In memory of Basil Walsh

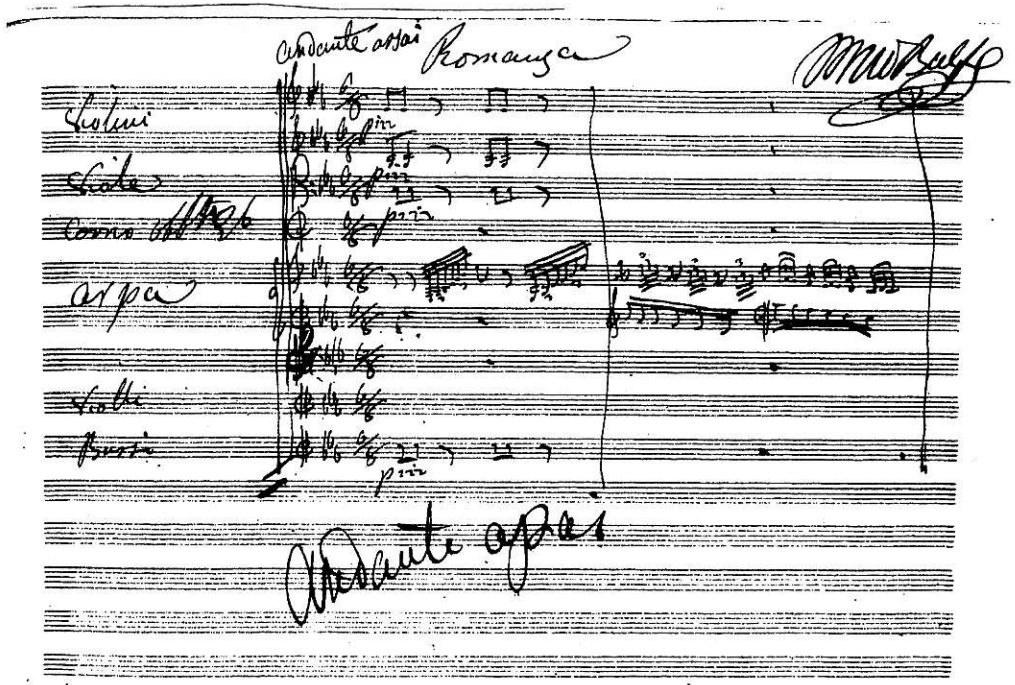
A Romance for Marcella

In Ronald Crichton's amiable review of the concert performance of *Il furioso* that we sponsored with Pro Opera at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1979 he regrets that the last-minute substitution of an indisposed Marcella prevented us from hearing a *romanza* expressly composed for the opera by Michael William Balfe. It was all too true alas. Lynn Barber took the place of Sally Burgess at twenty-four-hours notice so the very first unveiling of an unknown insert by Balfe had to be abandoned. Sometime after 1846 - soon after he took up his baton as principal conductor at Her Majesty's Theatre in the Haymarket the Anglo-Irish composer masterminded a new edition of *Il furioso* for a second staging in the city (the first having been at the Lyceum Theatre on 17 December 1836). It was a project that never reached the stage for reasons now unknown but whose score remains patiently waiting in the British Library [ADD 30913] We were deprived in 1979, or so it would seem, just as audiences were deprived in 1847 or soon after. In his day it would have been commonplace for such an unwonted addition to appear in the work of a famous composer and no maestro of Balfe's generation could have resisted adding at least *something* of his own to a work he so greatly admired. And there indeed it was, waiting to be discovered, with all the rest of the music - bound-in among the large folio pages of Act II of the BL manuscript is the autograph of a suave Andante assai in E^b 6/8, nine pages of 18^{mo} oblong format unusually scored for Strings, Harp and Horn and destined for the sympathetic Marcella whose role has some significance in the drama but very little to sing in this Donizetti masterwork. It is a treasure trove in a diminutive holograph hiding among the pages and signed boldly in the top corner.

Marcella opens the action of the opera memorably enough, but then is more or less left on the shelf, just like the score in the library. This manuscript begs all sorts of questions. Could Balfe have been writing the *romanza* for his wife? It is not an insignificant item. Lina Roser Balfe was thirty-six years old and the right age for the part but she was scarcely sang mezzo roles and doesn't seem to have been around at the time. The piece is in four quatrains and two strophe. Did he write the text himself? We shall never know but apart from some oddities and conventional sentiments it has a sweetness and urgency unusual in the horrid days of Alfred Bunn and his gang of literary assassins.

There is a seventeen bar prelude - boldly virtuosic with wonderful flourishes - the harp in fluttering dialogue with the placid accents of a serene horn melody

coming to a head in a gentle melisma and pizzicato strings as the voice enters: Marcella has an extended lilting melody with a great many chromatic modulations urged on by the harp and horn, the full reprise after some twenty bars of music leading to a cadenza rising to A flat and a terminal cluster of staccato semi-quavers is capped by a figured harp diminuendo (the horn now silent) and buzzing strings. An enigmatic note at the end suggests that Balfe (with endearing Irish tastes) would have liked *two* harps which would have made this *romanza* a strenuous proposition had they in fact materialised!



The text is as follows:

Quando lieto del suo affetto
di speranza si pascea,
come avesse un cielo in petto,
tutto in lui spirava amor.
Ma dal dì che traditrice
fu scoperta la sua bella,
da quel giorno l'infelice
giacque oppresso dal dolor.

E da suolo in altro suolo
come in traccia di pietade,
ma inseguito dal suo duolo
la sua mente si smarrì.
Sinché il fato la sua cara
qui conduce a lui pentita,
già s'abbella, già si schiara
il cammino dei suoi dì.

This is an aria of Balfe's maturity, it is clear, that our conductor in 1979, Leslie Head, decided to place immediately after the Act II *tempesta* (an embellishment added for the La Scala revival?) that features in the OTOS score, that is, immediately before the recitative 'Dovè, dovè sarà?' when Bartolomeo remembers he had promised two pistols to one of his native Chiefs and decides to send Kaidamà to deliver them. No doubt such an insert aria would have made an unnecessary hole in the unfolding of the plot but one his audience (if not the composer or librettist) would have welcomed with its dreamy hiatus and intimate colour.

But its timing is the key I think. He had an especially affecting relationship with Donizetti. Even though his remarkable vocal career had been far more Rossinian, Bellinian and Pacinian than Donizettian, Balfe's links with the Bergamasc were always close and he was one of the poignant few to struggle past the barriers put up by Andrea Donizetti and make the pilgrimage to see the stricken composer in tragic seclusion at Ivry in precisely this period - the period, that is, of the Marcella *romanza*... Could it have been composed in its wake?

Possibly we have here (note the colour, the wording, and note the harps) his own idiosyncratic response.

Alexander Weatherson

In memoriam

Andrew Porter

Vice President of the Donizetti Society 1974-2015

Alto: The Voice of Bel Canto
History and Technique

Dan H. Marek

This book will examine the careers of the great alto singers, including the castrati, from the dawn of opera in 1597 to the present day. The music of the composers who wrote for the alto voice is discussed along with musical examples, including *24 Easy Vocalises in Progressive Order for Medium Voice* by Marco Bordogni (1789-1856) adapted to acoustical phonetics by Dan H. Marek. The book is to be published in January 2016 by Rowman and Littlefield.

Everyone is familiar with the words "diva" or "prima donna". These have come to mean an operatic soprano, along with the behavior and stratospheric high notes associated with her. But there was a time when the star of the show was more often a contralto or a soprano who sang in today's mezzo-soprano range. The old word for these voices was alto. Furthermore, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the leading roles, male and female, were likely to be sung by emasculated males, the alto castrati, although there were many great female altos during this period as well. The music for these fantastic artists written by such composers as Porpora and Vinci, not to mention Handel, has been largely forgotten. At the beginning of the 19th century, as the castrati died out, their roles were often taken over by female altos who were given the name *musici*. Because of the incredible ease of obtaining recorded performances of these works by such gifted singers such as Marilyn Horne, Cecilia Bartoli, and Joyce DiDonato, there has been a renewed interest and performances of some of these works.

The following excerpts are from the chapter *The Bel Canto Altos of Bellini and Donizetti*. Excerpts will be published here in two installments

Part I

Gaetano Donizetti was the prolific composer of some 70 operas. His work still lives on in perennial favorites like *Lucia di Lammermoor, Don Pasquale,* and *L'elisir d'amore* and others that are revived from time to time. Some are written for soprano voices, but following the lead of Rossini, he also composed many for the alto prima donnas. His use of the alto voice began with the *melodramma, Enrico di Borgogna.* This was Donizetti's first opera to be performed, and premiered at the Teatro San Luca in Venice on November 14, 1818. The role of Elisa was sung by Adelaide (Adele) Catalani (*fl.* 1818-32) (not *Angelica* Catalani). Donizetti made the distinction calling her "*la Catalani iuniore*" in a letter to Mayr, in which he declared that she had a "large beautiful voice" and was hoping for a better outcome than he had had with a previous prima donna who was unavailable.[1] Weinstock says that Catalani had a secondary career in several theaters and was listed on the roster at La Scala as late as 1832. The *musico* role of Enrico was created by Fanny Eckerlin (1802-42), a contralto whose career was decidedly not secondary. The sixteen year old Eckerlin had just

made her debut in same year as Isabella in Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Teatro S. Benedetto (also in Venice).

According to Dr Gerardo Casaglia,[2] *Enrico* was followed a month later by an *opera buffa (farsa)* by Donizetti called *Una follia*, which featured the same cast in the same roles based on the same libretto as *Enrico*. The score has been lost and one wonders whether this was an attempt to make up for the lack of success of *Enrico di Borgogna* by tweaking the original version to attract the public to a work in the popular *buffo* genre. During the Carnivale season of 1820-21 in Mantua, Eckerlin was also possibly in the cast of *Le nozze in villa,* a *buffa* opera.[3] In 1822, Rossini wrote an aria for Fanny Eckerlin's appearance in *Zelmira* in Vienna and she went on to become one of his most successful interpreters. Eckerlin was compared favorably with Benedetta Pisaroni during this time and they shared a similar repertory. Her fluency in coloratura and her extensive range accounted for her acclaim in *travesti musico* roles.

Donizetti's next piece, the *melodrama eroico, Zoraida di Granata* (1822), had a measure of notoriety, when he was forced to replace the tenor Amerigo Sbigoli in the role of Abenamet with a *musico* contralto named Mazzanti. Sbigoli had attempted to emulate the stentorian tones of Domenico Donzelli in another opera and had burst a blood vessel and died![4] *Zoraide di Granata*[5] was revived in 1824 and Abenamet was sung by the great Benedetta Pisaroni.

Despite a very inept libretto, the melodramma *La zingara* was a big hit with the audience at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples on May 11, 1822. The title role was sung by Giacinta Canonici (*fl.*1812-34). Stendhal (who mistakenly called her Graciata Canonici) thought her "beautiful" and stated that she was a "leading light of the Teatro dei Fiorentini in Naples".[6] Canonici created the role of Berenice in *L'occasione fa il ladro* for Rossini in 1812. In 1822 she replaced Isabella Colbran in *Zelmira* at the San Carlo.

On June 29, 1822, *La lettera anonima* a *drama per musica,* Donizetti's one act farce opened at the Teatro del Fondo. Teresa Cecconi (*fl.* 1822-32), a young mezzo-soprano appeared as Melita and the twenty-seven year old Giovanni Battista Rubini, on the verge of a great career, sang Filinto. Donizetti complained that the performance "was half-ruined by a novice singer (Cecconi)".[7] As noted, Cecconi survived the setback and went on to create Nerestano in *Zaira* by Bellini in 1829. William Ashbrook is at pains to point out that:

> *The characterization of Donizetti's early career up to the time of his great success with Anna Bolena (1830), as anni di galera (years spent turning out an embarrassing profusion of journeyman's work) is as misleading in its way as is the application of that perjorative term to the first decade of Verdi's output. There is hardly a score of Donizetti's from the 1820's that does not have some pages that anticipate his future achievenents. La lettera anonima, in spite of the contretemps that marred its prima managed to have a run of twenty performances.*[8]

To this should be added that, because of his appointment at Naples, Donizetti had access to the best group of singers in Italy assembled during Rossini's tenure there. Many were cast in his early operas, both in Naples and elsewhere.

