Giovanni Pacini *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* dramma per musica in due atti (libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola), Teatro Massimo Bellini, Catania 24/26 September 1996

Nicola Vaccai *Giulietta e Romeo* tragedia per musica in due atti (libretto by Felice Romani) Teatro Comunale G.B.Pergolesi, Jesi 4/6 October 1996

Two of the pivotal scores in the evolution of Italian romantic opera made their way to the stage this last autumn in the theatres of Catania (birthplace of Pacini), and Jesi (near enough to the birthplace of Vaccai), a fortnight or so apart. For all those who take opera seriously, this was a red letter occasion, sending so much of the poor fare offered by the *Grandes Boutiques* (Verdi's term) to the oblivion it deserves. Both operas are of 1825 - that key date between the departure of Rossini and the arrival of Bellini, both have been dismissed arrogantly by people who should know better, and both indeed have a claim to that overworked description "masterpiece" - which if it means anything at all means precisely a work of consistantly high standards of inspiration and achievement, as here. It has never been very certain in most people's minds whether Rossini gave birth, unaided, to Bellini as has often been claimed, or if Bellini, unaided, changed the course of opera in his homeland. These two operas make one thing perfectly clear: they did nothing of the kind. Both operas in fact, though certainly indebted to Rossini to a varying extent, indicate where Bellini derived some of his style, what is more, both operas anticipate Donizetti in places - even the Donizetti of the years after the death of his younger contender for world fame, and Pacini not only anticipates himself as the composer of*Saffo* (which is supposed to have been forged as a reaction to his earlier frivolousness) but also Verdi, no less, especially in his marvellously flexible orchestration. Oh yes. Of course Pacini and Vaccai have been rubbished consistantly by those unable or unwilling to look at their music, or had a vested interest elsewhere, there is no need to mention names; we, at least and thanks to the enterprise of these revivals are able to take a longer view and one which should happily be endorsed by the recordings shortly to be available for those who would like to make up their own minds.

Probably the most fascinating aspect of the two scores is that they are as different as chalk from cheese: Pacini's opera is a spectacular inset with scurrilous intrigue, sensual, knowing and inventive with a mature hand on the pulse of the theatre, and Vaccai's, almost painfully sincere, uncomplicated, yet so dramatic that all carping is rendered irrelevant. In 1825 Pacini was already a celebrity and writing for the S.Carlo, Vaccai had yet to make an indelible mark but this he did in the same year and in the dimmer venue of the Teatro Canobbiana of Milan; Pacini was an *enfant terrible* grown into a terrible adult, Vaccai was a gentleman, seriously handicapped by modesty and good faith. Both were to be betrayed by their contemporaries, but in these two operas they made their claim for immortality. At Catania, and at Jesi, their credentials passed all the tests and both operas terminated to the agreeable sound of critics eating their words.

It is perhaps a bit unfair to snipe at aspects of the staging of *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* as few operas could possibly be harder to perform, the composer puts incredible vocal, orchestral and scenographic hurdles before the audience, most of which were cleared with some verve. The production came from Martina Franca, one of Monsieur

Opposite: *Giulietta e Romeo* Paula Almerares and Maria José Trullu in Malibran's misappropriated *Scena della tomba*

Segalini's admirable contributions to the operatic vocabulary, and was suitably vivid, if a little hampered by its somewhat too facile setting. I can't help feeling that it was a mistaken idea to place the opera in a "decadent" Pompei. Pacini's opera is about noble Romans keeping up appearances while a rotten apple in their midst does its best to upset the whole cart so to speak, Ottavia - the heroine - is accused of a preposterous paedophilia, and with the mischievous intervention of Vesuvius nearly gets buried alive, the setting, as here, of walzing temples and circus was at odds with a whole series of solemn processions and rituals and enforced all sorts of disturbing interruptions in the flow of the music while the conductor was waiting for the stage to come to a halt. And then these Triumph Scenes, carefully crafted by the composer, lacked the important dimension of an on-stage *banda*, with the result that they failed to supply the stereoscopic spread, as well as the ambitious scope of this score. But what as score it is! Full of ideas from beginning to end, quite without depending upon anyone. Pacini himself, in his memoirs, claimed novelty for many of its component sections, if these sections are not so novel-sounding today (simply because his ideas have been borrowed time and time again by rival composers) his music is immediately recognisable, and was to remain idiosincratic to the end of his life. *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* is full of splendid ensembles and is capped by nothing less than a a four-part *gran' scena* for the heroine in Act II just before the indignant volcano brings down the curtain. At the Teatro Massimo a fine Iano Tamar, as Ottavia, and a somewhat wooden Nicolas Rivenq, as Sallustio, were clearly ill-at-ease before an underpowered tenor whose inaudibility obliged them to place themselves in acoustically expedient positions rather than as the action demanded. As a result the stage picture was somewhat disconcerting. This tenor, the rotten Appio,has in fact the leading role composed for the uniquely stratospheric Giovanni David - a specialist in *expressive* fioriture, in this revival the villain was so busy trying to sing all the notes that all hope of an expressive delivery was lost. [Happily, the recording will feature Raul Gimenez in the role, less virtuoso I dare say, but far more into the skin of the lustful Tribune]. Other roles were quite well taken, and the ballet - even if choreographically fustion - was enjoyable. Giuliano Carella has this kind of repertoire at his fingertips and faced up to all the issues - revolving sets, inaudibliity, and the vagaries of volcanic caprice with aplomb from his podium. All praise to Catania's magnificent theatre (named for Pacini's great antagonist) for its courage and sense of responsibility on the bicentenary of one of its most remarkable sons.

