THE NEWSLETTER No.103

February 2008

I due Gregorio

Thoroughly annoying, repeated ad-nauseam, that jingle the *"complete disappearance of opera buffa in Italy after Don Pasquale"* is one of the more idiotic aberrations with which we have had to contend. Blind to statistics, deaf to once-household names (in the peninsula) like those of Antonio Cagnoni, Carlo Pedrotti, Nicola De Giosa, the two Ricci's et al, an unfunny gang of twentieth-century scribblers have succeeded in bending musical history to its own myths. The idea comes about because the flagship composers of the later nineteenth-century lyric stage did not write comedies: Wagner, Verdi and Gounod had only a small number of listeners in stitches.

But this nonsense seems to have run its course. A shortage of comic fodder on the fringe is the reason and the two 'Don Gregorios' - concurrent in Italy this autumn - a portent, both glorying in hilarious near-farse with strong roots in commedia dell'arte and similar archaic formulae but both - in their own way - pointing the way ahead in the revival stakes. Of course Donizetti's *Don Gregorio* is no sunset score, it is a refurbishment of genius, a reworked *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (1824) with a well-worn plot inherited from decades of eighteenth-century ribaldry and two years later relaunched by the composer in Naples, retouched, supplied with a streetwise Parthenopean validity and then staged Europe-wide - most notably in our day at Wexford in 2006 in a splendid edition due to the irreplaceable expertise of Maria Chiara Bertieri (see Newsletter 99) [*Don Gregorio* made his first London appearance post-*Pasquale* on 30 July 1846 with - ex- *Pasquale* - Luigi Lablache in the title role, Giulia Grisi as Gilda and her real-life clandestine "husband" Mario as Enrico: the conductor was Michael William Balfe]

The other 'Don Gregorio' is even more dependent upon tradition and indisputably positioned in the "comedy-less" zone. Carlo Pedrotti's *Tutti in maschera* dates from 1856, and has an undisguised historical setting, at least the plot could make this claim, its music is post - *Don Pasquale* and its argument post - *Don Gregorio*. With a début in Pedrotti's native Verona on 4 November 1856 *Tutti in maschera* was played to the end of the nineteenth century and a bit beyond. It is an "opera about opera"; its sub-hero, the Don Gregorio in question, is an unsuccessful composer, as a result he leaves for Turkey in the cargo of an importunate impresario. This is the whole plot. He is seconded by a colourful cast trying to find something to do. Carlo Goldoni's 'L'Impresario delle Smirne' is the excuse, Longhi the style, Venice the modus vivendi.

In its way, with its delicious music, *Tutti in maschera* is a salutary score, and even more a pointer to that which is to come. After the unification of Italy comic opera would lose its socio-political excuses, no longer a pea under the mattress of foreign princes it would settle comfortably into endorsement of the status quo. The provocation, bitter irony, the black humour of *Crispino e la comare* (1850) would go back down the well. Conventional "funny-men" still would do their patter, indeed the standard duetto *"dei due buffi"* would be trebled between *Don Checco* (De Giosa 1850) and *Tutti in maschera*, but an air of innocence would replace the savagery of the disreputable farse which had so long flourished the length and breadth of Italy. In this particular instance, with its new-born patriotism, *Tutti in maschera* makes a shot at a new mode. .

It should be noted that Don Gregorio was no self-portrait, Pedrotti (1817-1893) was anything but an unsuccessful composer. Vis-à-vis Donizetti he had made his first real musical mark with *La figlia dell'arciere* (Amsterdam 1844) re-using the libretto by Felice Romani supplied to Carlo Coccia in 1834 and thus partially identical with the text later set by the Bergamasc as *Adelia*. Did Donizetti ever hear of it? There is no way of telling. Subsequently he tended to specialise in farse, until the more sombre phase of his last years which ended in tragedy. *Tutti in maschera* is quite the most successful of his comedies, much of its musical content is truly delectable, but little of it is new, his musical mentor was Lauro Rossi, this is most obvious in the two big arias for the soprano - her sortita and the *aria finale*, but the deft handling of the cori and the brilliant instrumental ostinati also recall Lauro Rossi time and time again. There are one or two really enchanting moments. Above all, plotless and colourful, decorative rather than meaningful, *Tutti in maschera* comes over - not so much as an opera buffa - but as a Musical by a *real* composer.

Domenico Colaianni was the Don Gregorio I heard at Rovigo, with Yolanda Auyanet in the testing role of Vittoria ("La regina") and Annarita Gemmabella as her rival Dorotea (the most amusing moment in the opera had the very substantial Dorotea clinging to the ankle of Don Gregorio in an effort to prevent his escape!)

Musicologically unexceptionable in a Nuova Edizione critica by its conductor Giovanni Di Stefano, primad at the Teatro dell'Opera Giocosa di Savona, then restaged subsequently at the immaculate circular Teatro Sociale di Rovigo as well as the Teatro Municipale di Piacenza, *Tutti in maschera* is heading for the brand new Theatre Royal at Wexford next year in something of a reverse programming to that of *Don Gregorio* which featured there last year. A DVD of this second 'Don Gregorio' may well be on its way. A destiny to be shared, we have every reason for hoping, by his Donizettian predecessor at Bergamo this year.

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