La Scala was the scene for the next Donizetti opera, the *semiserio melodramma Chiara e Serafina* premiered October 26, 1822. Rosa Morandi, the famed Rossini mezzo-soprano, sang Serafina to a libretto by the outstanding Felice Romani. The opera ran for twelve performances, but was not considered enough of a success by the directors of the theater and Donizetti was not offered a new contract. Chastened but not discouraged, Donizetti returned to Naples, where he had a futher series of

disappointments. His next alto work was *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (The Tutor Embarassed), which he called a *melodramma giocoso,* premiered at the Teatro Valle in Rome on February 4, 1824. *L'ajo,* which was revised for the taste of the Neapolitan audience two years later as *Don Gregorio,* was a huge success in Rome. Alto Maria Ester Mombelli, an old friend of Rossini, starred as Gilda. *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* continued for the rest of the season in Rome and was repeated many times throughout Italy and the rest of Europe.

The next Donizetti opera to feature the alto voice in the lead role was *Olivo e Pasquale,* with a libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, again at the Teatro Valle on January 7, 1827. The travesty role of Camillo (later changed to a tenor) was sung by Anna Scudellari Cosselli, who was listed as prima donna for the Valle in 1826 and 1827.[9] Anna was the wife of Domenico Cosselli (1801-1855), who was a fine baritone, a Rossini specialist, who later created Enrico in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835). Almost forgotten today, *Olivo e Pasquale* received many stagings all over Europe during Donizetti's lifetime.

Donizetti's next opera was the first for his new position as music director for Barbaja in Naples. Titled *Otto mesi in tre ore, ossia Gli esiliati in Siberia* (Eight Months in Two Hours or the Exiles in Siberia), the *opera romantica* has had quite a history of different versions and revisions. A species of "rescue" opera, the plot concerns a teenager, Elisabetta Potoski, and her efforts to free her father, unjustly exiled to Siberia. Caterina Liparini (1792-1855), a soprano assumed the role of Elisabetta in the first performance on May 13, 1827. However, as previously mentioned, Donizetti revised the part for the great contralto, Carolina Ungher in 1832.[10] Ungher became one of Donizetti's favorite singers and he wrote several more operas for her in the ensuing years, including his next *melodramma giocoso, Il borgomastro di Saardam,* which was premiered on August, 19, 1827 at the Teatro del Fondo. *Il borgomastro* was carefully rehearsed and given a good production and ran for thirty-five repetitions but when Ungher attempted it at La Scala with an under-rehearsed and mediocre cast, it proved to be fiasco and was withdrawn after only one performance.

Alina, regina di Golconda, an *opera buffa,* with Serafina Rubini, a soprano, in the title role, was premiered on May 12, 1828 at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa. As far as I can tell, Serafina Rubini, who was a prima donna at several theaters, was not related to Giovanni Battista Rubini. *Alina* was revised with Viennese prima donna Annetta Fischer (*fl.* 1830s) assuming the title role on October 29, 1833 at the Valle in Rome. As far as the tessitura of *Alina* is concerned, Pauline Viardot had a great success in the part during a run at La Scala during the period of 1843-1846.

Donizetti's next opera that featured an alto in the leading part was *Gianni di Calais*, a *melodramma semiserio* that starred Giovanni Battista Rubini and his wife, mezzo-soprano Adelaide Comelli-Rubini. *Gianni* was premiered on August 2, 1828 at the Teatro Fondo. The Rubini couple, along with baritone Antonio Tamburini, who was also in the cast, was largely responsible for the success of the opera, and prompted Barbaja to sign Donizetti as Director of the Royal Theaters of Naples, a post he held for ten years. Rubini was always fond of *Gianni* and persuaded the Théâtre Italien in Paris to stage it in 1833 and 1834. The principal part of Matilde was sung by Carolina Ungher.

The Rubini duo were the principals, along with Luigi Lablache, in *Il giovedi grasso* (Maundy Thursday), a *farsa* with spoken dialog, part of which was delivered in Neapolitan dialect. The first staging was on February 26, 1829. Ashbrook states that the characters of this work have "beguiling charm" which has been revealed in some modern stagings.[11]

The *tragedia lirica Anna Bolena* was the work that was critical for Donizetti's career as a great composer and opened doors for him in all the great theaters of Europe, being the first Donizetti opera to be heard in Paris and London. It was repeated regularly for twenty-five years and has enjoyed a modern revival starting with Maria Callas at La Scala in 1957. We have discussed *Anna Bolena,* which was premiered at the Carcano Theater on December 26, 1830, in the chapter on Giuditta Pasta. We should mention Elisa Orlandi (1811-1834), the first Giovanna Seymour, whose story was even more poignant than that of Maria Malibran. Orlandi, a mezzo-soprano made her debut as Fiorillo in *Il turco in Italia* in Parma at the age of nineteen and seemed destined for a great career. She sang some soprano parts as well as alto roles. Orlandi apparently was a favorite of Donizetti because, besides Giovanna Seymour, she created the part of Eleonora in the world premiere of *Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo* at the Valle in Rome in 1833. She also portrayed Adina in *L'elisir d'amore,* Isabella in *Olivo e Pasquale*, and Matilde in *Gianni di Calais.* Besides those of Donizetti, Orlandi sang in operas by Rossini, Meyerbeer, Pacini, Joseph Weigl, Cesare Pugni (1802-70), Pietro Antonio De Moyana (d. 1870), and Mercadante. In 1834 in Rovigo, just prior to her entrance as Adalgisa in *Norma,* the twenty-three year old Elisa Orlandi, so full of promise, collapsed and died.

In 1832, Donizetti composed *Fausta* for Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis, who is mostly listed as a soprano. Riggs calls her a *soprano sfogato* or *assoluta* and suggests that she has been unjustly neglected as "a crucial figure in the history of *bel canto".*[12] Some idea of her ability can be gathered by the fact that she sang Giulia in Spontini's *La vestale* when she was only seventeen years old. Attesting to the fluid nature of vocal categories during this period, De Begnis sang many alto parts in common with Pasta, Colbran, and Malibran, such as Rosina, Desdemona, Elena in *La donna del lago*, and the musico role of Bellini's Romeo. *Fausta* was called an *opera seria* and the libretto, like that of Euripides's *Phaedra,* is about the unhealthy lustful obsession of the protagonist for her stepson. Donizetti hoped that *Fausta* would build on the success of *Anna Bolena,* but William Ashbrook writes:

> *The heroic tone and a certain striving to be grandiose make parts of the score of Fausta seem rather cold and monotonous, but in the great final scene of Fausta's suicide Donizetti communicates real pathos and tragic immediacy, testifying in the aria "Tu che volli" and its cabaletta, "No, qui morir degg'io" to his innate understanding of the nuances of human suffering. .[13]*

This scene, with its throbbing coupled sixteenth notes used by many composers to portray anguished palpitations, also awakened Donizetti to the potential of Ronzi-De Begnis, both technically and expressively, to help him realize his destiny as a great musical dramatist. The two collaborated over a period of seven years to produce five notable operas. De Begnis became an important singer in the Donizetti canon, as we shall see. On December 26, 1832 Giuditta Pasta assumed the title role of Fausta at La Scala in which her supporting cast did not rise to Donizetti's expectations. The opera generated little enthusiasm; nevertheless *Fausta* achieved a run of thirty repetitions.

Ugo, conte di Parigi, a *tragedia lirica,* was premiered at La Scala on March 13, 1832 and featured the *Norma* pair - Giuditta Pasta as Bianca and Giulia Grisi as her sister Adelia - along with Donzelli in the title role. When Donizetti reached Milan he was confronted with his score mutilated at the hands of the censors, so much so that Romani, the librettist, disavowed it. The great singers in the cast were demoralized and disorganized. *Ugo* was a failure and withdrawn after only five

performances, but it was to prove to be a source of material in subsequent Donizetti operas. Donizetti's season was not a total loss, for Pasta and Grisi (Giovanna Seymour) appeared together in the La Scala premiere of *Anna Bolena* for eight performances with great success.

L'elisir d'amore, called a *melodramma giocoso*, the next Donizetti masterpiece, was composed in only two weeks. It has never been confused as an alto opera by anyone. The young composer continued his furious pace during the middle thirties with *Sancia di Castiglia*, another *tragedia lirica*, composed for Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis and premiered at the San Carlo on November 4, 1832. The eponymous role of Sancia, Queen of Castille was a Gothic tale of a mother persuaded to poison her son in order to secure the throne for her lover, only to relent at the last moment and drink the poison herself. The *musico* role of Garzia, the son, was sung by mezzo-soprano Dionilla Santolini (*fl.* 1830s) and Ircano, the Saracen lover, by Luigi Lablache. Amazingly, Naples welcomed *Sancia* warmly, but it soon disappeared from the repertory. In modern times, Montserrat Caballé (b.1933) made a CD of a concert performance in 1992.

Donizetti's next *melodramma, Il furioso all'isola di Santo Domingo,* had a libretto by Feretti and premiered at the Valle on January 2, 1833. It was his first opera to feature a baritone as the protagonist. The baritone voice was emerging during the early part of the nineteenth century as a separate category and was utilized to the fullest by Verdi and Wagner. Giorgio Ronconi (1810-90), who portrayed the madman Cardenio, became one of the great artists in the category and appeared in seven premieres by Donizetti and in numerous other operas. Ten years later, Ronconi created the title role in Verdi's *Nabucco*. Eleonora, the alto love interest, was sung by the ill-starred Elisa Orlandi. The impresario Giovanni Paterni (1779-1837) discovered that Orlandi was introducing the final rondo from *Il furioso* into other operas, not in their original version, but in a bastardized arrangement by Giacomo Panizza (1804-60). Paterni promptly protested against this misuse of the aria by placing notices in several papers denouncing it as "*contrary to the intentions of the composer and contrary to the sacred rights of property*".[14]

The following opera, *Parisina,*,a *melodramma* from a poem by Lord Byron, was Donizetti's favorite for a long time and starred the redoubtable Carolina Ungher,with Gilbert-Louis Duprez as Ugo. *Parisina* was premiered on March 17, 1833 at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence. Duprez modestly remarked in his *Souvenirs d'un chanteur*:

> *Composed especially for me, it united the grace and elegance of the light genre, in which I had performed at the beginning of my career, with the elevated qualities of the opera seria which produced such good results for me after eighteen months, and it seemed to be the act of union between the two genres.. [15]*

Ashbrook remarks that *Parisina...foreshadows Lucia in many expressive details*. Duprez was the first Edgardo. Perhaps he brought echos of *Parisina* with him to the role.

The great poet, Torquato Tasso (1544-95), was the subject of the next *melodramma* by the same name premiered on September 9, 1833 at the Teatro Valle in Rome. Tasso was the author of *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), which was the source for many literary and musical works, including Rossini's *Armida* and Handel's *Rinaldo*. Donizetti originally conceived the opera as a vehicle for Rubini, whose lack of interest caused the composer to again center on the baritone Ronconi to create the title part. The mezzo-soprano Adelina Spech (1811-66), whose repertoire included



A *donizettian* alto in travesty, Dionilla Santolini

Norma and *La sonnambula,* was cast as Eleonora d'Este.

Adelina Spech was a prima donna of some importance during the 1830s but she caused Donizetti trouble during the rehearsals of *Tasso*. He informed Ricordi that "*La Spech, a contralto who has pulled herself up by the teeth to mezzo-soprano, has caused me to turn half my opera inside out*".[16] *Tasso* was so well received (fifteen repetitions) that even the librettist, Ferretti, was given curtain calls. The opera had a certain amount of success in Italy and the German speaking countries but not in London or Paris.

