looked like a walking mushroom. Here, in Bergamo, he had the same flawed impact. What is required is a ferocious, brown, phallic intruder, brandishing his scimitar provocatively, emblematic of everything dangerous, foreign and sexy without which the plot falls apart. On 16 September 2011 in the Teatro Donizetti Gregory Kunde was obliged to swelter in a tricoloured bag of washing.

Some tenors made almost a career out of tiger-Tamas, that his dissidence struck an instant political chord is clear. Certain fellow Bergamasc tenors



remained especially loyal to this role: Giovanni Battista Milesi [v] grasped the turban four times between 1837 and 1840 when Giovanni Storti [vi] took over, singing Tamas at the Teatro Comunale of Catania that same year with his wife Eloisa Gaggi as Emma; Domenico Donizetti [vii] sang Tamas twice in 1841. Other tenors included the super-heroic Enrico Tamberlick as the fine Bergamo programme book tells us, he must have made an exceptionally virile impression [viii]. But offering a credible Tamas is only one of many hurdles confronting those staging this opera. Presenting *Gemma di Vergy* with complete conviction is very nearly impossible. So many of the *arie* in the score are reflective, asking for an intimate close-up with that kind of cinematic focus that separates the singer from the rest of the cast. However in the world can you do this when there is set-piece after set-piece? In the days of the apron stage it was perhaps easier than it is now. The opera is utterly static from start to finish, how is it possible to combine a stage full of comparse – such as we saw at the Teatro Donizetti – with persistent heart-searching in aria after aria? Only a maximum ingenuity can get away with such an awkward dramatic dichotomy under modern conditions - programmed lighting and so on with all the fixtures and limitations of current staging parameters.

This was a *Gemma di Vergy* that was very well sung. Better, in its totality perhaps, than any of its predecessors. Happily a DVD is on its way and will be able to enhance the production visually but a CD would offer the most satisfactory realisation of this difficult opera – more complete than any other version currently available and with the items of the score in the order chosen by the composer (which has not always been the case). The orchestral score presents a large number of headaches – not all of them resolved at the time of the initial performance, on the second evening a tentative start gave way to a bolder reading with most of the details of acoustic and with timing under control. Roberto Rizzi Brignoli offered a sympathetic baton and took care of the forces with skill - but perhaps too prudently in respect of a score that lacks focus at leading moments. Of the artists Maria Agresta rose triumphantly to the astonishing challenges of her role of Gemma, finding the requisite volume and force even at the very end of an extremely long evening. Placed – often enough – too far back on the stage when she should have been at the footlights she forced her tone when her admirable projection would have allowed her more intimate exchanges with the house. A full and flexible voice and talent she held the drama in her hands to the very last note.

(opposite: Maria Agresta and Gregory Kunde contemplate flight in Act II of *Gemma di Vergy*)

Gregory Kunde sang with intelligence and conviction a role that would have suited him better earlier in his career; as the ineffectual Conte di Vergy, Mario Cassi displayed an admirable legato but little interest in the drama; as Guido and Rolando, Leonardo Galeazzi and Dario Russo acquitted themselves with honour. Only Ida di Greville (a soprano instead of a mezzo-soprano) fell below the high level of realisation. The absurdly elaborate costumes were an impediment from beginning to end.

Gemma di Vergy is an opera that succeeded in being shown almost everywhere in the operatic world, the two Royal Theatres of Naples for example staged *Gemma di Vergy* one hundred and eleven times between 1837 and 1848 [ix] (one can only imagine what havoc the censors played with the text!) plus another twenty-four more performances in two of the smaller theatres. The high points of the score – the *finale primo* and the *gran scena finale* that ends the opera – are leading items in the unbelievable archive of great operatic music as chronicled under the name of Gaetano Donizetti.

If Italy takes note of this neglected opera now – on a poignant anniversary of such import for the great nation when freedom and independence are at issue - then the great composer and his *Italo-albanesi* (not "Italo-greco") poet in their heaven will indeed be content.

Alexander Weatherson

(Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo 16 and 18 September 2011)

[i] Thriving for a decade or so, then tailing-off abruptly.

[ii] Egidio Saracino *Tutti i libretti di Donizetti* (Milano 1993) 778. Operas for which Bidèra supplied libretti - for Carlo Coccia [*Marfa* 1835], and Giuseppe Lillo [*Odda di Bernaver* 1837] to name only two such works - suffered more from musical than literary defects, but the poet obstinately stayed-put in an antipathetic Naples thus curtailing his theatrical potential. The provocation in the texts both of *Gemma di Vergy* and *Marino Faliero* can only have attracted the same cloud of suspicion, pointed the same dubiously attentive eyes and ears that blighted Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* in that same year. Such a radical reputation certainly limited the poet's career. It is significant that during the anti-Bourbon uprising of 1848 in Palermo - Bidèra's rebellious city - the inflammatory cries of Tamas provoked an uproar.

[iii] He died in Palermo in 1858

[iv] "*Uno schiavo giovane arabo, di niuna elevata condizione, per nome Tamas, e che si trova, non si sa poi né come, né perché, alla corte del Conte di Vergy*"

[v] Giovanni Battista Milesi (Bergamo 1807-after 1853). He sang one final Tamas as late as 1852

[vi] Giovanni Storti (Bergamo 1801-Fano 1879). The role of Tamas was his very last - in a performance of *Gemma di Vergy* at Senigallia in 1842

[vii] Domenico Donzelli (Bergamo 1790-Bologna 1873)

[viii] Enrico Tamberlick (1820-1889) sang the role more than once in Spain

[ix] *Cfr* John Black *Donizetti's operas in Naples 1822-1848* (London 1982), 65

Grandioses Opernereignis
Joseph Martin Kraus: *Aeneas in Karthago*

Ein beglückendes Geschenk machte der scheidende Leiter des Berliner Konzerthausorchesters, LATHOR ZAGROSEK, seinem Berliner Publikum: **AENEAS IN KARTHAGO** von Joseph Martin Kraus, dem bedeutenden Mittler zwischen den Musikstilen Europas um die Jahrhundertwende von 18. zum 19.Jahrhundert. Über ihn und seine Reformbewegungen am Königlichen Hof von Stockholm habe ich im *orpheus* oft und begeistert geschrieben und auch auf die Bedeutung dieser unglaublichen, epischen Oper hingewiesen, deren Aufführung 1799 Kraus nicht mehr erlebte. In moderner Zeit hatte sich (vom dürftigen Berliner Programmheft diskret verschwiegen) der amerikanische Pionier Newell Jenkins 1976 mit einer wichtigen Ausgrabung in Stockholm um das Werk verdient gemacht, gekürzt zwar, aber mit Elisabeth Söderström und Johnny Blanc hochbesetzt (dem war der 3.Akt als Festaufführung 1972 vorangegangen, und 1980 folgte eine New Yorker Aufführung in Englisch ebenfalls mit der Söderström). Lothar Zagrosek hatte das Werk in längerer Fassung – ohne Ballette – 2006 eher glücklos auf die Stuttgarter Bühne gebracht, deren Chef er damals war und wovon eigentlich nur die Dido von Martina Serafin in Erinnerung bleibt (es gibt den Radiomitschnitt, eine Übernahme bei Naxos scheiterte, die aber die Ballette einzeln auf CD herausgebracht haben; Pläne für eine komplette Aufführung in schwedischer Sprache in Vadstena scheiterten ebenfalls). Für die semi-konzertanten zwei Aufführungen im Konzerthaus im März (in der für Stuttgart erstellten neuen deutschen Übersetzung von Ute Becker und Jens Schroth) nun hatte Zagrosek eine „Berliner Fassung" erstellt (wie es im Programmheft nebulös hieß), die sich aber als außerordentlich wirkungsvoll und kompakt erwies und die den Zuhörer (mich) bis zur Raserei begeisterte und für die vielen ebenso langweiligen wie deprimierenden Abende der letzten Saison in Berlins Opernhäuser glückvoll entschädigte. Anders als in Stuttgart versah Zagrosek sein Orchester bereits in der machtvollen Ouvertüre mit Sturm und Elan, ließ die Bläser kraftvoll aufrauschen, gab dem überragenden Chor (Rias Kammerchor) Raum und Ausdruck, ließ seinen Klangkörper weite Dynamiken durchlaufen und brachte das eher solide Konzerthaus zum Erbeben. Was für ein Werk – diese unglaubliche, epische Mischung aus großer Repräsentation und feiner Lyrik, diese gelungene Balance zwischen Öffentlichem und Privatem, diese Verlorenheit des Einzelnen in der arbiträren Macht der Götter. Ungeheuer! Die halbszenische Realisierung durch die norwegische Regisseurin SUSANNE ÖGLAND und ihre triste Optik durch ihr Team (MACHA MAZUR/ CLEMENS REICHLE/ GUNNA MEYERANNA PROKRYWIEC/ FRANCK EVIN) übergehe ich ohne Kommentar, die deutschen Übertitel hätten genügt, zumal die rundherum bedeutenden Sänger mehr als deutlich artikulierten. Kongenial zu Zagroseks umwerfender Realisierung der Musik war mit SIMONE SCHNEIDER eine in jedem Moment überragende Dido gefunden worden – dunkel und geheimnisvoll im Ton, sensationell in den Koloraturen, pastos-tragisch im Ausdruck und zudem eine schöne Frau, lange hat mich eine Sängerin nicht mehr so berührt. Ihr dem Selbstmord vorausgehendes Rezitativ und die dazugehörigen Arien ließen mich sprachlos und erinnerten mich an die ebenso berührende Todesszene der Königin in Telemanns *Orpheus*. Mit DOMINIK WORTIG war der Aeneas eher lyrisch denn draufgängerisch besetzt, und er lief – mehr noch als 2006 in Stuttgart – im zweiten und den folgenden Akten zu überzeugender Form auf. KLARA EK trotzte mit schönstem Sopranton ihrem hässlichen Kostüm als Vertraute Didos, Clélie. DANIEL OHLMANN gab eine feschen, operettenhaften Abblitzer Jarbas. CATRIONA SMITH als Venus und CORNELIA HORAK als Juno lieferten sich als zwei *himmlische* Waschfrauen Wortgefechte von Balkon zu Balkon und brachten