Jesi was no less challenged, especially as Vaccai's score has been denigrated for 150 years. Blamed for its presumption in inserting itself (actually Malibran was the culprit) into Bellini's *I Capuleti*, everyone has assumed that the original opera must have been a poor affair. How foolish, and how foolish many writers must now feel after this staging in the certain knowledge that it was *Rossini* who had pointed out that Vaccai's extraordinary music was more effective than that which had upstaged it! At Jesi it was clear that Vaccai's opera had nothing to lose in comparison with Bellini's opera, *Giulietta e Romeo* is passionate, melodic, and quite riveting to the very end and leaves the audience transfixed, and it is hard to resist the temptation of saying that Malibran could perhaps have replaced more of Bellini's opera - if not most of it - where sheer drama is at issue.

This said, Vaccai's idiom is decidedly old-fashioned, he is in debt to a Rossini of the

past, not that of the Parisian *Siège de Corinthe* so soon to come, and as for the sensational vehemence with which Giulietta berates her dreadful father in the closing moments of the opera Vaccai even has recourse to Gluck. But this is of no account, everything is grist to his dramatic mill, a total conviction shines throughout the score so that the end transcends the means. Nowhere in *Giulietta e Romeo* are the melodies inferior to those of Bellini, if you have been led to believe that full-blooded nineteenth century vocalism made its début with *Il pirata* you had better listen to Giulietta's magical invocation (Act I Sc.XV)

'Ah! per Romeo v'invoco,
Cielo, Destino, Amor."

at which point romantic opera is literally born on the Italian stage, and in music worthy of the moment.

There is, in fact, plenty of innovation in this *Giulietta e Romeo*, the orchestra in Ilaria Narici and Bruno Gandolfi's admirable edition of the original version of the opera (Vaccai made many subsequent changes) is carefully coloured and abounds in horn obbligati later "borrowed" by his supplanter for his version, and Lucia-like harp accents; from the Sinfonia onwards the listener is alerted to a "new" voice, the choral interventions are scarcely less than sensational, above all this is not - as might be imagined - a chilly essay by a "Master of Belcanto" (whatever that means) - but demonstrates a use of the human voice, varied, flexible and poignant according to the convolutions of the heart. As a cumulative drama, Vaccai's remarkable creation is worthy of the Shakespearian tale, step by step glueing the listener to the seat until at the terrifying dénouement the whole house is awed into silence.

The production at Jesi was not without comedy, shades of Jane Austin crossed with King Lear permitting a generous recourse to Oxfam (or its Italian equivalent) and all-purpose sets, as well as an input from the local ladies of the fencing club. All the main roles were perfectly adequately sustained, as the rabid Capellio, Dano Raffanti was rough but rose to his big aria; as Tebaldo, Armando Ariostini aroused compassion as he should: as Giulietta's mother, Elena Marinangeli made something out of rather little. The starring lovers come in a special category, both young singers, both new to me, Maria José Trullu's Romeo was nicely focussed and most energetically acted, though often placed too far from the footlights to make a full impact, she is a promising contralto who, in this 1825 version of the opera, is not obliged to emulate the Malibran histrionics which Vaccai later wrote into the score; as Giulietta Paula Almerares not only sang with great beauty, fully into the neurasthenic character ascribed to her in this production, rising to real heights, but knew how to act this kind of role perfectly, there were moments when Henriette Méric-Lalande was invoked with perfect conviction. Did she learn to act like this herself? Or did she have wonderful teachers in her native Argentina? If she did, please Miss Almerares ask them to come over and do some teaching here where they are really needed. The Teatro Comunale di Jesi is to be congratulated on this splendid revival, which does it the greatest credit.

Alexander Weatherson

(NB Two previously neglected composers must be hugging themselves in heaven after these revivals, indeed, Pacini is presently putting the final touches to his one millionth opera for a staging at the T.Eliseo - to the text of *Outis* which everyone agrees is much in need of his cabalettas and sense of humour)