The *melodramma Lucrezia Borgia* first met the footlights on December 26, 1833 at La Scala to a libretto by Felice Romani. The title role was created by soprano Henriette Méric-Lalande (1798-1867). Alto Marietta Brambilla was the original Maffeo Orsini. *Lucrezia* ran into trouble from the censors from the first and was produced in other theaters under a bevy of other titles and libretto changes. The impresarios were cowed by threats of lawsuits for plagiarism by Victor Hugo (1802-85), the original author, and by Borgia descendants. In addition, Méric-Lalande insisted, on pain of her imminent departure, of an *aria finale* in the last act as she is standing over the body of her son whom she has inadvertently poisoned. Donizetti reluctantly complied but revised the score twice in 1840 with new *finali*. *Lucrezia* was one of Donizetti's most popular scores during the nineteenth century. As previously mentioned Carolina Ungher created a sensation in Vienna in 1839 and became one of the leading Lucrezia's in Europe. Ungher's magnetism was described from afar by Chorley:

> *Madame Grisi has been surpassed, I have been told, by the original (sic) Lucrezia; a woman far less splendidly gifted by nature – Madame Ungher – whose serpentine and deep malevolence, subtly veiled at the moment when its most diabolical works were on foot, has been described as fearful.*[17]

Donizetti's next opera of interest to us was *Maria Stuarda,* another *tragedia lirica*, which was written for Ronzi-de Begnis at the San Carlo in 1834 but finally premiered by Maria Malibran at La Scala on December 30, 1835. The circumstances of *Maria Stuarda's* birth were very curious and highlight the frustration of Italian composers of the early *ottocento* and the difficulty of divining the true intentions of the great composers of the period. *Maria Stuarda,* capitalizing on continental fascination of the bloody Tudor history, was based on Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) play. The libretto was to have been written by Romani, who was beginning to distain libretto writing and it was turned over to Giuseppe Bardari (1817-61), a seventeen year old law student. At the first orchestral rehearsal, Ronzi had the following lines to address to Anna Del Serre, the Elisabetta:

> Impure daughter of Boleyn, do you speak of dishonor? Obscene and unworthy prostitute, may my blush fall on you. Profaned is the English throne, vile bastard, by your foot! [18]

Ronzi delivered these lines with her customary vehemence and Del Serre took them personally. In a scene reminiscent of the fight between Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni a hundred years earlier, Del Serre attacked her rival – biting, hitting, and pulling her hair. Ronzi, who was a heavyweight in more than voice, was surprised, but counter-attacked and Del Serre fainted and had to be carried home, where she spent a few days in bed. A month later Donizetti wrote to Ferretti:

> *"You know about the battle between the women, and I do not know if you are aware that Ronzi spoke against me, believing me out of earshot. She said,'Donizetti protects that whore of a Del Serre.' And to her surprise, I answered, 'I do not protect any of you, but those two*

queens were whores, and you two are whores.' She was convinced; either she was ashamed or decided to keep quiet. She spoke no more, the rehearsal went on, and then the opera was not performed".[19]

The opera not being performed was a reference to the king's prohibition of *Maria Stuarda* after a successful dress rehearsal for an invited audience. There are several possible reasons for this action, mostly political. Be that as it may, Donizetti revised the plot, added more characters, and the bastard child of *Maria Stuarda* emerged as *Buondelmonte* premiered on October 18, 1834 with Ronzi-de Begnis and Del Serre in the same roles but with different names. This was the only staging of *Buondelmonte* and Donizetti was determined to preserve his original vision of the opera, but he had to wait for a little over a year until it was mounted at La Scala. In the meantime, he had to make a living.

The amazingly prolific young composer had already finished the draft for the *tragedia Marino Faliero* for the Théâtre-Italien, when he submitted his next work to the censors in Milan for the production which took place on December 26, 1834. This *tragedia lirica* was *Gemma di Vergy* based upon Dumas's *Charles VII* and the eponymous heroine was Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis. Gemma is one of the most difficult and rewarding roles ever written and Ronzi demonstrated her ability by completing a run of twenty-six performances without any obvious signs of fatigue. In an interview in 1976, Montserrat Caballé, the outstanding modern Gemma, quoted Lilli Lehmann's (1848-1929) statement that one *Norma* was equivalent to three Brünhildas, going on to add that one *Gemma* was equal to three *Normas*.[20] Especially beautiful (and difficult) is Gemma's prayer "Eccomi sola alfine" in the first act and the finale to the last act "Chi m'accusa". *Gemma di Vergy* was very successful in Italy. In Palermo, nearly fourteen years later, a performance of *Gemma* inspired a patriotic demonstration, when her "faithful slave" sang the words:

"You took away my heart and soul,
Country, gods, and liberty!"[21]

The next two items along Donizetti's trajectory were definitely soprano roles. *Marino Faliero* which premiered on March 12, 1835 starred Giulia Grisi as Elena with other members of the Puritani quartet – Rubini, Tamburini, and Lablache. *I Puritani* premiered during the same season and garnered more attention than *Marino Faliero* because the latter had a less showy role for the prima donna. In London, both operas were the 1835 season's most important events. Chorley clearly preferred *Marino* but he stated that the lack of interest in the female character and

On such occasions there is always a success and a failure. The public will not endure two favourites.[22]

The other masterpiece will endure as long as opera is performed, it is *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

[to be continued]

[1] Herbert Weinstock *Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris and Vienna in the First half of the Nineteenth Century* (London 1964), 21.
[2] Dr Gerardo Casaglia, Donizetti", http://www.amadeusonline.eu/almanacco.php
[3] Weinstock op cit 316.
[4] William Ashbrook *Donizetti and His Operas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 23.
[5] The initial version was spelled *Zoraida* and the second *Zoraide* (ref. Weatherson)
[6] Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 496.
[7] Charles Osbourne, *The Bel Canto Operas of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini* (Amadeus Press 1994), 149-50
[8] Ashbrook op cit 27.
[9] Anon., "Foreign Musical Report, Rome", *The Harmonicon, Vol IV,* London: (W. Pinnock, Ed. 1826), 96.
[10] Donizetti wrote a late version of this opera for Pauline Viardot called *Elisabeth ou La Fille de l'exilé* [see] Alexander Weatherson *Puntature for Pauline Viardot* [in] 'Il Teatro di Donizetti', Atti del convegno delle celebrazioni del bicentenario 'La vocalità e i cantanti' (Bergamo 2001), 197-213
[11] Ashbrook op cit 53.
[12] Riggs, *The Assoluta Voice in Opera,* 137.
[13] Ashbrook op cit 71.
[14] ibid 76.
[15] Gilbert-Louis Duprez *Souvenirs d'un Chanteur,* (Paris: Michel Levy Frères, 1860) 92- 93,. translation of Herbert Weinstock.
[16] Ashbrook op cit n.624.
[17] Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, 79.
[18] Ashbrooks op cit 85. The translation is Ashbrook's.
[19] ibid 85. From a letter to Guido Zavadini.
[20] Riggs op cit 142.
[21] Weinstock op cit 103.
[22] Chorley op cit 65



Leyla Gencer *sconosciuta*?

Douglas M. Bennett

When my son and his Turkish girlfriend gave me, for Christmas, a book about Leyla Gencer along with CDs of two of her Paris recitals, I was rather muted with my enthusiastic response. It had been a thoughtfully prepared gift: neither giver was by any stretch an operatic fan, so the problem, if there was to be one, was all mine. You see, I have never been an enthusiast for particular singers; a 'canary fancier', if you like. It is probably best all round that I seldom meet singers in the vulnerable aftermath of their performances. I would be far too inclined to tell them how their art reflected on ME, rather than pour balm on the pain left in the aftermath of their strenuous endeavours.

So I would have to approach the generous gift in as positive a frame of mind as I could muster. First I listened to the CDs. 1981 was better than 1985, but both suffered from being late performances. The voice was heavy, and it was difficult to believe that this singer had once sung serious Rossini to great acclaim at a time when Rossini was only known for his comedies.

Thinking I might be missing something, I collected additional items from Gencer's most famous performances when she was in her prime (the 60s). The recordings came from various sources, but all were quite low grade audio mp3s. The effect on me was even worse than the CDs had been.

Poor audio seems to damage higher frequencies more than lower. The result is that the male singers survived better than the women. I soon realised that these 'documents' were of value mainly, and perhaps only to those who had the good fortune to have experienced the original performances 'live'. I have noticed something similar in my own reactions: recordings or broadcasts from events where I had actually been present seem to deliver an enhanced resonance (a happy metaphor). The worst case was a Mahler 7 in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, played by the *Mahler Jugendorchester*, conducted by Claudio Abbado. In the hall the music whizzed by like Haydn, in spite of some nearby Americans chatting during the music. The later broadcast brought back some of that, but not quite the unexpectedness of the original experience.

Of course, Gencer is known as the 'Queen of the Pirates' because she so seldom if ever entered the recording studio. How can we youngsters of much later generations properly assess such an artiste when most surviving records are of poor quality and doubtful authenticity?

But before trying to answer that imponderable question, I turned instead to the book I had been given: *Leyla Gencer, A Story of Passion*, by Zeynep Oral.

Reading it was hard work for me. It seemed to be the most extreme kind of hagiography: a lengthy paean to the Turkish diva. The sequence of chapters made little sense, and there was a distinct lack of facts to keep the reader informed of place or time of events. Some parts diverted for no logical reason into the author's musings. The photographs, on the other hand, were many and interesting. Still, my frustration grew to the point of nearly giving up on many occasions, had the book not been a gift.

The turning point came late. Gencer, perhaps uniquely amongst divas, entered the operatic world arena happily married and without an agent, two things that she may have been proud of, but which almost certainly worked against her being successful in that 'dog eat dog' world. It dawned on me only gradually that her career had aspects of both tragedy, and some of greatness, and that Donizetti was one of the spectral shades that had benefitted most from this woman's sacrifices and achievements.

Leyla Gencer's nemesis was, to some extent but not entirely, Maria Callas. Gencer had the misfortune to live under the shadow of Callas' testosterone-fuelled dominance, and lacked the will, and perhaps the weaponry to fight back. She was not the only one; Tebaldi's career was probably affected, but on the whole she suffered less. Perhaps uniquely Gencer never got the attention of the record companies that has kept Callas in front of us. The two singers had similar voices and strengths: they were both predominantly 'singing actresses'. For both, Verdi's Lady Macbeth was a particularly good role, and Verdi specified an 'un-beautiful' voice for maximum effect.

Of course, she was not completely denied chances to perform, but the opportunities that were passed down to Gencer were either poorly placed (her North American opening came in San Francisco, so the MET shunned her) or in less eye-catching repertoire (her La Scala opening was in the world premiere of Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmelites*). Such constraints can lead to oddities: her favourite comedy is quoted as being Britten's *Albert Herring*: she was Lady Billows in the Italian premiere (at La Scala).

Luckily she had already 'appeared' in more 'conventional' repertoire on Italian Radio, including Anna Bolena in 1958, and that was probably the beginning of the collection of bootleg recordings on which her reputation now rests. The pattern of being offered the chance to perform unusual works is something by which Gencer is closely associated with the process of recovery of 'lost' works, and that has made her something of an iconic performer for the discerning operatic enthusiasts of the 21st century. Donizetti's reputation was a particular beneficiary in that Gencer sang in revivals of such works as *Roberto Devereux, Belisario, Caterina Cornaro*, as well as the ground-breaking 1958 *Anna Bolena*.

A 'what-if?'; try to imagine a *Maria Stuarda* involving both Callas and Gencer in the leading roles: they could probably have done it, but the nearest we have is Gencer and Verrett from Florence, 1967: the balance is poor and the audience participation is distracting, and so the result is rather monochrome.

So that brings me back to my earlier rhetorical question about the value of live recordings to any but those who were present. It is dangerous to generalise, but it seems to me that the huge body of recordings made informally and pedalled by those of doubtful audio credentials are more likely to yield disappointments than reveal hitherto hidden pleasures. The contrary argument comes from those that know the singing process and can recognise the characteristics of the genuine article. This applies to both surviving 'live" documents and over-produced studio recordings.

My personal conclusion about Gencer is that she confronted Callas on her own ground without the aid of male champions (and without the aid of beauticians: she was a beautiful woman, as the many photos in the book prove) with a flair that should have earned the same status on the world stage. She has a loyal following that remembers her fervently, but she lives on, alas, only in their memories, without the prop of an over-zealous cult.