superbe Stimmen und Präsenz für ihre Partien ein. Die restlichen Götter waren sensationell-luxuriös besetzt, bis in kleinste Partien. DANIEL KIRCH glänzte als Jupiter und Neptun, JOACHIM GOLTZ nicht minder als Eol sowie als Berater Narbal und aus dem Totenreich aufsteigender Gatte Siché (was für eine Szene!). OLIVIA VERMEULEN schließlich war eine *comprimaria de grand luxe* als Bercé und Iris. Und die Übersetzung ließ sich wirklich gut singen, während die Wortmelodie das schwedische Original nicht verleugnete. Über, unter und vor allem aber glänzte Zagroseks Orchester und Chor wie schon erwähnt ebenso machtvoll wie lyrisch, die wunderbare Instrumentierung Kraus´ ausbreitend, Klangwogen entfesselnd und zarteste Momente der sanften Holzbläser auskostend, ach es war eine Lust. Danke an alle für diesen wirklich wunderbaren Abend.

Geerd Heinsen

In Praise of Andrew Greenwood (and Donizetti)

Buxton 2011

The hit of this year's Buxton Festival was the production of Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan*. This opera has been held in high regard by commentators from William Ashbrook onwards, who wrote "... anyone who is unfamiliar with it has not experienced the full range of Donizetti's power as a musical dramatist." [Donizetti and his Operas, p.510.] It is safe to say that few left the Buxton Opera House after this performance less than overwhelmed.

In the pre-performance talk (July 23rd), conductor Andrew Greenwood was asked why *Maria di Rohan* was so rarely put on. As part of his answer he commented that the idea fostered (in practice if not deliberately) by Sutherland and Bonynge that such operas need a Sutherland at their centres has worked against their frequent performance. Perhaps bel-canto operas are not best served by the cult of the prima-donna. It is an interesting idea. But I have to confess that in my ideal world we would have heard singers with world-class voices and techniques. At the interval I was conscious that though I was enjoying the performance enormously, Mary Plazas (Maria) sounded somewhat worn, not pure-toned, John Bellemer (Chalais) was too insistently open in production and William Dazeley somewhat grey in tone colour. But all overcame these "defects" with sensitive, musical singing, impassioned declamation and committed acting. By the end any failings had become unimportant and Dazeley at least was making me think that my interval judgment had maybe been too harsh.

The direction told the story clearly, more clearly in fact than previous productions I have seen. The set consists of a clock mechanism whose wheels turn constantly, emphasising that in the last two acts "we are as close to drama in real time as opera can ever get" [Tim Ashley in the Guardian]. True, we had to imagine the door to the secret passage, but I don't think many had difficulty with that. Costumes were convincingly period. The conducting was excellent, well paced and dramatic. It was a team effort that believed in the merits of the opera, with outstanding overall results.

At his talk, Mr. Greenwood held up what I think he said was a pre-publication copy of the critical edition prepared by Luca Zoppelli for Ricordi. This consisted of the original Vienna version (June 1843) with extra sheets from the revisions made for Paris (November 1843). Thus we heard Gondì as a mezzo-soprano breeches part containing two arias, rather

than a comprimario tenor. This was attractively sung and played by Mirouslava Yordanova. Other music chosen from the Paris version included Chalais' Act I cabaletta and the duet for Maria and Chalais in Act II. We didn't hear the cabaletta for Maria after her Act III prayer - probably the right decision, though I confess I have a weakness for such showpieces which when brilliantly sung add to the character even if dramatically they hold up the action. Neither did we hear the one-verse cabaletta for Maria ending the opera that Wexford exhumed for their revival in 2005. (See Douglas Bennett's report in Newsletter 97 for more on this, including its text.) Though I remember finding it convincing then, it does shift the emphasis from Chevreuse to Maria. It was dropped by Donizetti before the Vienna prima and Buxton was right not to include it. Chevreuse's Act III aria with its fragmentary cabaletta, the duet with Maria and the final trio make for a uniquely powerful close to this amazing work.

Another snippet from Mr. Greenwood's talk was the confession that, years ago, he turned down an opportunity to conduct *Lucia*, on the grounds that Donizetti wasn't worth attention, but that he has since seen the light. This was his last season as Artistic Director of the Buxton Festival and the third Donizetti opera performed under his leadership, following *Lucrezia Borgia* in 2009 and *Roberto Devereux* in 2007. He also conducted *Maria Padilla* in 2003. All these productions have been characterised by seriousness of purpose and total belief in the operas themselves. It is a fine record, one that Buxton and Mr Greenwood can be proud of, and one that Donizetti lovers should be grateful for.

Alan Jackson

Michael Aspinall

Michael — The Surprising Soprano — has announced his retirement and is giving a long series of Farwell Performances quite as protracted and gruelling for the spectators I fear - as those of Nellie Melba. He is one of those lucky people who (like the Editor of this Newsletter) is able to assume multiple personalities on Google but also to bridge the gap between athletics both vocal and non-vocal, with BBC announcing thrown in (with the aid of a slight adjustment to his spelling). By the time this Newsletter appears, alas, you will have missed his final London recital. This means that you will never again hear Arditi's *L'Estasi* as a prelude to a succession of vocal gems that take-in the *Adelina Patti Waltz, Death and the Maiden, There are fairies at the bottom of our garden* coming to a head, understandably I fear, with *The night wind* (by Roland Farley). Those fortunate enough to have attended will have repeated to themselves with fervour the words of 'Cruda sorte' (from *L'italiana in Algeri*), not improbably taking up the suggestion of 'Suicidio!' (from *La Gioconda)*

If he really does intend to retire it means that the shade of Florence Foster Jenkins has at last laid down her tiara. But YouTube will keep his memory dear and he will be able to concentrate on his career as a distinguished academic and unrivalled authority upon all those artists he has pilloried so memorably and for so many years for our amusement. AW

"IL DOLCE SUONO "DEL RIMPIANTO

(Lucia di Lammermoor al Regio di Torino)

In chiusura di stagione , ormai alle soglie dell'estate, il Regio di Torino ha programmatouna *Lucia di Lammermoor* di tutto rispetto dopo undici anni dall'ultima rappresentazionedel capolavoro donizettiano nella città subalpina.

Gotico, romantico, notturno, brullo sono aggettivi adatti a definire l'impianto scenico entro il quale si snoda la lettura dell'opera così come fu pensata nel 1996 da Graham Vick per il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Il richiamo letterario all'origine del lavoro del regista sembra essere il romanticismo delle sorelle Bronte materializzato nelle brughiere rocciose e brumose in cui l'erica dona al paesaggio un colore algido e spettrale.

Questi elementi figurativi sono la simbologia dell'amore dei protagonisti destinato ad infrangersi contro il muro dell'odio e del destino avverso. Non per niente la landa desolata accoglie Lucia nel suo appassionato incontro con Edgardo, nel 1° atto, e nel suo delirio finale, diventando solo uno *squarcio,* limitato da paraventi scorrevoli , per fare posto alla negazione dell'amore nel momento del colloquio di Lucia con Enrico e poi con Raimondo, e nelle scene asfittiche della cerimonia nuziale e della sfida avvolta dalle ombre.

Al termine dell'opera la brughiera senza luce diviene il cimitero dei Ravenswood con la mesta cerimonia del funerale della protagonista ed il suicidio di Edgardo. Niente sole, ma soltanto una luna gigantesca , quasi miraggio della felicità.

In effetti impotenti contro la sofferenza sono i personaggi, non solamente i due innamorati ma anche Enrico che spesso appare più prostrato che irato, preda di ansia e spavento.

Bravi gli interpreti che sanno muoversi con disinvoltura all'interno di questa stretta drammaturgica indossando costumi più vicini al tempo della Rivoluzione Francese che non a quello che Cammarano indica come il declinare del Secolo XVI.