My Christmas gift has made me recognise the value of first experiences: often that fleeting moment stays with us, but is much more difficult to share.

L'«orrido campo» e *Isabella d'Aspeno* di Paolo Carrer *

Eduardo Rescigno

Paolo Carrer (Pavlos Karrer in greco) nasce a Zante nel 1829, inizia gli studi musicali nell'isola dove è nato, e li completa a Corfù, dove diventa socio onorario della Compagnia Filarmonica Corcirese; quindi, dopo un breve soggiorno a Parigi, si stabilisce a Milano nel 1850. Qui diventa allievo di Raimondo Boucheron, a quel tempo maestro di cappella del Duomo di Milano, e inizia a pubblicare per l'editore Lucca un numero considerevole di danze (valzer, quadriglie, polke, mazurke, ecc.) per pianoforte e per piccoli complessi strumentali, prevalentemente basate su temi di opere di successo. Approda anche al Teatro alla Canobbiana con un ballo, e poi il 24 agosto 1852 al Teatro Carcano con un "melodramma storico-fantastico in tre atti", *Dante e Bice*, che viene acquistato dall'editore Lucca, che ne pubblica il libretto. La musica, pur presente nel catalogo dell'editore milanese, non è stata rintracciata. Tuttavia val la pena di soffermarsi brevemente su questo libretto, firmato da Serafino Torelli, che risulta essere "Professore di Storia Universale e Declamazione all'I. R. Conservatorio di musica". Un titolo strano, poiché dai registri della scuola milanese risulta che il Torelli fu realmente professore di declamazione (quella che oggi si chiama arte scenica), ma soltanto a partire dal 1862, e fino al 1870.

Il libretto è interessante, perché si tratta probabilmente dell'unico melodramma che porta in scena Dante nelle vesti di tenore; una curiosità, in questo 2015 in cui si celebra il 750° anniversario della morte del poeta, e uno stimolo a cercare la musica in vista del 2021, quando si celebrerà l'800° anniversario della morte.

Il primo atto è riservato alla lotta dei nobili fiorenti che vogliono espellere Dante da Firenze, e per raggiungere lo scopo prima cercheranno di ostacolarlo nel suo amore per Bice, poi gli daranno l'ostracismo. Tutto questo dovrebbe risultar chiaro all'ascoltatore in virtù del coro iniziale dei Nobili fiorentini: dodici settenari infarciti di vocaboli "danteschi":

Saggio è il parer: colui
Troppo sofferto abbiamo:
Ei ne percosse: or nui
Risposta dar dobbiamo
Al tracotante spirto,
Or, che securo sta.
Soffrir più a lungo fora
Opra di vil che piaggia:
Cotesto Dante audace,
Patrizii, uop'è che caggia:
Spente a lui pria le tede,
Poscia ostracismo avrà.

La prima strofa è abbastanza comprensibile. Nella seconda i Nobili affermano che sarebbe atteggiamento da vile piaggiatore sopportare ancora Dante; è necessario cacciarlo; per prima cosa impedendo le nozze, poi dandogli l'ostracismo. Strano modo per iniziare un'opera; forse il pubblico era abbastanza volonteroso, e avrà cercato di capire. Poco oltre, tanto per far toccare con mano agli spettatori di qual natura siano le "tede" di Dante, c'è un'aria di Bice, e subito dopo un duetto fra Dante e Bice, quello che potremmo chiamare un duetto d'amore. E quali altre parole mettere in bocca ai due innamorati se non una parafrasi di Paolo e Francesca?

Quai colombe, che il disio
Dolce al nido abbia chiamate,
Colle ferme ed apert'ali,
Pel voler vi son portate,
Sì l'un'alma all'altra intese
Nel vederci, e in noi s'apprese
L'alto amor, ch'a ogni pensiero
Siede primo e regna in me:
Or la vita m'abbandona,
Lunge ov'io mi sia da te.

Nel secondo atto il senato fiorentino raggiunge lo scopo, Dante deve abbandonare la città, e c'è ancora il tempo per un ultimo abbraccio con Bice:

Noi divisi in questo mondo
Voglion ire ingiuste e felle:
Ei però, che eterno amore,
Muove il sole, e l'altre stelle,
Dopo giorni di dolore
Le nostr'alme appellerà,
E congiunte peregrine,
In suo grembo e' le torrà.

E infatti nel terzo atto, l'atto fantastico, Dante incontra Bice nel sopramondo degli eroi, gli fa incontrare Virgilio, e gli mostrerà tutto quanto sarà poi oggetto della sua Commedia, che infatti inizia diligentemente a scrivere: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"...

L'opera non ebbe successo, anzi, passò quasi del tutto inosservata secondo qualche recensore, e l'editore Lucca non rinnovò il contratto a Carrer, che infatti per un paio d'anni sembrò disinteressarsi al mondo dell'opera. Non ho la possibilità di dare una data esatta, ma qualche tempo dopo l'esito modesto di *Dante e Bice*, Carrer tornò a Corfù, e qui, al Teatro San Giacomo, il 7 febbraio 1854 mise in scena l'*Isabella d'Aspeno*, melodramma tragico in tre atti. Tornato a Milano, pochi mesi dopo, il 9 aprile 1855, ancora al Teatro Carcano, la nuova opera ebbe il suo battesimo milanese.

La Biblioteca del Conservatorio "Giuseppe Verdi" di Milano possiede la partitura manoscritta (forse autografa) dell'opera. Sono tre volumi, e quando li ho trovati sul tavolo nella sala di consultazione, ne ho preso in mano il primo e, tanto per creare un primo contatto con quell'opera di cui non conoscevo nulla, lo apro a caso, e mi trovo davanti alla zingara Ebba che invoca le forze sotterranee, poi ascolta la confessione di un soprano che svela di nutrire un amore peccaminoso da cui vorrebbe liberarsi; la zingara la rassicura, e le suggerisce di recarsi in un luogo imprecato e orribile dove vengono giustiziati i rei, per cogliere a mezzanotte un'erba che la salverà; ma nello stesso tempo un tenore ha ascoltato la confessione, e dice fra sé che anche lui andrà in quel luogo misterioso a raggiungere la donna che ama. Subito dopo, mentre il soprano si allontana, il tenore, divenuto scherzoso, chiede alla zingara di leggergli la mano, e così apprende che morrà per mano di un amico. Ce n'è abbastanza, tanto più che, aprendo il secondo volume, ossia il II atto, c'è proprio l'orrido campo, c'è il terrore e la preghiera della donna, e c'è l'improvviso apparire dell'uomo a cui la donna, dopo molte esitazioni, rivelerà il proprio amore. E tutto il resto (o quasi), che ci porta al *Ballo in maschera*.

Niente di strano, conosciamo bene queste faccende. Nel Settecento un libretto poteva essere musicato anche cento volte e più (Metastasio), e nel primo Ottocento una commedia, o un romanzo, o un poema, se avevano successo, venivano più volte adattati per le scene d'opera. Senza cambiare titolo (*Sposa/Lucia di Lammermoor* di Mazzucato e di Donizetti, *Ernani* di Verdi e di Mazzucato), più spesso cambiando titolo, come nel nostro caso. Sia *Un ballo in maschera* che *Isabella d'Aspeno* derivano dunque dal *Gustave III, ou Le Bal masqué* di Scribe, ma ci sono anche altre opere derivate dalla medesima

fonte, come la *Clemenza di Valois*, di Gaetano Rossi con la musica di Vincenzo Gabussi, che è del 1841, e *Il reggente* di Salvadore Cammarano con la musica di Saverio Mercadante che è del 1843, e forse ce ne sono altre ancora.

Sento il bisogno di fare ulteriori controlli, prendo il libretto della *Clemenza di Valois*, e lo apro alla solita pagina della zingara e della sua invocazione. Provo a leggere: lei si chiama Neala, ed è un'indovina orientale; alla Fenice di Venezia, dove l'opera è stata rappresentata la prima volta, è Annunziata Tramontani, un soprano riminese.

Signor de' regni dell'eterna notte,
Terribile Astarotte, cogli arcani
Accenti formidati io t'invocai.
Alla ministra tua rispondi omai. *ecc.*

Passo ora all'*Isabella* di Carrer. La zingara si chiama Ebba, è araba ed è un mezzosoprano, Lucia Viale al Carcano:

Signor dei regni dell'eterna notte,
Terribile Astarotte,
Tu, che col formidabile
Accento evocator, sempre invocai,
Alla ministra tua rispondi omai!

Quasi uguale; ma è interessante verificare quel *quasi*. Neala (Gabussi) dice "cogli arcani accenti formidati io t'invocai", dove *formidati* è il participio passato di *formidare*, incutere paura. A Ebbe (Carrer), quel *formidati* pare un errore (in realtà è poco usato), e il verso muta in "Tu, che col formidabile accento evocator sempre invocai". Ha tutta l'aria di una correzione, con un *formidabile* che è evidentemente più chiaro di *formidati*. Forse il nuovo libretto, quello di Carrer, è costruito sulla falsariga di quello di Gabussi, e ci sono qua e là delle somiglianze, niente di più. Occorre una ulteriore verifica, e passo all'inizio del II atto, il campo imprecato o orrido.

Ove m'inoltro? – In quest'orrendo asilo
Qual ribrezzo m'assale!

Questo è il recitativo del soprano, appena giunto nel luogo terribile, a mezzanotte. E subito dopo attacca l'aria:

Tu che sai quant'io penai,
I contrasti del cor mio,
D'un vietato amor l'obblio
Deh! concedimi, o Signor.

Si tratta del libretto della *Clemenza* o dell'*Isabella*? Non c'è alcuna differenza, tutta la scena dell'orrido campo è identica. E sono identici tutti i versi del libretto dell'opera di Carrer rispetto a quella di Gabussi, a parte i nomi dei personaggi e dei luoghi, e l'inizio, i primi tre numeri dell'opera di Carrer, su un totale di 19 numeri. Su questi primi tre numeri tornerò più avanti, quando parlerò della musica; ora mi sto chiedendo in qual modo il libretto dell'opera di Gabussi e Carrer ha risolto il problema della censura, cioè l'impossibilità in quegli anni cinquanta di portare sulle scene d'opera italiane un regicidio avvenuto nel 1792; una faccenda che ha fatto penare, e molto, anche Verdi e Somma.

Gaetano Rossi – che è il librettista di Gabussi e seppure non ufficialmente anche quello di Carrer – ricorre a un antefatto che assomiglia molto all'antefatto di un'opera che, cronologicamente, si trova giusto a metà strada fra Clemenza e Isabella, ossia *La battaglia di Legnano*. Un nobile che governa una importante contea si allontana per seguire il re Luigi alla seconda Crociata e, nel corso di un aspro combattimento e nel tentativo di proteggere il re, cade ferito gravemente, e poco dopo in patria giunge notizia della sua morte. Trascorrono alcuni anni e, quando ormai il cugino del conte si considera saldamente alla guida della contea, il ferito, che era stato amorevolmente soccorso da uno scudiero, torna, e scopre che la donna da lui amata si è nel frattempo sposata con il suo più caro amico. Mentre il cugino cova un odio profondo e studia il modo di ucciderlo, il conte

riprende possesso dei suoi poteri cercando invano di dimenticare la delusione, mentre la donna, rendendosi conto di non avere affatto dimenticato il primo amore, cerca di cancellarlo. A questo punto entra in gioco la zingara indovina, con tutto quello che segue e che noi ben conosciamo.

Ho riassunto in poche righe l'antefatto, che su entrambi i libretti viene invece diffusamente narrato. Leggiamo l'inizio della "Protasi" della *Clemenza di Valois*:

Renato, conte d'Arles, aveva seguito il pio re Luigi all'infelice Crociata, e sotto Tunisi, fra i prodi che s'esponevano per salvare il re, cadde sul campo, creduto estinto dalle tante ferite, né più si rinvennero le mortali di lui spoglie. Arrivò in Arles la fatal nuova della di lui morte, e trasse d'affanno alla tomba il vecchio di lui padre. Enrico, cugino di Renato, diveniva l'erede degli stati d'Arles, e s'aspettava a cingerne la corona, allorché repente comparve Renato che da fido scudiero trasportato semivivo dal campo alla grotta di un Cenobita, venne curato da sue mortali ferite, e poté alfine ritornar ai suoi stati. Universale fu la gioja. Il solo Enrico ne fremeva: mal sofferiva perdere la sperata corona, ma celava il suo rancore non rinunziando alla speranza.

Ed ecco invece la "Protasi" dell'*Isabella d'Aspeno*:

Arnolfo, conte d'Ebersdorf, ed uno dei baroni del Reno, aveva seguito il re Luigi all'infelice Crociata, e sotto Tunisi, fra i prodi che s'esponevano per salvare il Re, cadde sul campo, e fu creduto estinto dalle tante riportate ferite, né più si rinvennero le mortali di lui spoglie. Arrivò in Ebersdorf la fatal nuova della di lui morte, che trasse alla tomba per affanno il vecchio di lui padre. Rainoldo, cugino di Arnolfo, diveniva l'erede dei stati di Ebersdorf e s'aspettava a cingere la corona di Barone, allorché repente comparve Arnolfo, che da fido scudiero trasportato semivivo dal campo di battaglia alla grotta di un cenobita, venne curato dalle sue molte ferite, e poté alfine ritornar ai suoi dominj. Universale fu la gioja. Il solo Rainoldo ne fremeva: mal sofferiva perdere la sperata corona, ma celava il suo rancore non rinunciando alla speranza.

Identico, a parte nomi e luoghi. Può essere poi interessante osservare, nel passaggio dal testo del 1842 a quello del 1855 (si tratta del libretto stampato in occasione della rappresentazione al Carcano), qualche interessante correzione. *Rinunziando* diventa *rinunciando*, le *mortali ferite* curate dallo scudiero diventano giustamente le *molte ferite*, mentre la morte del padre del protagonista, *trasse d'affanno alla tomba*, viene ripulita in un *trasse alla tomba per affanno*; ed altro ancora. Tutto questo, e cioè la quasi totale identità dei due libretti, e l'identico testo della Protasi, tutto questo è piuttosto insolito, tenuto conto che il primo libretto è firmato da Gaetano Rossi, e il secondo dalla misteriosa sigla R. G. S. Ma c'è un'altra stranezza.

Non so da dove Gaetano Rossi abbia preso nomi dei personaggi e luoghi dell'azione: la dinastia dei Valois era spesso presente nei melodrammi, e forse esiste anche qualche altra opera che parla di Renato di Valois e di Clemenza sua moglie. Al contrario, so da dove sono tratti nomi dei personaggi e luoghi dell'opera di Carrer. Si riferiscono a una tragedia di Walter Scott, *The House of Aspen*, scritta nel 1800 circa quando ancora Scott non aveva scritto nessuna delle sue opere di ambiente scozzese, pubblicata nel 1829 quando il suo autore era ormai celebre, mai rappresentata in Inghilterra, pubblicata in traduzione italiana a Milano da Visaj nel 1832 col titolo *Casa d'Aspen*, e mai rappresentata in Italia. Qualcuno, tradito dal nome Aspen o Aspeno, potrebbe pensare che ci sia qualche altra identità fra la tragedia e il libretto. Ma non è così. La tragedia di Scott è una truculenta vicenda che vede in scena un donna che, costretta a un matrimonio odioso, uccide il marito riuscendo a far credere che sia morto di peste, poi sposa l'uomo che ama da cui ha due figli, e cerca invano di dimenticare la sua colpa. Quando questa viene scoperta, uno dei figli, vincolato a una setta che persegue spietatamente la menzogna e il delitto, si troverà davanti a un terribile dilemma – salvare la madre o trasgredire la legge – e lo risolverà con il suicidio.

Nessun rapporto, dunque; a parte i nomi. La madre assassina di Scott, Isabella baronessa d'Aspen, diventa il soprano Isabella d'Aspeno; Arnolfo d'Ebersdorf, il primo marito che lei uccide, diventa il tenore Arnolfo conte d'Ebersdorf, ossia l'uomo che Isabella invano ama; Rudiger barone d'Aspen, il secondo e amato marito e padre dei due figli di Isabella, diventa il baritono Rudigero barone d'Aspeno marito di Isabella, nonché amico prediletto di Arnolfo e suo assassino; Rainoldo, uomo d'armi di casa d'Aspen, diventa il basso Rainoldo, cugino di Arnolfo e suo implacabile nemico. In Scott infine c'è anche Ugo, un personaggio secondario, scudiero del capo del Tribunale che giudicherà il delitto di Isabella, e che nel libretto diventa il basso Ugo scudiero di Arnolfo. Insomma – se mi è permesso dirlo – un gran pasticcio. Forse, alla base di tutto ciò, c'è un criterio, che non riesco a intuire. Bisognerebbe consultare il librettista, che però si nasconde, come si è detto, dietro una indecifrabile sigla che forse, giocando ancora un poco con il mistero, potremmo risolvere in questo modo: R. sta per Rossi, G. sta per Gaetano, ed S. sta per Scott e Scribe, che sono le incolpevoli fonti di questa operazione. Uno scherzo, ovviamente.

Ma resta il mistero. Non possiamo neppure pensare che Carrer, essendo greco e poco pratico della lingua italiana, non abbia capito la manipolazione, ma non è così, perché come tutti i greci delle isole Ionie, per secoli legate alla Serenissima, parlava perfettamente l'italiano. Comunque, quando l'opera venne rappresentato al Carcano di Milano, nessuno dei recensori segnalò la stranezza della coincidenza dei nomi con la tragedia di Scott, e neppure le affinità del libretto con la *Clemenza* di Gabussi, che pure aveva avuto un certo successo: prima rappresentazione alla Fenice di Venezia il 20 febbraio 1841 con il soprano Desiderata Derancourt e il tenore Nicola Ivanoff, ripresa alla Scala nel maggio 1842 con il soprano Luigia Abbadia: Teatri e interpreti di prestigio, che dovevano aver lasciato traccia nella memoria dei recensori. Ma nessuno di loro sembra essersene accorto. Notano invece, i recensori, "abbondanza di vecchie conoscenze" (*Gazzetta dei teatri*), e un'esecuzione mediocre che però migliora nel corso delle quattro rappresentazioni. L'*Italia Musicale* è più precisa, e nota il "soverchio fragore dell'istrumentale e la monotonia delle forme." Sulla monotonia delle forme non c'è dubbio, ma posso aggiungere anche una prevalenza di frasi col ritmo puntato, quasi a voler dare un sovrappiù di slancio alla melodia, e la mancanza di grandi aperture melodiche. Per esempio, quando nel III atto il tenore incalza il soprano e cerca di farle confessare l'amore, "T'amo d'amore / immenso, eterno. / T'apro il mio cuore, / presso a morir", si esprime con un cantabile affettuoso, niente affatto trascinante e convincente. In quanto al fragore, è molto spesso presente la banda, specie nel primo atto, ma non si può parlare di un'orchestrazione pletorica, anzi è quasi sempre molto discreta. Al tempo della prima esecuzione è stato notato il preludio con una lunga cadenza del violino solo, ed è certamente riuscita la Mazurka Militare che accompagna il ballo finale, naturalmente con la banda. Ma Carrer non coglie l'opportunità di concludere tragicamente l'opera con il suono delle danze, perché esso si allontana e svanisce in una cadenza del violino solo.

Ci sono poi alcuni errori evidenti, che riguardano in particolare uno dei tre numeri aggiunti al libretto di Rossi. Questi sono il coro d'introduzione che festeggia il ritorno di Arnolfo, e il recitativo e cavatina di Rainoldo, in cui esprime tutta la sua rabbia per il ritorno del cugino che gli toglie il potere. Fra l'uno e l'altro di questi numeri si pone la canzonetta di Ebba, che non ha nulla a che fare con la vicenda: racconta l'infelice amore di due giovani che poi muoiono affogati, con un tenera melodia accompagnata dall'arpa, che ci mostra una indovina del tutto diversa da quella che poi apparirà più avanti, alle prese con l'invocazione ad Astarotte. Per di più, poco dopo, l'arpa accompagna anche la cavatina di Arnolfo che canta il dolore che ha provato nel vedere l'amata Isabella sposa, e uno strumento così caratteristico come l'arpa crea inevitabilmente un rapporto fra i due personaggi che non deve esistere. Forse, per l'inserimento della canzonetta di Ebba, c'è una spiegazione. A Milano lo interpretava il mezzosoprano Lucia Viale, che lo aveva

cantato anche a Corfù l'anno prima (tutti gli altri interpreti erano diversi), e sarà ancora Lucia Viale ad avere un ruolo nella terza opera milanese di Carrer, *La rediviva*, andata in scena al Carcano il 20 gennaio 1856: insomma, una cantante particolarmente cara al compositore. Ma, bisogna riconoscerlo, apprezzata anche dai recensori, che mettono in luce la "abbondanza di mezzi" (*Gazzetta dei teatri*), ma anche "un'avvenente persona [...] e una bella, intonata e simpatica voce di mezzo soprano" (*L'Italia musicale*). Quest'ultimo giornale afferma che la Viale, nel gradimento del pubblico, è seconda solo al tenore che interpreta Arnolfo, che "ama l'arte e lo studio, e coi doni di cui l'ha fornito natura, ci lusinghiamo che in breve potrà percorrere una luminosa carriera". Si chiamava Giacinto Ghislanzoni (ma a volte usava lo pseudonimo Giovanni Galvani), ed ebbe lunga anche se non proprio luminosa carriera. Molti anni dopo, nel 1873, il futuro librettista di *Aida*, Antonio Ghislanzoni, avrebbe scritto a Tornaghi, segretario di Casa Ricordi, che "mio cugino Giacinto Ghislanzoni non sarebbe un cattivo tenore." Anche Antonio era presente al Carcano, e interpretava il ruolo baritonale di Rudigero, ossia il marito di Isabella, l'amico e poi l'assassino di Arnolfo. "Non sarebbe un cattivo baritono", avrebbe potuto affermare il cugino Giacinto, se non fosse in difficoltà per la paura del palcoscenico, come era accaduto nel 1851 al Théâtre Italien di Parigi, quando era stato un impaurito re Carlo nell'*Ernani* accanto alla Cruvelli e a Guasco. Ma forse, oltre alla paura, c'erano altri pensieri nella mente di Antonio Ghislanzoni: aveva ormai deciso di abbandonare l'attività di cantante per diventare scrittore, e stava già scrivendo il romanzo *Artisti di teatro* in cui le esperienze del palcoscenico sarebbero diventate protagoniste.

L'opera ebbe dunque un discreto successo, confermato dal fatto che neppure un anno dopo (19 gennaio 1856), sempre al Carcano, sarebbe andata in scena la terza opera di Carrer, *La rediviva*, una specie di grand-opéra all'italiana (apprezzata da Meyerbeer) che ebbe un buon successo, malgrado i vistosi tagli cui venne sottoposta e l'inadeguatezza dei cantanti ad affrontare un'opera così complessa vocalmente e scenicamente.

In quattro anni tre opere in un importante teatro milanese come il Carcano, a cui bisogna aggiungere la ripresa dell'*Isabella d'Aspeno* nel 1856 sempre al Carcano, e la *La rediviva* al Teatro Comunale di Como nella Stagione 1856-1857: sono l'inizio di una carriera che si annuncia di grande prestigio. Ma nel 1857 Carrer torna in patria, dove continuerà a comporre opere in italiano e anche in greco, ma non avrà più rapporti con Milano e l'Italia. Anche questo, se non proprio un mistero, è qualcosa di non facilmente comprensibile. Ma forse Carrer si era reso conto che il mondo teatrale milanese, se non proprio "orrido", era un campo difficile, in cui per vincere era necessaria non solo un'ottima preparazione musicale (che lui certamente possedeva), ma anche e soprattutto una grande sensibilità teatrale che gli faceva difetto (come dimostrano le strutture dei due primi libretti); senza contare la capacità di imporsi, di appoggiarsi alle giuste conoscenze, di sbaragliare senza pietà i molti concorrenti. Un'impresa che non era evidentemente alla portata di Carrer.