Elena Mosuc è una Lucia trasognata e funestata da visioni penose fin dal suo apparire sulla scena: la bellissima aria della fontana viene affrontata con impegno e diligenza mentre la voce si fa delicatissima nei pianissimi quasi la paura della visione paralizzi la parola. Suggestivo questo momento in cui, rannicchiata presso la fonte, una specie di pozzo aperto nel terreno, si stringe spaventata alla sua damigella avvolgendo sé e lei in un drappo quasi a difesa dal gelo del paesaggio circostante, ma ancor di più da quello della psiche terrorizzata.

La performance del soprano rumeno si è tenuta su un buon livello interpretativo fino alla scena della pazzia, apice del dramma, in cui ha fatto pienamente sfoggio di grande perizia vocale e scenica, strappando, a sipario aperto, amplissimi consensi al pubblico. Ma un momento intermedio particolarmente toccante è stato il tenue e dolente *Soffriva nel pianto* nel quale alla dolorosa mestizia si univa un rimpianto struggente e desolato. Alla grande poesia donizettiana che fa di questo momento quasi un'eco del dolore universale dinanzi allo svanire di sogni e speranze, ha reso un bel servizio l'arte del maestro Campanella che ha sfumato i toni fino a renderli quasi sospiri dello spirito. Già dall'esecuzione del preludio, infatti, la sua direzione ha teso a privilegiare la morbidezza dei suoni, la dolcezza delle melodie , il sottile dilatarsi del momento musicale fino alla profusione di intime vibrazioni contemplative e nostalgiche.

Nel duetto d'amore che conclude il primo atto l'attacco di Lucia, esilissimo, e la sottolineatura con tocco delicato degli spunti melodici hanno sublimato straordinariamente la pagina , di per sé uno dei *topoi* donizettiani tra le invenzioni indimenticabili del Bergamasco, creando un afflato emozionante , quasi la riproduzione , nel potenziamento dei violini, dell'*eco ...nel mar che mormora*...Mentre la regia alludeva al mare come metafora di un amore senza futuro, con il soprano che allargava le braccia cinta alle spalle dal tenore in una rivisitazione, quasi, dell'icona di *Titanic!*

Molto bravo il giovane Francesco Meli, che ha affrontato con impegno la parte romanticissima di Edgardo, raggiungendo accenti di trepida emozione nell'evocazione
della paterna *tomba che rinserra* e nello struggente commiato da Lucia, fino al vibrante concertato del secondo atto culminante nella maledizione ed alla scena della sfida in cui la luce di un faretto, effusa da una botola del pavimento, produceva un gioco di ombre suggestivo, come lo smaterializzarsi di persone e cose nell'affermazione assoluta di stati d'animo di dolore e di furore. Il clou del pathos, con grande riscontro da parte del pubblico, è stato però raggiunto nella desolata *Tombe degli avi miei* e nella scena del suicidio in cui alla disperazione di Edgardo si offriva la vista del funerale di Lucia avvolta in un bianco sudario. Anche qui la direzione di Campanella ha rarefatto i toni rendendo la supplica del morente intimamente accorata e nostalgica.

La lettura dei tormenti dei personaggi , peculiare in questo allestimento, non ha risparmiato Enrico, l'antagonista per eccellenza dell' impossibile amore dei protagonisti, che , come già si osservava , è apparso in veste meno aggressiva di quanto spesso ci si possa aspettare, *rivisitato* secondo le ragioni di stato che lo sconvolgono fin dal suo comparire in scena. Al suo esordio il baritono Fabio Maria Capitanucci è , infatti, barcollante

sotto l'effetto della coppa di vino che regge con mano insicura e nella scena del colloquio con Lucia è dapprima prostrato e sempre intento a cercare sollievo nel bicchiere, poi via via coinvolto nel dolore della sorella annientata dall' inganno, che tiene stretta a sé con pietà per tutto il tempo della mestissima aria di lei .

Anche la prova di questo cantante è stata ampiamente positiva, con un progressivo imporsi della sicurezza vocale e della presenza scenica ed è valsa pure per lui la scelta direttiva di far prevalere l'intimità dei sentimenti sulla veemenza dell'espressione , cosicché la minacciosa protervia di *Se tradirmi tu potrai* è divenuta manifestazione dell'ansia di chi è in balìa del destino. Allo stesso modo nel potente sestetto si rilevavano intensi gli accenni di *...oh che spegnere non posso i rimorsi del mio cor.*

Corretta, anche se non sempre drammaturgicamente incisiva, la performance del basso ucraino Vitalij Kowaljow nei panni di Raimondo, austero nella veste sacerdotale e con cotta e stola nella scena del matrimonio. A completamento del cast la fida Alisa di Federica Giansanti, il petulante Normanno di Cristiano Olivieri e l'Arturo di Saverio Fiore, spiccante nel vestito e tricorno bianco sui mezzi toni dei colori dello sfondo, incubo per Lucia che, al calar del sipario sulla ormai definitiva perdita dell'amato, è stretta in uno spazio angusto con il marito di fatto, e pronto a levare la spada contro il rivale in amore .

Suggestivo, infatti, il duello tra Edgardo ed i suoi avversari con studiate mosse di scherma!

L'opera è stata presentata in edizione integrale dal punto di vista delle scene un tempo assurdamente tagliate (colloquio tra Lucia e Raimondo, sfida nella torre, rientro di Enrico nella pazzia fino all'anatema di Raimondo contro il delatore Normanno), mentre non c'è stata riapertura delle cabalette, forse per una volontà di maggior coesione con un allestimento dalle linee fortemente espressive e, soprattutto, dalla simbologia concisa : significativi i drappi scozzesi di diverso colore che contrassegnano i clan rivali, triste ma non raccapricciante la pazza che si muove su un tappeto di erica rossa come il sangue sui suoi abiti, bello l'albero spoglio, quasi una mano scheletrita, che si china al suolo nella luce lunare o è flagellato dalla pioggia sullo sfondo della torre ed altrettanto emblematico il cielo grigio, senza spiragli luminosi, sempre sovrastante la brughiera e via via più opalescente quando Edgardo riverso a terra si trascina verso la morta nell'epilogo del dramma.

Uno spettacolo che ci è apparso di grande bellezza e profondità interpretativa ad onore, tutto meritato, di Donizetti.

Laura D'Alessandro

DONIZETTI: UN COLPO DI FULMINE PER SEMPRE
(Riflessioni a ritroso...)

Nel cartellone della stagione 2010/2011 del Teatro Regio di Torino, imperniata sulle celebrazioni dei 150 anni dell'Unità d'Italia , è stato inserito il titolo *forte* de *I Vespri Siciliani* di Verdi, titolo patriottico, dagli intenti di riscossa contro l'usurpatore, dai colori fortemente risorgimentali. E uno spunto di riflessione viene dalla presenza del tenore Gregory Kunde nel contesto di una regia attualizzatrice, che colloca la vicenda del basso medioevo ai giorni nostri con tanto di funerale in diretta TV del fratello di Elena, ucciso dalla tirannide e pianto al microfono RAI dalla combattiva sorella, di camorristi in una Sicilia dell'attentato di Capaci , di spazzatura napoletana in mezzo alla quale si muove il corteo delle spose, di automobili sfasciate, uffici manageriali ecc.

Non ostili per pregiudizio alle pretese innovative nel campo del teatro lirico da parte di certi registi, confessiamo tuttavia di nutrire delle perplessità dinanzi al radicale stravolgimento di spettacoli operistici con anacronismi che mal si conciliano, o che addirittura fanno a pugni, con quanto pensato e voluto dagli autori del libretto e della musica.

La voce straordinaria di Gregory Kunde, acclamatissimo da un pubblico entusiasta, riporta la mente al *Poliuto* bergamasco dello scorso settembre, nella cui occasione il tenore fu ugualmente festeggiato con ripetute chiamate sul proscenio a fronte di una regia che *divideva* gli spettatori per lo spostamento (voluto da Marco Spada) della vicenda tratta dal martirologio cristiano all'epoca delle persecuzioni razziali del ventesimo secolo. Da qui divise naziste e pistole nel contesto di un libretto che prevede catacombe e martìri nel circo, macchine fotografiche e look femminili alla Marlene Dietrich con l'aggiunta della trepidante Paolina e dell'innamorato Severo intenti a bere il tè in un gazebo. Unica concessione al contesto storico della vicenda , come contemplata da Donizetti e da Cammarano, era la sagoma di un pesce, tradizionale simbolo cristiano, tratteggiata da lumini accesi e riflessa in uno specchio deformante. Se questo suscitava un certo rimpianto per il richiamo al soggetto tragico e sacro scritto dal Bergamasco per Adolphe Nourrit, assolutamente fastidiosa ed irritante ci appariva l'irrisione dell'epoca imperiale romana in una sorta di aberrazione cinematografica onirico-felliniana compiuta dalle masse corali e dai figuranti.