*** Questo è il testo del mio intervento all'incontro internazionale di studi *Sette note dalla Grecia. Musiche e compositori delle Isole Ionie à Milano nell'Ottocento* organizzato dal Conservatorio "Giuseppe Verdi" di Milano, dal Consolato Generale di Grecia e dall'Università degli Studi di Milano, e svoltosi il 17 marzo 2015 al Conservatorio di Milano**

Le Pré aux Clercs

Paris: Opéra Comique.
31 March 2015

This was an evening of great delight. The opera proved to be a mix of charm, comedy, sentiment and if not high drama, then sincere and sometimes conflicting emotions, with lyrical arias and imposing ensembles. I caught an echo of Raimbaud's aria from *Le Comte Ory* in Marguerite's contribution to the Act II trio and an anticipation of the Act II trio from *La fille du régiment* in the Act III trio. Certainly Ferdinand Hérold's opera, to a libretto by d'Eugène de Planard after (very loosely) a novel by Prosper Mérimée, was well worth the trip to Paris.

Not knowing the opera I listened first to a couple of excerpts on old 78s reissued on LPs from that wonderful Rubini label and found a few more on YouTube. Then I looked at the entry in the Opera Grove which you need to read carefully if you want to avoid the impression that there is any similarity at all with Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* bar the same Mérimée source and the appearance of Marguerite de Valois in both. The differences, accurately described, are so great as to refute the assertion that they deal with the same subject. In Meyerbeer the different faiths of the principals are crucial; in Hérold they are almost incidental – there is just one reference in the sung text to a "fils de Calvin" in the confrontation between the Protestant Baron de Mergy and the Catholic soldiers who challenge him about eating meat on a Friday. After that the plot is all about the personal relationships and nothing explicit about belief, religion or prejudice.

Grove also says "Marguerite, like her namesake in *Les Huguenots*, sparkles and glitters". Well, no she doesn't. Certainly she is a prime mover in the action, facilitating the marriage of her favourite, Isabelle, to de Mergy. Musically she takes part only in ensembles with just one very brief solo utterance, she has no solo aria and virtually no coloratura. Throughout Act I, Isabelle takes the top line in ensembles and has more elaborate music. In Acts II and III the relative tessituras are comparable or even reversed, but nonetheless there is no doubt that it is Isabelle who is the prima donna and she indeed has both a splendid large-scale double aria and an affecting romance. My Paris Marguerite was designated mezzo-soprano in the programme; an early score lists her as a soprano. Following it on my return to London while listening in the British Library to a BBC studio performance from 1987, I thought lines could easily enough be swapped if a mezzo Marguerite wanted to avoid the occasional high C and C#.

Now I mention all this as the Opéra Comique programme states something I had read before my trip, that the first Marguerite Mme. Ponchard, "première soprano à roulades", deserted the opera after the first night. Véron, director of the Opéra, lent one of his star sopranos, Julie Dorus, later Dorus-Gras, who had already sung Elvire in Auber's *La muette de Portici* and the Comtesse Adèle in *Le Comte Ory*, and four years later would create Marguerite in *Les Huguenots*, all of whom do indeed sparkle and glitter. Hérold taught her the role in five days while seriously ill – he died only four weeks later. On hearing the opera this all seemed very strange. Would a "first soprano with roulades" have a role without roulades written for her? Would a virtuoso like Dorus have agreed to sing such an unshowy role as Marguerite? My suspicions increased when the commentary to the BBC performance said it was the singer of Isabelle who deserted and was replaced. And our Chairman has confirmed that the *Dictionnaire des Opéras* of Clément et Larousse says that it was Isabelle, created by Marie Casimir who left after the first night and was replaced by Julie Dorus.

Going back to Wikipedia, where I am convinced I originally saw the mis-attribution, I found the correct information. But the page had been updated only three days earlier, so I'm drawing my own conclusions! Strange about the Opéra Comique's own programme though. And while in picky mode, that programme's English background article (though not the French one) gives Comminge as a baritone (he's a tenor) and the Grove article gives Girot as a tenor (he's a bass).

The musical side was under the expert baton of Paul McCreesh, and apart from a couple of undercast very minor roles, there wasn't a weak link in the cast. This was led by Marie-Eve Munger (soprano) as the Protestant Isabelle de Montal and Michael Spyres (tenor) as the Baron de Mergy. Both were pure-voiced and agile. She added charm, he a touch of steel when necessary. Their love and marriage, evading the wishes of Henry III (who doesn't appear in the opera) is facilitated by mezzo Marie Lenormand as Marguerite who relished the intrigues. De Mergy's adversary is the Catholic Marquis de Comminge, sung well by tenor Emiliano Gonzalez Toro, who also loves Isabelle, but ends up killed by de Mergy in a duel – mercifully off-stage so as not to spoil the happy ending. The bourgeois couple Nicette and Girot were sung charmingly by Jaël Azzaretti and Christian Helmer, and Éric Huchet didn't overdo the comedy of the Italian courtier Cantarelli who intrigues on behalf of the lovers at Marguerite's behest. There were excellent contributions from the Orchestre Gulbenkian and the chorus accentus.

The director and scenic designer was Éric Ruf who concentrated on telling the story, got the singers to act well, and refrained from imposing any extraneous concept. Hurrah. If I have one small criticism it was that Comminge was played with a touch of the pantomime villain; I would have preferred a totally serious adversary. Costumes, by Renato Bianchi, were period, apt and varied – you could tell who was who. Ruf opted for naturalistic settings, believable trees and walkways for the scenes in the royal hunting ground of Étampes and the meadow that gives the opera its title. This must have been a 16th century equivalent of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in 18th century London, where all could enjoy themselves in the open air and social classes could mix to a greater extent than in court or city life. Both were on the 'wrong' side of the river but as far as I know, Vauxhall wasn't also an infamous duelling ground. The excellent lighting was by Stéphanie Daniel and the attractive choreography by Glyslein Lefever. In short, Hérold would have recognised his opera, and how refreshing it is to be able to write that. The Opéra Comique is exactly the right size of theatre for this work and this cast. No-one had to force their voice and the naturalistic acting carried to the back of the auditorium. If only the Opéra Comique had air conditioning it would have been close to perfection.

Two of my early recordings are of the duet "Les rendez-vous de noble compagnie" for Nicette and Girot at the start of the opera. One is by soprano Jane Marignan and bass Hypolite Belhomme. The other is by Jeanne Leclerc and baritone Gabriel Soulacroix, which is notable for an interpolated and very virtuosic cadenza from Soulacroix at the end of his first statement. Soulacroix died in 1905, so it is indeed an "early" recording. Belhomme, who other recordings demonstrate could have done the same, refrains, probably correctly. But it reminds us of the technical prowess possessed by so many French singers of those days. The third is of de Mergy's entrance aria, attractively sung by Eugène De Creus; I thought Michael Spyres in Paris even better. The opera could do with a modern recording - any chance, Opera Rara?

Alan Jackson

Linda di Chamounix in Giessen

Was it mere coincidence that at the same time when Alexander Weatherson in his editorial of the latest newsletter (No. 124) of the Donizetti Society pondered on the possible comeback of opera semiseria the director of the Stadttheater Giessen, **Cathérine Miville**, put on Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* for the spring season of her theatre?

There were certainly rather unequivocal motives for staging this "melodramma semiserio" – incidentally the first performance of this masterpiece in Germany for more than 100 years! First of all, Ms Miville personally has a distinct gusto for Belcanto operas and operatic rarities from the Ottocento, which has become visible in a large number of highly praised productions since 2002: *Zampa, Lo schiavo, Il giuramento, Lucrezia Borgia, La favorita, Maria regina d'Inghilterra* and others. Moreover she always had the knack of finding the matching young singers for such operas and either engaged them permanently or for single productions. A recent example is **Naroa Intxausti**, a young Basque soprano with ideal qualities for Belcanto roles, whom we heard as Zulema in Arrieta's *La conquista di Granata* last year. With her warm and round lyrical voice she was the perfect embodiment of the title role, the more so as she convincingly represented this young daughter of an impoverished Savoyard family living in the mountain village of Chamounix. She pulled at the spectators' heartstrings, not only in Act II when she finally loses her mind after being cursed by her father and learning about her lover's scheduled marriage with a noblewoman. This Carlo, Visconte di Sirval, was **Leonardo Ferrando**, the Uruguayan tenor whom we already saw and heard with great pleasure as Riccardo Fenimoore in Pacini's *Maria Tudor* and last year as Gonzalo in Arrieta's opera. He gave another proof of his ideal qualities as a Belcanto tenor, developing beautifully sung legato phrases, presenting secure top notes and playing the role of this not consistently likeable character with fervor. The part of Linda's orphan friend Pierotto was movingly sung and acted by the young Italian mezzo-soprano **Sofia Pavone**. Her melancholic ballad "Per sua madre andò una figlia", one of the two suggestive key melodies in this melodramma (the other one Carlo's "A consolarmi affretisi tal giorno desiato" of course), was appropriately accompanied by the synthesized sounds of a harmonium, imported from a box at the side of the orchestra. In this multicultural cast two Romanian singers won great acclaim for the portrayal of their parts as Linda's father Antonio (**Cozmin Sime**) and Il prefetto (**Calin Valentin Cozma**). The latter, who in the sung words of the libretto is usually referred to as 'Rettore', originally was the 'curé', the pastor of Chamounix, in d'Ennery's and Lemoine's play *La Grâce de Dieu*, the source of Gaetano Rossi's libretto. In this production he seems to be a Calvinist clergyman, symbolized by the black cassock and a pectoral cross, and

he obviously is an authority within this small community, also in non-religious matters. The dominating status of church and its representative is emphasized by a slender, glaring cross, hanging in front of the stage from the overture to the last finale. Of course we must not forget Il Marchese di Boisfleury, Carlo's lecherous uncle, the mandatory buffo that – among other features – makes *Linda di Chamounix* a semiseria. In the original play he is a more unpleasant fellow, whereas in Rossi's/ Donizetti's text he is not really threatening (despite the Prefetto's warning to Antonio "Di tutto egli è capace; Ognun qui trema e tace"), but a source of amusement to his tenants and to the audience as well (enhanced by the Dulcamara-like music Donizetti has allotted to him). Such a character is an alien element in most semi-serious operas, and in this production **Tomi Wendt**, dressed like the hero of some operetta and behaving like a mischievous smirking clown, was visibly up to the task of acting and singing comically. The numerous members of the choir, extra choir and children's choir (directed by **Jan Hoffmann** and **Martin Gärtner**) were authentic women, men, boys and girls living in this mountain community - and not only well-prepared singers. The "Philharmonisches Orchester Giessen" conducted by **Florian Ziemen** lavishly displayed the necessary belcanto abilities, from the full-scale overture (the orchestrated first movement of a string quartet Donizetti had composed in 1836) to the finale, which here seemingly is not unreservedly happy but open-ended, leaving room for speculations about the protagonists' married life – at least in the director's opinion. **Hans Walter Richter** did a very good job, together with **Bernhard Niechotz**, who was responsible for the impressive stage set and costumes: They took the plot (sometimes labeled as crude) and every single character seriously and managed to narrate the story set in an Alpine scenery and Paris authentically and reasonably, even if some of Richter's ideas are definitely in stark contrast to the libretto text[1]: the prefetto's soft spot for Linda visualized in the white flower from her bridal garland that he always carries with him, or Linda's pregnancy, which is already insinuated by her body language in Act I, and her miscarriage on her way back home in Act III. These figments of artistic licence were apparently due to his intention (as a creative contemporary director?) to dramatize Linda's character by adding further facets.