Riflettendo su questa partitura scomparsa dal repertorio da decenni e pur tanto affascinante, ci scoprivamo *feriti* dall'allestimento anche perché una siffatta lettura non poteva certo trasmettere al grande pubblico l'arte donizettiana tutta da scoprire e da rivalutare. L'impianto registico militaresco strideva con la raccolta pensosità della donna pagana che scopre il cuore palpitante del cristianesimo in *Di quai soavi lagrime*, cantato da Paoletta Marrocu, e con il raccoglimento del catecumeno che invano tenta di dimenticare la propria gelosia coniugale in *D'una alma troppo fervida,* del tenore. Allo stesso modo la veemente passione di Severo, interpretato da Simone Del Savio, appariva non credibile nel coacervo delirante che smontava il fondale storico per ridurre tutta la vicenda ad un piccolo dramma borghese *di lui,lei,l'altro...*

Un sollievo confortante veniva però dal recupero di Donizetti come musicista ispirato che sa regalare momenti estasianti : nessuna rivisitazione registica può infatti prevalere sulla bellezza del clou drammatico dell'opera nello splendido concertato *Dell'iniqua, del protervo* e nella scena seguente dell'abiura in cui convergono sentimento religioso e passione amorosa. Come rileva l'indimenticato William

Ashbrook, queste pagine collegano il musicista di Bergamo alle grandi opere italiane di fine Ottocento segnando una svolta importante nella musica e nel teatro donizettiani. Alla potenza espressiva di questi momenti si contrappone l'intima solitudine di Poliuto in '*Bella, e di sol vestita*' e la solennità de '*Il suon dell'arpe angeliche*' che conclude la tragedia : il motivo del sogno premonitore e della gioiosa rigenerazione spirituale dei protagonisti, cioè.

Un recupero di Donizetti, si osservava, che compensa le delusioni contingenti e conferma la presa che questo compositore sa attuare su chi lo *scopre*.

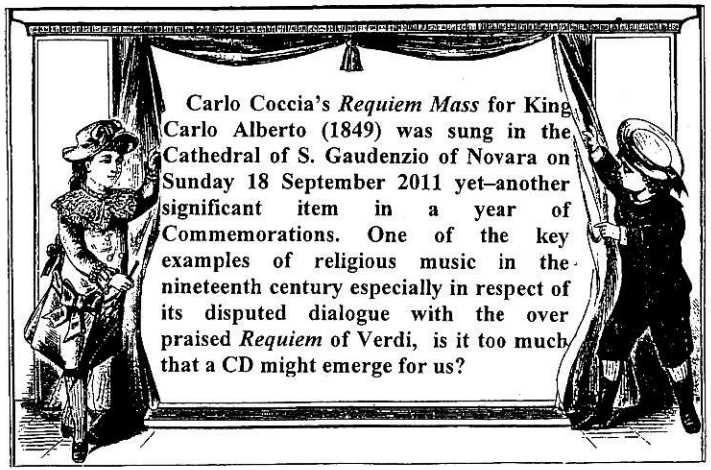
Poche ore prima dell'inizio di *Poliuto*, la Fondazione Donizetti aveva consegnato nel ridotto del Teatro il premio biennale, intitolato al musicista, alla studiosa Franca Cella che molto si è spesa nello studio e nella ricerca sull'arte del Bergamasco. E' stato motivo di profonda riflessione, e anche di emozione, l'ascoltare quanto da lei raccontato sulle sue esperienze in proposito e sul fatto di come la conoscenza del compositore, sperimentata in età giovanile, abbia influito sul suo orientamento culturale e musicale. In sintesi la professoressa Cella ha dichiarato che avvenne per lei quanto nel nostro piccolo possiamo riconoscere per noi stessi , cioè il verificarsi di *un colpo di fulmine per sempre*, iniziato nell'incontro con l'uomo e con l'artista, mai diminuito, anzi, accresciuto nel tempo.

Con queste premesse si può considerare positiva la ripresa del *Poliuto* dello scorso settembre, pur in un contesto in cui si stentava a riconoscerne la drammaturgia più autentica, in quanto la renaissance donizettiana è , secondo noi , sempre degna di essere presa in considerazione ed incrementata.

Questa partitura, poi, che confluì ne *Les Martyrs*, appare interessante e significativa anche per le circostanze in cui nacque: dalla proibizione, da parte della censura bigotta, di eseguirne la messa in scena a Napoli al sodalizio umano e professionale fra il compositore e l'amico Nourrit ed alla tragica fine di quest'ultimo, suicida per il male oscuro che lo rodeva segretamente. Dalla corrispondenza del tenore francese con amici e parenti conosciamo quanto questo soggetto innovativo fosse caro a lui nonché a Donizetti, desideroso di rinnovarsi ed aprirsi un varco verso la Francia (le tematiche del martirologio cristiano lo facevano *impazzire*, confidava Nourrit...).

Un insieme di elementi storici che oggi hanno anche il sapore della nostalgia per il progetto sfumato ed anche un po' per il distaccarsi graduale e definitivo dalla sua Napoli , pregna di ricordi dolorosi , e dall'Italia del maestro di Bergamo.

Laura D'Alessandro



FONDAZIONE DONIZETTI

Attiva dal 1997, dall'epoca delle celebrazioni per il centenario della nascita di Donizetti, la Fondazione Donizetti è nata con lo scopo di dare continuità, sistematicità ed espansione alle iniziative straordinarie legate a quella circostanza. Temi di tale portata storica e artistica, e così ricchi di potenzialità culturali (manifestazioni, mostre, spettacoli), non potevano essere limitati a ricorrenze saltuarie. La Fondazione Donizetti ha voluto perciò essere un costante e stabile 'motore di ricerca' relativo a Donizetti, al suo maestro Mayr, ai loro tempi.

In questi anni la Fondazione ha fatto opera di raccolta di fonti mayriane e donizettiane: in riproduzione, ma per quanto possibile anche acquisendo autografi sul mercato antiquario (soprattutto lettere e documenti, ma anche musica e prime edizioni di libretti). Tutto questo ha notevolmente arricchito il patrimonio della Fondazione, consentendo anche di porrre questo materiale a disposizione pubblica.

La Fondazione ha poi ripreso la fondamentale eredità dell'edizione critica delle opere di Donizetti già avviata dal Comune di Bergamo in collaborazione con Casa Ricordi. Anzi, l'ha potenziata riuscendo a farle conferire la qualifica di "Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Gaetano Donizetti". Sono una decina i titoli fino ad ora pubblicati: altri sono in cantiere, e a giorni è previsto il debutto allo Staatsoper di Vienna dell'edizione critica di *Anna Bolena*, curata da chi scrive.

In parallelo, è stata avviata l'edizione degli epistolari di Mayr (2 volumi già pubblicati: i successivi sono in lavorazione) e di Donizetti (lavori in corso): del tutto nuova nel primo caso, una revisione ma anche notevole ampliamento del classico lavoro di Guido Zavadini nel secondo.

I risultati dell'attività scientifica della Fondazione (incontri, convegni, giornate di studio) si possono vedere concretizzati in altrettante pubblicazioni. Tutte queste forme di attività sono indirizzate anzitutto alla comunità scientifica nazionale e internazionale. Non meno essenziale, però, è stata anche l'attenzione rivolta alla massima diffusione dei risultati di tali ricerche. Penso alle molte iniziative e incontri pubblici promossi e organizzati specie a Bergamo, e in modo particolare alle due più significative e continue:

1. la serie delle conferenze e concerti denominati "Caffè del teatro", pensata per il pubblico del teatro e incentrata sui titoli in cartellone.

2. "La scuola all'opera", che ha invece l'obiettivo di far accostare gli studenti al mondo della musica, e dunque costruire il pubblico di domani.

Negli ultimi anni si è poi felicemente aggiunta la collaborazione col Teatro "Donizetti" nella realizzazione del Festival incentrato sul grande compositore bergamasco. Era un obiettivo centrale e fondamentale, coltivato fin dalla nascita della Fondazione, che vede affiancati un ente di ricerca e uno produttivo e distributivo, ciascuno con le proprie specificità. La Fondazione mette a disposizione del Teatro:

1. testi da utilizzare per le rappresentazioni: edizioni critiche, edizioni verificate sugli autografi, ricostruzione di partiture.

2. nuove prospettive interpretative ed esecutive, alla luce degli studî più recenti ed aggiornati

3. partecipazione a manifestazioni di contesto (concerti, spettacoli teatrali, mostre, convegni, giornate di studio) che servano a collocare i titoli in cartellone in prospettive storico-culturali più ampie.

FONDAZIONE DONIZETTI
C.F. 95056160161 P.IVA 03329820165
Piazza Cavour, 15 – 24121 Bergamo (I)
tel 035.244483 – fax 035.4160685 – e-mail fondazione@donizetti.org

FONDAZIONE DONIZETTI

4. attività di divulgazione scientifica qualificata, attuata attraverso incontri pubblici, e fissata in pubblicazioni apposite come ad esempio i "Quaderni della Fondazione", una collana che ha il costante apprezzamento non solo del pubblico, ma anche di biblioteche e facoltà universitarie, che li adottano nei loro corsi.

La collaborazione col Teatro "Donizetti" e l'esperienza del Festival rappresentano una grande occasione per la Fondazione Donizetti: vetrina d'eccezione per le proprie attività, spazio privilegiato d'incontro con la città di Bergamo, strumento di risonanza internazionale del suo operato.

Paolo Fabbri
Direttore scientifico Fondazione Donizetti



GEMMA DI VERGY

TRAGEDIA LIRICA IN DUE ATTI

DA RAPPRESENTARSI

NELL'IMP. REGIO TEATRO ALLA SCALA

Il Carnovale 1834-35

MILANO

PER LUIGI DI GIACOMO PIROLA

M.DCCC.XXXIV

Libretto of the prima. Collection F.S.Lo Presti Bruxelles

As sung by...

Alan Jackson

One of my favourite "old" records, and by "old" I mean pre-electric, which in turn means roughly pre-1924, is Amelita Galli-Curci's 1917 recording of "Una voce poco fa" from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The timbre is so charming, the runs are so fluent, the staccatos hit their marks with pin-point accuracy, the characterisation is vivid. But recently I have read an article by Philip Gossett, "Source Studies and Opera History" in the Cambridge Opera Journal, Volume 21, No. 2 (2010), which re-iterates some material from the chapter "Ornamenting Rossini" in his wonderful book *Divas and Scholars* (University of Chicago Press). In both article and book he takes to task sopranos who turn up clutching ornaments taken from Estelle Liebling's *Diva Bravura*, a collection of soprano showpieces with suggested ornamentation and cadenzas, based on the idea, culled from the practice of sopranos in the early years of the 20th century, that coloratura sopranos should sound akin to Delibes' Lakmé in Bell Song mode.

The reason Gossett condemns Liebling's "vocal shenanigans" is that in the new critical edition of *Il barbiere*, issued by Bärenreiter in March 2009 (although with a 2008 date) and edited by Patricia B. Brauner, there is a seventy-five page chapter in the Critical Commentary by the critic and conductor Will Crutchfield, which offers an ample selection of ornamentation that is attributable to singers who studied with Rossini and indeed some written by Rossini himself. The singers, some as performers, some as teachers, include Henriette Sontag, Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle, Laure Cinti-Damoreau and Giuditta Pasta. Let me be clear: he is not objecting to ornamentation itself - that of the singers mentioned is copious - but to types of ornamentation that are simply not found in these early examples. By shenanigans, it becomes clear, he includes volleys of staccatos above the stave and cadenzas in the wrong place.

And so an unwelcome question started to assert itself. Was my love for Galli-Curci's record misplaced? Was treating it as a benchmark a stylistic error of judgment? Up till now I had been convinced by the late and lamented John Steane, for whom this record had been his entry into the world of "old" recordings and who described it in *The Grand Tradition* as still the best. It was time to consult both Liebling and the Commentary in the critical edition.

The former showed that many of Liebling's suggestions were indeed to be found in Galli-Curci; there were plenty of high staccato phrases. And listening again revealed that that she does halt the stretta to insert her final cadenza and she does commit the associated sin of dropping out for a bar or two in order to prepare for it.

Alas, my attempt to read the Commentary faltered at the first step. The British Library in London has a copy which is available for consultation in its Rare Books and Music Reading Room. But the copy is held at a store off-site where they have discovered asbestos. Worse, it is kept in the area least used by readers and so will be the last one to be made safe. When will that be done? "We don't know", but clearly not for some time. However, the British Library's on-line catalogue (available for anyone to consult) is very thorough when it comes to listing titles. Looking up Rossini as author, and then refining the title search to include "Il barbiere di Siviglia" and then "Sontag", reveals music from

the opera whose title page asserts that the music has something to do with the great soprano. In this case I found three entries. Each was embedded in a bound volume containing many individual items, often with no rationale evident to me as to why they were put together.

The first title page, beautifully printed, offered (my slashes indicate line breaks and I have preserved most of the capitalisation and punctuation) "Mademoiselle Sontag's / Celebrated Cavatina / "Una voce poco fa" / As sung with Rapturous Applause at the / Kings Theatre and Concerts / Adapted to English Words, / The Music by / Sig^{r} G Rossini / London. Pub^{d} by Preston 71 Dean Street Soho 3/-." Unfortunately this turned out not to be the music "as sung by Sontag" but "the aria that Sontag recently sang, as printed in ordinary published scores". It is in the original contralto key of E and there is not a cadenza or extra embellishment in sight. The only change is to raise the final five notes of the two descents to low G# up an octave.

The second volume I consulted contained the hopeful title page "Una Voce Poco Fa. / The Celebrated Cavatina / from / Rossini's Opera / of / Il Barbiere di Siviglia / as Sung by / Mademoiselle Sontag / Arranged with her Brilliant Variations & Embellishments / for the / Piano Forte / by / G.W. Maddison / Pr 3/- / London. / Published by G. Walker, 17, Soho Square." The first page of music is headed "Una Voce Poco Fa." / a la Sontag". Another disappointment. It comprises an Introduction, Theme and Variations on the tune of the cabaletta. However the introduction has new music compared to Rossini's original, the cabaletta theme is not given complete, the variations are in a number of different tempi, and what might be a vocal line goes beyond even a high soprano range. Though the key is F, the usual soprano key, it is clearly a set of piano variations, nothing like a transcription of what Sontag could have sung. But it raises questions. Do the embellishments contained reflect anything Sontag sang? Did she ever sing a theme and variations concert piece based on the aria - of which this is perhaps a very free piano adaptation?

But the third volume came up trumps. Its "Una voce poco fa" has the title page "Rossini's / Admired Cavatina / Una Voce Poco Fa / with the Embellishments & the Graces / As Sung By / Mademoiselle Sontag / on the Night of her Debut at the / King's Theatre. / with an Accompaniment / for the / Piano Forte. / Pr. 3^{s} London / Published by Goulding & D'Amaine. / 20 Soho Square / This Arrangement is Property & the only one Published under the / express Sanction & with the Graces of Mademoiselle Sontag.

Unfortunately I found nothing comparable from the other singers mentioned by Gossett, and so will have to wait till the critical edition becomes available to me. But, remembering that somewhere I had read that some of Jenny Lind's cadenzas and embellishments were preserved, I looked for those and came up with a slim volume entitled "Jenny Lind / A Record and Analysis of the 'Method' / of the late / Madame Jenny Lind-Goldschmidt / By W. S. Rockstro / together with a selection of / Cadenze, Solfeggi, Abellimenti, &c. / in / Illustration of Her Vocal Art / Edited by / Otto Goldschmidt / Price Two Shillings / 1894." (This is now available as a 'print on demand' volume through various booksellers for under £10 including postage.) And included in this is a complete and embellished vocal line for Rosina's "Una voce poco fà". Now, Lind's stage career was roughly twenty years later than Sontag's and, as far as I know, she never studied with Rossini, sang Rosina on stage or even sang the aria in concert. So there are question marks about what we can deduce from this version. When was it written? (Lind's operatic career finished in 1849, she sang in concert until 1883 and died in 1887.) Maybe she prepared it for use with a pupil? (Rockstro asserts that these cadenzas and embellishments were dictated to

Goldschmidt (Lind's husband) by Lind herself or were inserted by her into copies used by herself or her pupils.)

A quick look at these two versions by Sontag and Lind suggests much in the way of added "vocal shenanigans". But it must be emphasised that these are certainly not shenanigans *à la* Liebling. Nowhere in either version is there a single added staccato above the stave, let alone the volleys of high staccatos found in almost every soprano recording I have listened to, nearly twenty performances from Irene Abendroth in 1902 (in German) to Joan Sutherland in 1985.

It mustn't be thought that Sontag and Lind were less ambitious than Liebling. To take just one example, comparing what happens at the final "la vincerò" of the aria's first section, we find that Liebling inserts a cadenza of 39 notes (including some staccatos), whereas Lind warbles 61 notes (including some difficult looking slurs and accents). Sontag limits herself to only 55 notes, but these include a held high B*b*, then a startling passage that cascades down a dominant seventh arpeggio to middle C, goes up again to high B*b*, down again, up again and down again before the concluding cadence. Wow! Both Lind and Sontag end on the F at the bottom of the treble stave; no climactic high C as in Liebling.

Gossett also tells us: "The anticipation of the decisive "Ma" at the end of the cadenza [between the two verses of the cabaletta], so dear to every sweet-and-sour Rosina, stems directly from Rossini". It is found in the version he wrote in 1852 for Matilde Juva, a dilettante rather than professional soprano. There is no sign of this in Lind, but it is there in Sontag, though she doesn't repeat the word as is usual these days. And Sontag's King's Theatre debut was in 1828. I wonder how much she "played" with it.

Of all those soprano recordings I mentioned, there is one that stands out against the Liebling influence. It is by Marcella Sembrich. According to Michael Scott (*The Record of Singing*, Vol. 1), Sembrich wrote down what she heard Adelina Patti sing, and Patti got her decorations from Rossini. The story that Patti sang the aria to Rossini, who responded "Very nice, my dear, who wrote it?" does not mean that he didn't want his aria to be decorated. The deflated diva had the sense to return to him to find out how it should be done. So maybe that Sembrich recording from 1907/8 is a link to a period at least some fifty years earlier. But her age and the recording quality make it difficult listening, so that I would much rather (please forgive me) stick with Galli-Curci, badly behaved though it is. For a well behaved recorded example one needs to stick with mezzo/contralto versions from Conchita Supervia through Marilyn Horne, Cecilia Bartoli and Della Jones to Joyce DiDonato.