When the curtain rises during the final bars of the overture we look at a large asymmetric community room, which is used for different occasions: a fake harmonium and a hymn board on the left demonstrate its use for worship services, deer antlers and even photos decorate the walls, and front right there is a warped large wardrobe, which is meant to mark the entrance to the Loustolots' abode, but also gives Linda ("Ella timida è tanto" I 2) the chance to disappear – like the children in C.S. Lewis' *The chronicles of Narnia.* This wardrobe remains an integral part of the stage set in the other two acts, through which other characters as if by magic enter and leave. Thus in a daydream Linda meets

[1] Jeremy Commons: "Linda di Chamounix" in the booklet of Opera Rara, ORC 43, 2011

her parents and Carlo at the beginning of duet-dominated Act II, set in front of a red drop curtain, which together with a chaise longue and five huge chandeliers makes up the Paris scenery. In the third act we are confronted with the same stage set as in Act I (the photos are gone though), yet now everything seems to be in a dilapidated state: the windows are partly damaged, through the destroyed ceiling the boughs of a snow-covered tree hang down into the village hall and the steadily falling snow has formed a small snowy knoll there. The "harmonium" still works but the members of this community have changed, especially the Savoyard children who have returned home from their annual journey to Paris, and while the curtain falls only Linda and Carlo remain standing in front of it, an ending that – according to the director – is meant to be thought-provoking. Fortunately the cuts that the production team deemed necessary (and with respect to the young protagonists unavoidable) kept within reasonable limits and mostly concerned repetitions (in some duets) but never complete pieces. In Emanuele Senici's book *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera*[2] *Linda di Chamounix* is one of the six operas in which the author explores the connection between landscape and gender through the emblematic figure of the Alpine virgin - the others are *La sonnambula*, *Luisa Miller*, *La Wally*, *Fedora* and *La fanciulla del West*. The chapter on Donizetti's late contribution to the "terzo genere" is headlined "Linda di Chamounix and the ideology of chastity", and in the introductory part of this essay he points out that "[this opera] is not simply about virginity, or about virginity in the French Alps; it also focuses prominently on other themes such as seduction, madness and the power of the human voice"[3]. Since Senici is convinced that "this constellation of themes has been addressed most intensely and productively by psychoanalysis"[4] he in the course of his treatise attempts a psychoanalytic reading of *Linda*. Those who witness this latest Belcanto production of the enterprising Stadttheater Giessen and approach it with an open mind will probably confirm that it has succeeded in generating awareness of those themes, even if the director in certain cases went astray.

I fervently hope that *Linda di Chamounix*, which at its world premiere in Vienna 1842 met with a triumphant reception by the public and the press, yet – perhaps because of the naivety of its subject – "became in the 20th century a work more honoured in the breach than in the performance"[5], will return to many stages as a regular guest on account of the quality of its music.

Walter Wiertz (after the performances on 31/01 and 21/02/15)

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[2] Emanuele Senici: Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera, Cambridge University Press, 2005
[3] loc. cit. p.94
[4] loc. cit. p.94
[5] Jeremy Commons, loc.cit. p. 45

Halévy's *La Juive* in Ghent

April 22, 2015

Russell Burdekin

It is not an unusual sight in parts of Italy to see a couple of resplendent ceremonial Carabinieri stood at the main door of the opera house for an opera première. The opening night of Halévy's *La Juive* at Opera Vlaanderen in Ghent on April 15 saw a guard of Belgian police, some with sub machine guns. After last year's shootings at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, the management were clearly taking no chances that someone might take the opera's title as a provocation.

La Juive was one of the grandest of the Paris *grand operas* with one newspaper commenting on the enormous Act 1 procession that "The Opéra may become a power capable of throwing its armies into the balance of power in Europe"[i]. The libretto by Scribe was a typical of his style with an unlikely series of events and coincidences vaguely based on historical incidents, in this case in 15th century Constance, and culminating in a sensational ending. It seems that Meyerbeer might have been approached initially to write the music[ii] but it soon devolved on Halévy and the opera premiered on February 23, 1835. Ruth Jordan claimed that the story fired Halévy's imagination because it brought him "face to face with his [Jewish] heritage"[iii]. However, he did not respond by making use of Jewish music to any great extent nor could much of the music be called particularly inspired, "as for popular music, it has none" was Donizetti's opinion after seeing it[iv]. However, other composers, including Mahler and Offenbach and, more surprisingly, Wagner, have been more complimentary and, after a shaky start, the opera firmly established itself in the 19th century repertoire.

The opera is a rare beast today and I was particularly interested that Opera Vlaanderen had hired Peter Konwitschny as the director, who is known for his radical interpretations, such as that of *La Traviata* at ENO in 2013. To complement the opera, Opera Vlaanderen had also organised a two day conference on *Judaism in Opera*, during which Konwitschny discussed some of his decisions. He explained that he had directed little in the way of French opera, other than *Carmen*, and had been completely unfamiliar with *La Juive* until being invited to direct it. He talked of his Brechtian approach, no doubt a legacy of his East German upbringing, that aimed to avoid superficial sentimental emotion ("it's not just about two poor Jews") in the pursuit of a longer lasting and more deeply considered response ("the audience should come out resisting intolerance"). More personally, he had asked himself whether he, as a German, was allowed to criticise a Jew – no doubt having in mind Eléazar's own intolerance and morally ambiguous behaviour, particularly his lack of honesty with Rachel about her parentage. He then stated that he considered that the opera was too long with too many blocks to the dramatic flow and that the

music was not good and had too many choruses. He had thus set about refashioning the opera to provide an exciting and suspenseful evening rather than just a long evening and certainly succeeded in his aim with an absolutely cracking performance that illuminated the spirit if not always kept to the letter of the opera. While this stance is anathema to some opera lovers, it was clear that Konwitschny had given the project considerable thought and was not just wanting to be different or to shock, the motivation that many often ascribe to non-traditional productions.

Konwitschny saw the opera not primarily as Christian and Jew but as persecuting majority and persecuted minority, an essay in intolerance. To this end all wore modern dress with no distinction except that the Christians wore blue gloves and the Jews yellow. Thus he claimed to have deracinated the opera, although I doubt whether many would be convinced about this even if they might agree about his broader message. I wondered whether it was deliberate that he chose yellow for the Jewish gloves bearing in mind the yellow badge that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany but which would have cut across his avowed neutral approach or whether it was an oversight. The set had a huge rose window and other stain glass at the rear, which were lit up for certain scenes and otherwise the main features were groups of vertical metal bars that were arranged in various structures according to the scene. Thus it was a fairly minimal, functional set with no indication of time or place.

Typical of his reworking of the opera was his removal of the overture so that we plunged straight into the organ introduction to the "Te Deum" and the gathering of the Christians under the leadership of Cardinal de Brogni. Around a further 30 minutes was cut from the earlier part of Act 1 and its lengthy scene-setting. In Act 2, he moved Eléazar's cavatine to the end of the act because it does not have any specific bearing on the action at that point but is of a more philosophic nature and he wanted to keep up the dramatic impetus with Eudoxie's entrance immediately following Rachel's rising suspicion about Léopold when he does not eat the unleavened bread. Act 3 caused the greatest discussion amongst the next day's conference attendees because when Rachel publicly accused Léopold of being her lover she was shown wearing a suicide belt. Some delegates felt that this ran against Rachel's role as a mediator and the whole thrust of her personality. Unfortunately, the chairman called time on Konwitschny before he could adequately explain his ideas behind it but he said that he did not consider her as nice a person as some did and seemed to have been thinking in terms of her wanting to destroy the patrimony that was suppressing the world. The end of the act saw the chorus, wearing various coloured gloves, constructing an endless series of suicide belts, presumably intimating that we are all complicit in prejudice and its manifest evils. Act 4, in which Rachel and Eudoxie come together in order to save the man who has betrayed them both, had their duet morph into a dance as they celebrated coming together to rise above the hatred that had hitherto permeated the opera and in washing their hands together both divested their gloves.

One of Konwitschny's techniques was to have singers come out into the auditorium and mingle with the audience while singing, often having them seem to make asides to the audience or to look to the audience for support such as when Rachel, in the auditorium, lambasted Leopold, on the stage, for his duplicity. It gave the exchange a feeling of overhearing someone else's argument and a much greater involvement than with a traditional stage confrontation. While this sort of manoeuvre is not new, I have never seen it put to such telling effect, although I did sympathise with the woman who sat with her hands over her ears as the volume must have been pretty daunting when Eléazar sang the big hit number "Rachel, quand du Seigneur" a couple of feet away from her.

The end is a problem. Scribe, as was his usual practice, aimed for an arresting stage coup with no regard for its musical potential[v]. Here the opera called for Eléazar and Rachel to be flung into cauldrons of boiling oil with Eléazar revealing that Rachel was Cardinal de Brogni's daughter as this happened. Donizetti wrote on seeing it, "Too much reality – the final scene too horrifying, the more horrifying because of so much illusion"[vi]. For today's director perhaps there can be no appropriate realisation living as we do under the shadow of the Holocaust. Here, Konwitschny had them walk up some stairs and then out of sight, while de Brogni fell down the stairs in his surprise and anguish. It served but lacked any real emotional punch. All the roles were strongly delineated, even Eudoxie who can be a somewhat shadowy figure, and all were acted with great energy and commitment. The singing (Eléazar – Roberto Sacca, Rachel - Asmik Grigorian, de Brogni – Dmitry Ulyanov, Léopold – Randall Bills, Eudoxie - Nicole Chevalier, Ruggiero – Toby Girling) was excellent particularly when one considers the very physical acting that they were often asked to do at the same time and the whole enterprise was well supported by the orchestra under Tomás Netopil.

While some opera fans will no doubt decry such manipulation of the opera, it was all in all an intense and exhilarating evening and the audience clearly appreciated it. Unfortunately, on leaving the theatre past the armed police, they needed no reminding that intolerance is still very much with us.

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[i] Quoted in Hugh Macdonald, "La Juive", *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Vol 2, edited by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Reference Ltd., 1998) , p.926.

[ii] Mark Everist, *Giacomo Meyerbeer and Music Drama in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p.221.

[iii] Ruth Jordan, *Fromental Halevy*. (London: Kahn & Averill, 1997), p.59.

[iv] Quote from a letter to Innocenzo Giampieri in Herbert Weinstock, *Donizetti*. (London: Lowe & Brydone, 1964), p.108.

[v] "The denouement for which music can do nothing" wrote Donizetti of Scribe's ending for *Dom Sébastien* - Zaida and Sébastien fall from the rope they are climbing down to escape - quoted in William Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his operas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.187.

[vi] Herbert Weinstock *Loc. Cit.*

I CAVOLI A MERENDA DI WINDSOR
DIE LUSTIGEN WEIBER VON WINDSOR A LIEGI

Otto Nicolai, chi era costui? Per cominciare, merita di essere ricordato quale fondatore dei Wiener Philarmoniker nel 1842, cioè di una tra le più prestigiose orchestre tuttora esistenti (tra i numerosi direttori illustri avvicendatisi alla sua guida, basti ricordare un certo Gustav Mahler, che la diresse dal 1898 al 1901).

Carl Otto Ehrenfried Nicolai (1810-1849) era concittadino del filosofo Immanuel Kant, ma all'epoca la loro città natale si chiamava ancora Königsberg (quando, dopo la seconda guerra mondiale, se ne sarebbe impadronita la Russia, le avrebbe imposto il nome attuale: Kaliningrad). La sua esistenza non fu facile. Abbandonato dalla madre poco dopo la nascita, tiranneggiato dal padre, musicista e direttore d'orchestra alcolizzato, fuggito di casa a 16 anni, il giovane prussiano riuscì, grazie ai buoni maestri e ai multiformi talenti, ad affermarsi di volta in volta in Germania, in Italia, in Austria. Nel 1829 prese parte a Lipsia alla storica riscoperta della *Matthäus-Passion* di Bach voluta da Mendelssohn. Fu però in Italia che scoprì la vocazione di compositore d'opera. Se oggi la fama di operista di Nicolai è legata per l'essenziale a *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, bisogna riconoscere che *Il Templario* (Torino 1840) - sua più fulgida creazione del periodo italiano - ebbe per un buon trentennio una notevole diffusione anche sulle scene italiane più periferiche. Per nostra fortuna questo *Templario* (tratto dall'*Ivanhoe* di Walter Scott, che aveva già ispirato Pacini e Marschner) è stato meritevolmente riscoperto nel 2008 a Chemnitz e nel contempo registrato in CD (e, grazie ai CD, sono disponibili all'ascolto numerose edizioni delle *Lustigen Weiber* nonché, tra le composizioni sacre, la *Messa in Re maggiore*).