One of the pleasures of investigating the holdings of the British Library is that in looking for a particular item you never know what else you are going to stumble on en route. The first volume mentioned above has a version of "Rule Britannia" with variations, we are told, by Angelica Catalani, and sure enough, coloratura decorations are notated. But the big surprise for me was that at the chorus to the actual words "Rule Britannia" which we always hear as a repeated-note tune with Ds on "Rule" and "Bri" and E*b*s on "tan" and "nia" (the key here is B*b* major), Catalani sang "tan" to the note F, thus inserting an appoggiatura. Gossett, in both article and book, comments on the need for them in Donizetti and Rossini. I think of this find as yet more evidence that appoggiaturas should be inserted into Italianate vocal music between 1750 and 1850. But that is a separate article for another time.

Past, Present and Proposed No.12

Pip Clayton

Four theatres, The Queen's, The King's, His Majesty's and Her Majesty's in the Haymarket

Act 2

In February 1725 Handel's only new opera that year, *Rodelinda* was not only successful musically but also in the realm of high fashion as ladies of quality simply had to have the brown-and-silver dress that Cuzzoni wore. The following year, 1726, a new singer arrived in London to challenge Cuzzoni, this was the young (and pretty) Italian soprano aged 31, Faustina Bordoni. They first sang together with Senesino in *Alessandro* in May of that year but by May of the next year they were at daggers-drawn, things came to a head in a performance of Bononcini's *Astianatte,* supported by their admirers - the Countess of Burlington and Lord Walpole for Faustina - Lady Pembroke and Lady Walpole for Cuzzoni - the two singers embarked on a catfight on stage with scratching, hair-pulling and calls of Bitch and Whore at one another. This brawl overflowed into the audience and resulted in the Princess Caroline leaving the theatre and the military being called-in to quell the situation. Consequently the season came to an abrupt close. It is interesting to note that the fracas was caused by the scions of noble lineage and not by the riff-raff in the cheaper parts of the theatre. The season of 1727 opened with Ariosti's last opera *Teuzzone* on November 1st followed three weeks later by Handel's *Riccardo I, Re d'Inghilterra.* But all was not well at the theatre, a big setback to Italian opera was the ever-increasing quarrels between the directors and the constant drain on the subscribers for more money (the most recent call for more was the nineteenth such demand in seven years!). The original pledge had been estimated to cover all costs for no less than twenty-one years. It is not surprising that money ran out - Senesino was paid the princely sum of £2,000 a year and Cuzzoni and Faustina £1,500 each.

A much bigger setback hit the King's the following year as on January 29th *The Beggar's Opera* opened at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre, it had just over one hundred performances in that year whereas the Italian opera just had twenty. The hundred or more given at Lincoln's Inn do not include those extra performances given at Bartholomew Fair in August and Southwark Fair in September. It seemed as though Italian opera was dead; as far as I can ascertain only three operas were given in 1828 all by Handel, *Siroe, Re di Persia* in February, and *Tolomeo, Re d'Egitto* in May which only had seven performance despite the fact that it had the three star singers in it, then three performances of *Admeto* the last of them on June 1st, this last under the management of the Royal Academy. All the money from the original subscription, the extra demands made to the subscribers, plus the money taken at the box-office for the admission of non-subscibers which it was hoped would last for twenty-one years. had been wasted in less than ten. Why wasted? Senesino is said to have built a fine house when he returned to Italy with an inscription over the front door which read in an English translation "'twas the folly of the English that laid the foundation". Now, with the demise of the Royal Academy, the dream of Italian Opera seemed lost. With the continuing success of *The Beggar's Opera* the rage was for English ballad operas and these were churned-out thick-and-fast and were performed not only at the four legitimate theatres but at any of the playhouses that could stage them. And so they did.You could write a pastoral

script about a love-sick swain and his beloved milkmaid, add four songs/arias, and you were entitled to stage it.

Within the next ten years over one hundred of these native operas were performed, and interestingly most of them listed with the music as by ANON. Some composers, however, were not afraid to put their names to their work, well-known names such as Thomas Arne, Henry Carey and Johann Friedrick Lampe. Strangely enough though, the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera,* entitled *Polly* was *" not allow'd to be acted, but commanded to be supprest"* (sic) by the Lord Chamberlain.

At the last meeting of the Royal Academy it was decided to prosecute those members who had not paid their subscriptions and also to allow Heidegger and Handel to carry on presenting opera at the King's Theatre for a nominal rent for the next five years, also, for that period, to loan freely all the sets, instruments and costumes. George II paid Heidegger £1,000 a year to meet the expenses. No opera was given in 1729 until December when the new season opened with *Lotario* followed by *Partenope* both by Handel, the rest of the season I presume consisted of revivals of past presentations.

During the next thirteen years Handel produced seventeen new operas, three of them were fairly successful, *Poro, Re dell'Indie,* and *Alcina* (twenty-four performances), plus *Ariadne in Creta* (twenty-two.) The rest having less than tweve performances until his last opera *Deidamia* given in January 1741 at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre which had only three. This opera was not heard again until the Handel Opera Society under Charles Farncombe gave it as their inaugural production at the St. Pancras Assembley Rooms in London on the 3rd June 1955.

At the end of 1732 Aaron Hill wrote to Handel suggesting that he "deliver the public from Italian bondage as English is soft enough for Opera" but Handel ignored him. By now he was actively disliked by musicians, singers and the public: the King and Queen were for-him, but against-him were the Prince of Wales and his followers and it is from this group that emerged the idea of a second Opera House and a second company of singers. Senesino who had had a row with Handel defected to this new company as did Cuzzoni when she returned to London. The new Opera House did not materialize but as the "Opera of the Nobility" the company opened at the Lincoln's Inn Fields in December 1733 with Porpora's twenty year old *Arianna e Teseo* renamed as *Ariadne in Naxos.* Handel answered this challenge in January 1734 with his *Arianna in Creta,* this was his last opera at the King's Theatre for a while. In 1732 John Rich son of Christopher opened a new theatre in Covent Garden and Handel whose contract with Heidegger had expired. promptly moved there (despite the fact the theatre was licensed for plays only!) In January 1735 he presented *Ariodante,* followed in April by *Alcina,* thus leaving the King's Theatre vacant for the "Nobility" company which opened with *Artaserse* by Johann Adolf Hasse. The next two years at the King's Theatre saw operas which are now forgotten such as *Adriano in Siria* by Francesco Maria Veracini, *Issiphile* by Pietro Giuseppe Sandoni and *Demetrio* by Giovanni Battista Pescetti who was then Composer in Residence. Another opera *Merope* by Riccardo Broschi was also given, his brother Carlo had been engaged as one of the singers and would be world famous as Farinelli perhaps the greatest castrato that London has ever heard. His salary was over £2,000 a season and it was said that his benefit performance paid him £2,500 while he also received gifts and money totalling over £15,000 from his admirers. It is no supprise to learn that by the end of 1737 the "Opera of the Nobility" was bankrupt.

In this period 1735-37 Handel produced three of his best works, *Ariodante, Alcina,* and *Atalanta,* this last opera was composed to celebrate the wedding of Frederick, Prince of Wales to Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. He also produced three others which were not so successful, *Arminio*, *Giustino* and *Berenice*. Nor was it a supprise that Handel returned to the King's Theatre in 1738 with two new operas, *Faramando* and his only comic opera *Xerxes (Serse),* which shared the stage with *La Conquista del Vello d'Ora* by Pescetti. But again English opera intervened and swept the board, this was a (burlesque opera) in three acts a satire on Italian opera seria *The Dragon of Wantley* by Lampe to a libretto by Carey which premiered at the King's Theatre on May 27th 1737. It transferred to Covent Garden in November where it had over sixty performances; often revived, it can still be heard in our own day and is available as recording on CD.

By the end of 1738 the London opera scene was in a parlous state, Heidegger had failed to raise any subscriptions and could not open, Handel leased the theatre in January 1739 and then only for four months with the singers on half-pay, not for opera but for his oratorios. This notwithstanding, across the road, in the Little Theatre (where the Theatre Royal, Haymarket now stands), a pasticcio *Meridi e Salinunta* and Hasses's *Olimpia in Ebuda* had over thirty performances between them.

Once again a group of young men from the higher echelons of society lead by Lord Middlesex raised £6.000 to subsidize the opera at the King's Theatre for the next four years with Heidegger again in control. Lord Middlesex left the day-to-day running of the theatre to two men - the in-house librettist Paolo Antonino Rolli - and his theatre-manager, the Abbe Francesco Vaneschi. This was a big mistake. Firstly, three hundred guineas was paid to Vaneschi so he could go to Italy to engage new singers, and instead of the fifty guineas which was the usual salary for the librettist, both Rolli and Vaneschi were paid three hundred guineas each. Two years later all the money had gone and the gullible young society men were saddled with a debt of £7,680. Lord Middlesex himself, indeed, was partly to blame as he ordered that one of the singers - a Signora Panichi known as La Muscovita - be paid an extra £200 for *'secret services'* though it was reported that *singing was not one of her talents!* The debt was paid off as a matter of honour and as no records have survived it appears that Lord Middlesex alone met the expenses of the 1744/45 season, the rest of the group did not it seems contribute. It was Rolli who wrote or re-wrote the libretti of thirty-four of the operas given at the King's in this period and by most of the composers already mentioned, he returned to Italy in 1744. Despite the rumour that Vaneschi was lining his own pocket he kept his position as manager until his death in 1759

Baldassare Galuppi was composer in residence for two seasons from 1741, only one of the four operas he wrote for London is listed in Loewenberg and that was *Penelope*. Another was *Scipione in Cartago* remembered only for the elephant that crashed through the stage at rehearsal. There was no season in 1745 as the theatre was closed due to the Jacobite rebellion of that year, but in January 1746 the King's reopened with Gluck's *La Caduta de' Giganti* specially written in honour of the Duke of Cumberland and his defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie. It was a failure with only five performances. When Handel heard the opera it was reported that he remarked *"He knows no more of contrapunto than mein cook."* Gluck's second offering was a pasticcio *Artamene* in March which was also a failure, and as a result, disgusted with England, he returned home. The following season was disastrous, the public preferred English comic ballad opera to opera-seria so in 1748 Lord Middlesex engaged a company of comedy singers from Italy with a Signor Dr. John Francis Croza as their manager and the composer Vincenzo Legrenzio Ciampi as maestro and composer in residence. A good move but another mistake, Ciampi and the singers fell out with Croza in 1749 and they

moved lock-stock-and-barrel to the Little Theatre across the road. Like others before him Dr. Croza decamped with the takings, he was caught red-handed, and went to prison, on his release he organised another benefit in April but he fled a second time once more taking everything he could leaving theatre staff, singers and others bankrupt. He was never seen again. There were no regular seasons of opera at the King's Theatre until 1753 when opera-seria was revived under Vaneschi who was now the licensee, the biggest success of the season was *Gli amanti gelosi* a comic opera by Gioacchino Cocchi who became composer and music director at the theatre between 1757-1762? (This interrogative is an indication of how difficult it is to be sure of the facts: for instance, at the time that *Gli amanti* was given in London, Cocchi was supposedly in Venice reviving *Li matti per amore* which had been premiered there in the Autumn of 1754. Grove gives the London dates but two different books on this period hardly mention him, one as just a byword in passing, and the other states that the management wanted to engage Cocchi but without success). However during those five years in London eleven operas by Cocchi were premiered at the King's Theatre yet none of them are listed in Loewenberg.

It is at this time that Giovanni Andrea Gallini (known as Sir John) became the dance-director and later stage-manager at the theatre, but more of him later.

In 1756 Vaneschi following the example of his predecessors decamped owing a tidy sum, he was detained and sentenced to a term in the Fleet prison for debtors. While he was there the management of the theatre was taken over by a singer Regina Mingotti together with Giardini the leader of the orchestra but having lost money, they gave up at the end of the season. Another singer, the soprano Colomba Mattei took over the license and until 1763 seemed to be the only one to have made a success of the venture. Signora Mattei's management was quite remarkable, she employed a serious opera company in tandem with a comic one. The comic troupe were the Paganini family and one of the singers was known as La Paganina and she created the same mania that later would be accorded to Jenny Lind. In 1761 she had a benefit performance and it was reported that *"such was the crowd assembled only one third of the public that arrived at the theatre could get in, hats were lost and gowns torn to pieces and Ladies in full dress who had sent their carriages away were obliged to appear in the streets alone without their maid and walk home in great numbers".* Also as the performances on a Tuesday were less fashionable than other nights she offered reduced prices which brought a larger audience than usual, but her trump-card was to engage in 1762 Johann Christian Bach as resident composer, whose first opera for London *Orione o sia Diana vendicata* premiered in February 1763 and had a number of performances over the next three months and then revived in 1777. Signora Mattei resigned her interest in the theatre in 1763 but continued to sing for the rest of the season and left England in 1764. Despite their losses earlier Mingotti and Giardini returned to manage the season in 1763/64, but they had not learnt their lesson - they lost their money!

(From now until the destruction of the theatre in June 1789 there were so many who became the licensee or theatre manager, all hoping to become rich. It is not possible for me to list them all but I do want to show why no complete and concise history of the first King's Theatre has been written. There is only one book which deals with the subject and that is The King's Theatre 1704-1867 by Daniel Nalbach published in 1972, but you still need to check journals and newspapers to fill in the gaps)

In 1764 a trio of men took over the management; they were Messrs Gordon, Vincent and Crawford, The first two were musicians from the orchestra and the third was a former treasurer of the theatre. Two years later Mr Crawford sold his stake to a banker named

Drummond but by 1769 the trio had already lost money in the enterprise. A Mr George Hobart, brother of Lord Buckingham, took over and as well as opera presented plays and ballet and retained control until 1773, needless to say he lost his money too. The opera changed hands once again to a James Brooke and a Mr & Mrs Yates. She intended to give plays, songs and declamation as well as opera but the Lord Chamberlain scotched this plan by not issuing a license.

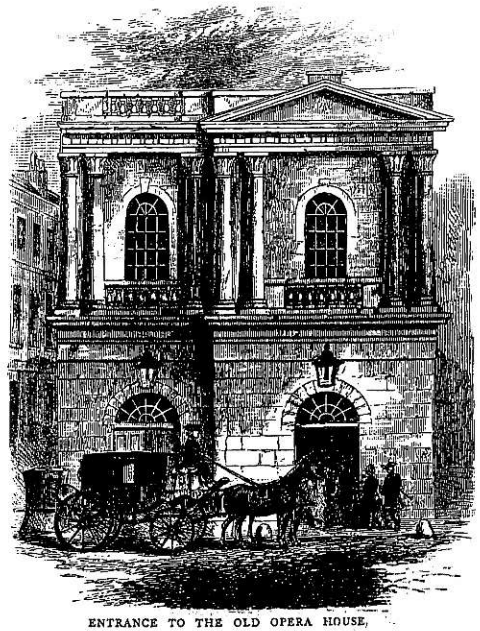
The dramatist and politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Thomas Harris, the stage manager at Covent Garden purchased the King's Theatre in 1778 for £22,000 plus a yearly rent of £1,270. They put down £10,000 and owed £12,000 on which the interest was allowed to accumulate. They then sold shares in the theatre for £200 each, although in another reference the price was £300. Now Gallini the director of dance at the theatre purchased the mortgage of £12,000 and hoped to force Sheridan to sell the theatre to him, Sheridan instead sold his holding to a William Taylor. Taylor then bought up the mortgage of £12,00 owned by Gallini. Not content with that, Taylor now sold seventy more shares at £210 each. He also sold a number of 'free admissions' at £20 each. He now claimed that he had spent £10,000 to remodel the theatre in 1782. The following year Taylor was arrested for debt, sent to prison, and the High Sheriff of London ordered that the theatre be sold by auction.

Thomas Harris reappeared as the highest bidder; the amount he paid is not known, he then sold the theatre on (I presume at a profit) to Gallini of all people who thus retained the building until the fire of 1789. But all was not over, Taylor found a flaw in the transaction and demanded the return of the theatre, however, as he was in prison for life he appointed a number of trustees to run the affairs of the theatre; one was a bankrupt; another had taken advantage of the Insolvency Act; the third was Michael Novosielski the architect responsible for the remodelling in 1782. (Most of the sums quoted come from a book published in 1791 by a Robert Brad O'Reilly who - as far as is known - had no access to the account books of the King's Theatre).

Novosielski's reputation was questioned, when in a pamphlet in 1784 he was accused of raising his expenses from £300 to £750, allotting himself a house, coals and candles, and employing his wife at £150 per annum as *"superintending the candles"* while employing his father-in-law at a salary of £200 "*as superintendent of something, but what that is, heaven alone can tell."* (Claims for dubious expenses are nothing new!.) Novosielski trusted no one and Crawford - still the treasurer - had to take the day's receipts to him every evening after the performance. The Lord Chamberlain, in order that all debts were paid, issued licenses for short periods only between December 1784 and June 1785, which at least made sure that the salaries of the performers were covered. Taylor's trustees then advertised a "Final performance by Royal command of his Majesty", but the Lord Chamberlain refused the license and prevented the performance from taking place (I find this strange, who had the balance of power: the King, the Lord Chamberlain, or the jailbird Taylor?) Later, however, in 1785, the Lord Chamberlain did award a license to Gallini and at the same time forced Taylor to sell the theatre finally to Gallini. By 1780 it was clear that dancers were a bigger draw than singers, this was due to three men - Gaetano Vestris and his legitimized natural son Auguste (the Nureyev and Barishinikov of that time) who were said to have brought-in a revenue of £1,000 a week to the theatre, the third man being Jean-Georges Noverre then the most famous choreographer in Europe. Curtain calls after a performance were not given until 1788 when after the première of his ballet *Cupid and Psyche* he was led unto the stage by the principal dancers Vestris and Marie Louise Hilligsberg, and crowned with laurel. They were joined by all the company led by Charles-Louis Didelot (a dancer and choreographer who was making his début in London) and all those associated with the performance just as it is

today after a first night. This, though common in France, was a first for England. Prior to this, artist's were applauded and encored during the performance which eventually led to the following notice being distributed: *"Whereas by the frequent calling for the songs again, the operas have been too tedious; therefore, the singers are forbidden to sing any song above once; and it is hoped nobody will call for 'em, or take it ill, when not obeyed."*

What was difficult to stop was members of the audience walking about on the stage during a performance. In 1711 Joseph Addison poet and statesman writing in the Spectator had this to say *"I must own I was not a little astonish'd to see a well-dressed young Fellow in a full-bottom'd Wigg, appear in the Midst of the Sea, and without any visible Concern taking snuff."* But even as late as 1788 a writer to the Public Advertiser complained of *"persons crowding the stage every night, to the great detriment of the performers especially the dancers"*



ENTRANCE TO THE OLD OPERA HOUSE.