Praticamente coeve di quell'altro celebre *Singspiel*, che è la maliosa *Martha* di Friedrich von Flotow (Vienna 1847), ormai quasi scomparsa dai teatri, *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, su libretto di Salomon Hermann von Mosenthal (1821-1877), andarono in scena all'Hofoper di Berlino il 9 marzo 1849. Ma il trentottenne compositore sopravvisse di appena due mesi al trionfo del suo capolavoro.

La fonte è la commedia *The Merry Wives of Windsor* di William Shakespeare, pubblicata nel 1602, ma forse anteriore di almeno un lustro. Tuttora fresca, cattivante, impertinente e irriverente, è abilmente condotta a vari livelli e in vari registri, secondo le situazioni e i personaggi. Dai maldestri tentativi, sistematicamente coronati da sollazzevoli fiaschi, da parte dell'anziano *Miles gloriosus* John Falstaff - libertino impenitente, beone inveterato e in permanenza squattrinato - di far breccia nei cuori di due appetibili comari, munite entrambe di legittimo consorte, allo scopo soprattutto di attingere alle rispettive ben fornite borse e di arginare in tal modo la catastrofica bolletta, ai macchinosi stratagemmi messi in atto da uno dei gelosi mariti, all'idillio, sotto il tetto dell'altra coppia, tra Anna e Fenton - lei probabilmente neanche quindicenne, lui tutt'al più diciassettenne - che volgerà a un *happy ending* durante la festa organizzata nel bosco per smascherare Falstaff, frustrando così i fermi propositi dei genitori della ragazza di accordare la mano di Anna ciascuno a uno spasimante diverso, l'uno non meno goffo e ridicolo dell'altro.

Il buon libretto di Mosenthal si attiene più o meno al tracciato shakespeariano, pur con qualche indispensabile scorciatoia e col ribattezzare alla tedesca alcuni personaggi, travasando destramente in una sciolta versificazione la freschezza e la vivacità della commedia seicentesca.

L'edizione delle *Lustigen Weiber*, a cui ho assistito il 7 febbraio al Théâtre Royal di Liegi (ultima rappresentazione), è il frutto di una coproduzione dell'Opéra de Wallonie con l'Opéra de Lausanne, la città svizzera che l'ha ospitata in precedenza l'anno scorso. La regia di David Hermann è stata salutata in termini più che favorevoli tanto da "La Libre Belgique" che da "Le Soir" (i due principali quotidiani brussellesi francofoni), elogi che ho il vivo rincrescimento di non condividere affatto. Non è tanto il posticipare ai nostri giorni l'azione, che di per sé può essere plausibile, quanto il flagrante tradimento della lettera e dello spirito del *Singspiel* di Mosenthal e Nicolai, lo sforzare la vicenda per farla combaciare alla meno peggio con la propria impostazione scenica, che reputo inaccettabile, da parte di un ennesimo regista guastamestieri, che vuole "salvare" l'opera, modernizzando e attualizzando la trama del libretto, al quale tanto per non cambiare presta scarsa attenzione, intrufolandovi malabilmente corpi estranei ingombranti quanto superflui.

È così che John Falstaff perde del tutto la sua ampia consistenza corporea, per ridursi a un fantasma che ossessiona mogli insoddisfatte e mariti gelosi da *telenovela*, che faranno ricorso a un insipido psichiatra recitante, in scene aggiunte non previste da Mosenthal. E alla *telenovela* infatti si addicono la funzionale e sobria scenografia di Rifail Ajdarpasic e i costumi di ordinaria amministrazione di Ariane Isabell Unfried. Il seduttore da bettola lo si vedrà in ogni caso sulla scena, ma sempre trasparentemente velato e con quasi niente addosso. E se è un fantasma, chi ha scritto le lettere alle due comari? Con chi finge di complottare allora Herr Fluth (il Ford shakespeariano) per scoprire se la moglie gli è infedele? La festa *féerique* del quadro finale si conclude con la bella invenzione di una rissa collettiva fra coppie, che se le suonano di santa ragione, e si perde in pratica l'*happy ending* di Anna e Fenton.

Per fortuna rimane la musica! Si ravvisa in questo cattivante *Singspiel* un'eleganza mutuata dalla frequentazione del belcanto romantico italiano, a cui ben si accompagnano l'agile padronanza della strumentazione germanica con una ricca invenzione melodica, suadente e calzante ora sul versante comico ora su quello sentimentale. Christian Zacharias conduce a buon porto l'Orchestra dell'ORW, che si fa valere già nella sognante ouverture dalle inconfondibili tinte pastello e dalla magica atmosfera. La compagnia di canto è robusta e ardimentosa oltre che calata con convinzione nei rispettivi personaggi. Franz Hawlata è basso di lusso nel ruolo del "fantomatico" Sir John, che gli è familiare, mentre i due mariti, Herr Fluth e Herr Reich (cioè il padre di Anna), sono sontuosamente serviti dai bassi-baritoni Werner van Mechelen e Laurent Kubla.

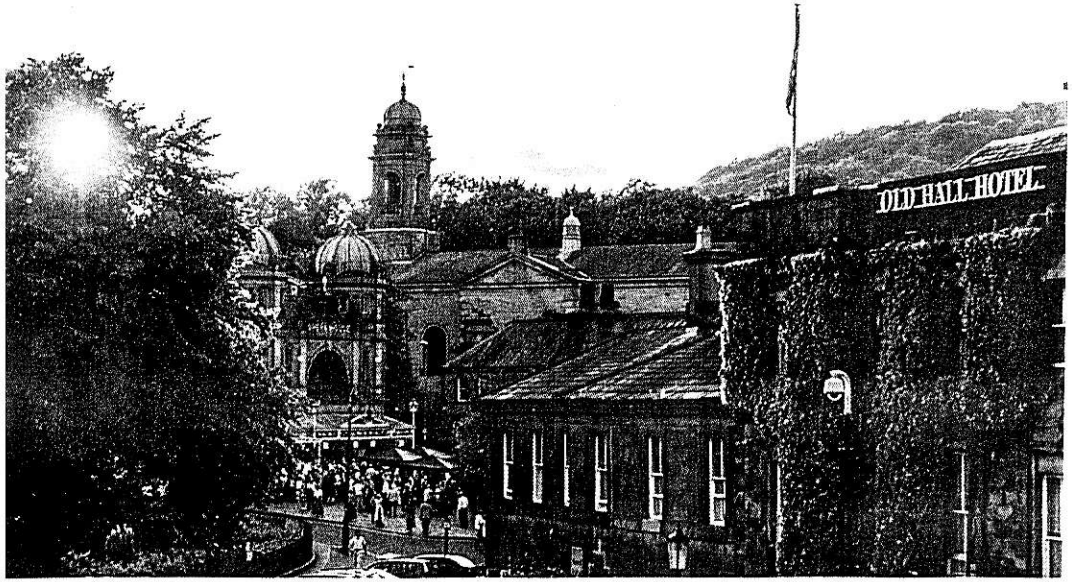
Nel trio delle donne spicca il timbro luminoso e la tecnica agguerrita del soprano Anneke Luyten, una mordace Frau Fluth, che è ben secondata dall'esuberante mezzo soprano Sabina Willeit, quale Frau Reich, l'altra temibile comare. E non sfigura affatto nei panni (ridotti nella scena della piscina a un suggestivo bikini) della bricconcella Anna l'aggraziato e vivace soprano Sophie Junker, a cui fa compagnia il più che promettente tenore Davide Giusti (Fenton) per rendere fresca e credibile la coppia dei giovanissimi innamorati.

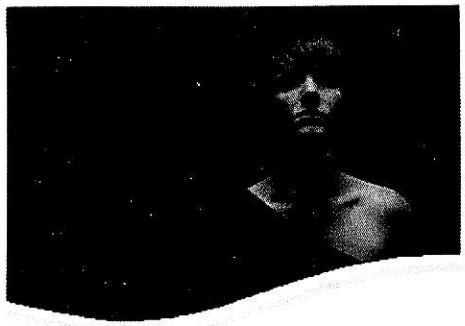
Completano il cast, con onorevole prestazione, i due buffi e sfortunati pretendenti di Anna, cioè il baritono Patrick Delcour (Dr. Cajus) e il tenore Stefan Cifolelli (Junker Spärlich). Le pagine solistiche, i duetti e gli insiemi nonché il poderoso concertato (abbastanza all'italiana) del Finale Primo hanno reso onore al capolavoro di Nicolai con l'indispensabile contributo del Coro della Casa affidato alle solerti cure di Marcel Seminara.

Degli attori che recitano nei ruoli dello psichiatra e delle infermiere basterà dire che la loro partecipazione è altrettanto irrilevante quanto gli interventi concepiti per loro.

Se il teatro è specchio della vita reale, questa però non sempre gli restituisce un'immagine fedele. Nonostante gli impedimenti, Anna e Fenton coronano il loro sogno d'amore. Quello del trentenne Otto Nicolai con il ventiduenne soprano umbro Erminia Frezzolini nel 1840 non si realizzò invece per i sordidi calcoli del padre della cantante, il basso Giuseppe Frezzolini, e della stessa Erminia, la quale per di più mandò a picco alla Scala nel 1841 la prima del *Proscritto* dell'ex *boy-friend*. E il cuore del giovane tedesco sanguinò a lungo!

Fulvio Stefano Lo Presti





Buxton Festival

10–26 July 2015

Diary

London, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Chelsea Opera Group
***Ernani* (Verdi) 3 July**
(Cond. Robin Newton w. Hughes Jones, Dix)

Buxton Festival (see opposite page for a view of Buxton and its delicious opera house)

Friday 10 July (20.00)	**Opening Concert**
Saturday 11 July (19.15)	***Giovanna d'Arco* (Verdi)**
	(conductor - Stuart Stratford; director - Stephen Unwin)
Sunday 12 July (191.15)	***Lucia di Lammermoor***
	(conductor - Stephen Barlow, director – Elijah Moshinsky)
Tuesday 14 July (19.15)	***Giovanna d'Arco***
Wednesday 15 July (19.15)	***Lucia di Lammermoor***
Friday 17 July (19.15)	***Giovanna d'Arco***
Saturday 18 July (19.15)	***Lucia di Lammermoor***
Tuesday 21 July (19.15)	***Giovanna d'Arco***
Wednesday 22 July (14.30)	***Lucia di Lammermoor* (matinée)**
Friday 24 July (19.15)	***Giovanna d'Arco***
Saturday 25 July (19.15)	***Lucia di Lammermoor***



Caramoor Festival
***La Favorite* 11 July**

Bad Wildbad: Rossini in Wildbad Festival
***L'inganno felice* (Rossini) 11/ 17/ 23 July**
***Le cinesi* (Manuel Garcia) 12/18/ 25 July**
***Bianca e Falliero* (Rossini) 18. 24/ 26 July**
***L'italiana in Algeri* (Rossini) 19/22 July**
***Il vespro Siciliano* (*Die Sizilianische Vesper*) (Lindpaintner) 23/ 25 July**

Martina Franca: Festival della Valle d'Itria:
***Don Checco* (De Giosa) 21/ 31 July**
***Medea in Corinto* (Mayr) 30 July, 2/4 August**

***Bampton Classical Opera* (Oxon)**
***La grotta di Trofonio* (Antonio Salieri)**
Bampton Deanery garden 17/18 July
Westonbirt 31 August
London, St John's, Smith Square 15 September
(Cond.: Paul Wingfield Director: Jeremy Gray)

Oviedo, Opéra: (sixty-seventh Season)
***Il duca d'Alba* (Donizetti) 13/15/17/19 December 2015**

TO BE ESPECIALLY NOTED

A little company called VPR (Vertical Player Repertory - of New York City) is planning to put on Pacini's *Malvina di Scozia* probably some time in the Fall or Winter of this year in an edition prepared by Hans Schellevis (and masterminded by Thea Cook)
The FREE OPERA COMPANY of Zürich propose a further absolute rarity next year, E.T.A Hoffmann's *Liebe und Eifersucht* based on a play by Calderòn

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Opinions in the Newsletter are those of the author
and not necessarily those of the Editor or Committee
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