It is at the first Queen's/King's Theatre that most of what we experience at the theatre today originated: the permanent static set was abolished and scenic wings called flats were pushed into view from the side of the stage or dropped from above and a little later trap-doors in the stage were introduced. In all that I have read I have found no reference to the means by which patrons reached the upper floors of the theatre, but eventually I came across just one sentence (in one of my own books) which mentioned that on the outside wall of the King's Theatre there was a double helix staircase in the style of one at the Chateau de Chambord in France. Nor was there any reference to that important facility, the restroom or toilet. Ladies of

fashion could use a narrow chamber pot in the privacy of their boxes which became known as a *bourdaloue* in respect of a 17th Century French Jesuit priest Père Bourdaloue whose sermons lasted for four hours or more (Spode china made a lot of these in their blue & white patterns which can be used nowadays for mayonnaise). Quite frankly, gentlemen sometimes were obliged to use their boots! But it was the footmen in the upper gallery who found a solution at the expense of their masters below. The Public Advertiser announced in 1762; *"Whereas the Cloaths of many Ladies and Gentlemen sitting in the crown Gallery have been spoiled, at different Times this Winter, by the Indecency of the Footmen: The Manager most humbly hopes that the Nobility and Gentry will not take it amiss, should he be under a necessity of shutting up the Footmen's Gallery, in case the rude practice is repeated."*

During the eighty years of the theatre's life so many were involved with shares and half-shares and other means of making an investment. It is not surprising that the Court in Chancery, lawyers, solicitors etc., were kept busy with claims and counter-claims well into the middle of the Nineteenth Century. (I wonder if this is where Charles Dickens got his idea for the legal convolution of *Jarndyce v Jarndyce* in his novel *Bleak House* published in 1852/53)

Now after eighty-four years and a lot of alterations and re-decorating the old theatre was beginning to look a bit the worse for wear. An English lady visiting Italy in June 1789 wrote to the *Town and Country* magazine complaining of the state of Vanbrugh's and Novosielski's theatre: "Can one wonder at the contempt shewn by foreigners when they see Englishmen of fashion squeezed into holes lined with dirty torn red paper and the walls covered with crimson fluff?" The letter was published in the July edition of the magazine, too late however to make any difference. About 10 o'clock on the evening of 17th June 1789 it was noticed that the roof was ablaze. Dancers were rehearsing on stage and fled as blazing timbers fell around them and very soon the fire had spread throughout the building (this is hardly supprising as despite the alterations made by Novosielski, Vanbrugh's theatre was made entirely of wood inside a brick and stone shell). No one was hurt, surprisingly, but some of the houses and the Assembly Room were also destroyed. The cause is not known but rumours started to fly: the fire was an accident caused by a firework; Taylor from inside prison had arranged it; the leader of the orchestra after an argument with the deputy manager had set fire to the place in revenge: it was because Sir John Vanbrugh's son Edward held an insurance policy on the building? However the general concensus of opinion was that the arson was set by Gallini himself. This was highly unlikely as Gallini's insurance was for only £8,000, whereas his debt now stood at £61,000 made up of £12,000 for subscribers and stockholders, £18,000 for the mortgage, and £31,000 for simple indebtedness.

But there was only one answer, build a new theatre.



Now is the Winter of our Discontent Made glorious Summer....

I know that Shakespeare's words were always intended ironically, but on this occasion I would like you to take them 'straight'. The reason is that I think our 'discontent' with the opportunities to indulge our passion for the exotic fruits of the Bel Canto tradition is perhaps not as justified as we might like to claim.

'Hold on', I hear you cry. 'There is a huge recession going on almost world-wide, encouragement to youngsters to bother to train their voices is drying up and the recorded music industry seems to be in the process of collapsing. How can you dare to suggest that we are living in halcyon days? Indian Summer it might be, but many feel they are entering a cultural Ice Age'.

I don't want to belittle the troubled times in which we are living, nor am I ever allowed to forget that we aren't getting any younger. Travelling to the likes of Italy or South America in search of the elusive Holy Grail of an ideal *Lucia di Lammermoor* or (heaven help us) *Parsifal* can be uncomfortable, and the total cost will always increase. But even superficial reviews of the delights that have (or will) become available to us go far beyond my (and I guess quite a few others') wildest dreams of only a decade or two ago. Let me list a few:

1. Donizetti is now a regular in most opera houses, and not only the comedies. Now Giovanni Simone Mayr, the catalyst for Donizetti himself, is currently going through a rediscovery as impressive as that of Handel as an opera composer, and could even be called a 'Renaissance'. Most of the performances eventually are released as commercial recordings. *Lodoiska* from last year (at Ingolstadt) has been particularly worth the wait.
2. The sheer volume of Ottocento Italian operas has guaranteed that many struggled to hold the stage, but that doesn't mean the music isn't worth hearing. Early Meyerbeer we already knew to be a goldmine but the sudden emergence in Vienna of a single concert performance of *Emma di Resburgo* (yet another quarrying of dubious Scottish history –*Resburgo* is Roxburgh) at the end of last year with top-flight soloists was a surprise. I trust a commercial recording will come in due course.
3. Nicolai's time in Italy is usually dealt with in a short footnote in the books I read in my youth. He was categorised as a 'one opera' man, and his take on Shakespeare often considered to be inferior to Verdi's. Now we can hear for ourselves how good he might have been if he hadn't rejected *Nabucco* (for it to be taken up by Verdi and made famous). *Il Templario* is available already (on CPO) and a German language *Il proscritto* should come from the recent resurrection.

Sadly there has to be some bad news: High Street retailing of 'classical' records seems to be in terminal decline. On-line selling of serious music has suffered from a failure to recognise the importance of reading about the music whilst listening. Even now many websites offer downloads without any documentation. The situation may improve and for those of us who prefer to own the CD (and booklet) a few specialist shops will hopefully survive.

Opera Rara, that wellspring of the unusual, seems to have lost its way. Their current plans replicate the existing recorded repertoire without apparent benefit. The days of those generous and hefty box sets seem to be fading.

My impression is that the taste of the general public is not becoming more discerning. A recent free givaway CD with the London Daily Telegraph had (out of 10 tracks totalling 40 minutes) 2 by Callas and 2 by Mario Lanza. That might have been expected, but there was one by Dame Joan Sutherland (singing *'O luce di quest'anima'* from *Linda di Chamounix*). Only *her* performance gave any real impression of the power and finesse available from a trained singing voice.

It is now nearly 10 years since *'Operatunity'*, a TV programme that MIGHT have discovered a new operatic talent (it didn't). What do we get now? *'Pop-star to Operastar'*; a TV programme that struggled to re-launch the 'pop' career of someone called 'Darius frae Glasgow'. It didn't!

But as I said at the beginning, it may not be as bad as we might claim while we pray that cultural budgets are not asked bear the brunt of current cuts:

1. The 'enthusiastic fringe', often 'pro-am', can still take on challenging material. Edinburgh Grand Opera has done a series of semi-staged performances of Federico Ricci's *La prigione di Edimburgo*. They claim it was a UK Prima, which it was not. Sadly it turned out to be only marginally more complete than Opera Rara's excerpts CD, but it gave a frisson of excitement.
2. There has been an increase in the 'simulcast' broadcast of live performances from some of the big opera houses to 'a cinema near YOU'. The close ups can be embarrassing for those singers who can't act (or 'emote' as it is now termed). But there is no doubt the immediacy of a performance can be enhanced by good camera work, and the quality of the productions could easily outshine those available from provincial companies.
3. And some recording labels continue to come up with intriguing things to make us buy. One recent surprise for me has been the Spanish Glossa label which, as part of its collaboration with Hervé Niquet, is investigating the music written for the Prix de Rome. Even if they limited themselves to the winning composers we could expect Méhul, Hérold and Halévy, but an intriguing aspect is that the series is being given a late romantic bias, and includes composers who never won. So far there has been Debussy (he won), and another of Saint-Saëns (who didn't). Next in November comes Gustave Charpentier!

So as we wrap up for winter (or, if we can afford it, escape to sunnier climes) let us not dwell on what we HAVEN'T got, but dream of Paris next April for Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (a co-production by La Monnaie and at the Opéra Comique). So let us (like the bankers and the politicians) shake off the bad omens and continue to 'Dance on the Volcano':

The music's playing, the notes are right
Put your left foot first and move into the light.
The edge of this hill is the edge of the world
And if you're going to cross you better start doing it right...
Let the dance begin. (Genesis, © EMI)

Douglas M Bennett