Bad Wildbad

The Rossini festival in Bad Wildbad is celebrating its twentieth anniversary season, and for it it planned two productions of *Italiana in Algeri*: one with top singers and conducted by Alberto Zedda as the opening night gala (also done concert style and recorded for a cd); the other is to be staged and sung by young, unknown singers at a much lower price. When I ordered the tickets, with my bad German, I thought I was getting a dress rehearsal at a cheap rate of the staged version, and the opening night gala with the famous singers. Recently, I had heard from friend Reto Muller that they had decided not to sell tickets to the dress rehearsal after all.

When we arrived in Wildbad, we got all the tickets I had ordered, but we were told that there would not be many people at the dress. Since they had already confirmed our dress rehearsal tickets, I guess they decided to let us go. BUT (here's the bad German part) the dress rehearsal turned out to be the famous singers and not the students. They were rehearsing for the gala opening and recording. Thus instead of unknowns we got Lorenzo Regazzo as Mustapha, Marianna Pizzolato as Isabella, Roberto de Simone as Taddeo and Lawrence Brownlee as Lindoro. All conducted by Alberto Zedda. There were about 35 people in the audience, a few folks like us and other musicians. When we walked in, Zedda came up and shook our hands and said "Buona sera." He didn't know who we were, but he must have seen us at umpteen Pesaro productions in the great seats that Rich gets. Everybody was dressed casually. Zedda played the overture and then turned to the audience and asked permission to perform the second act first, since it was for a recording. The hardest music comes in Act I (Languir per una bella , Cruda sorte, etc.) and he thought it would give the singers a chance to warm up. So we had an *Italiana* backwards.

It was truly wonderful, like having the best singers in the world performing for King Charles (me), Queen Peggy and a few of our friends. The singing was just absolutely top drawer Rossini, and of course *Italiana* is one of the most amazing musical masterpieces ever penned by a 21 year old. Well sung, it never tires. The singers gave it their all, complete with interactions and facial expressions and gestures. It was much better than staged productions, which in Germany always run from passable to horrible.

Zedda bounced around and conducted with the energy of someone in their twenties (he is 85). Peggy noticed that at the end of the first part (second act) his yellow oxford button down collar shirt was soaked, and that he wore an identical one (dry) for the second part. At the interval, singers mingled with audience and we talked for awhile to Lawrence Brownlee, who was the least "old hand" among the singers. (Pizzolato and De Simone never looked at their scores and Zedda only looked during the secco recitativo). He was really worried about "Languir per una bella," coming up in Part II, but he sailed through it with grace (the lovely legato parts with the horn obbligato) and aplomb (the fast coloratura and leaps of the cabaletta). He is definitely an entity to watch. As we saw it, in reverse order, the opera ended with the big caw caw caw, booma, booma boom concertato, as great a finale as the master ever penned. Of course there was rapturous applause from our small crowd. Zedda walked out into the audience, wiping his brow. We were standing right there since we were in the second row. He walked over and shook our hands again. "Grazie, maestro," was all I could manage. It was an evening never to be forgotten or, alas, duplicated. We will see it again, in formal drag, on tomorrow night. It is hard to see how it could be better.

Don Giovanni ossia Il Convitato di Pietra by Giovanni Pacini

The true rarity at Bad Wildbad this season is *Don Giovanni* by Pacini. Pacini must be the most neglected almost-great composer of the nineteenth century with thousands of treasures waiting to be uncovered by musicologists. When Wildbad announced this completely unknown opera of his, I was doubly surprised, because it was written for a private performance *en famille* by the composer in 1832. Pacini's sister had married a wealthy doctor and the first (and only?) performance took place in a private theater in the doctor's villa in Viareggio. It was never intended for public performance. Pacini's brother, sister, and father all had roles, and only the father was a professional singer (he was the first Don Geronio in Rossini's *Turco*), but by 1832 he was retired. A student of Luigi's sang Masetto and doubled as the Commendatore. Pacini's brother's wife sang Donna Anna. It was a family affair indeed. The opera calls for a small orchestra (strings and a flute/ piccolo) and a small male chorus. It fits the tiny restored Kurtheater in Bad Wildbad very well (only about 100 seats).

The story is the familiar one from Mozart (actually Tirso de Molina), but there are some major differences from the Mozart score. Don Giovanni is a high tenor role, alla Rossini. Donna Elvira is eliminated entirely and the prima donna, a soprano, is Zerlina! Donna Anna is a mezzo, and the Leporello role is called Ficcanaso. Don Ottavio is here, but without an aria, not a bad choice considering what a wimp he is. The opera is in two acts, each act containing six numbers. There is a catalogue aria (wherein Don Giovanni is said to have had mistresses in Peru as well as the usual Da Ponte places), a "La ci darem la mano" duet--here "La man tu mi darai," a drinking song (with chorus), a serenade like "Deh, vieni alla finestra" and so on. There is also a grand rondo almost-finale for Zerlina, very Rossini like and very attractive ("Sento brillarmi il core") BEFORE the Commendatore appears at Don Giovanni's for dinner. Go figure..... All of the music was tuneful and standouts included Donna Anna (mezzo)'s aria in Act I on the discovery of her father's death. The Quintet in Act II was truly lovely and particularly a repeated motif sung by the soprano and the mezzo. I also liked the Masetto-Zerlina duet in Act II, sort of "Batti, batti, bel Masetto" as a duet. The bravura piece for Zerlina was also very good. The second act finale was the only music which reminded one vaguely of Mozart. I wanted Pacini to include a band playing excerpts from Donizetti, Rossini and Mercadante, but it didn't happen.

There were three really surprising things about the music: 1) how good it was. That Pacini lavished such care on a one-time piece for his family must indicate just how good a composer he was and how he never wanted to be without something to do in the way of composition. Don Giovanni falls between Ivanhoe and Gli elvezi of Jan., 1833; Pacini must have been bored in the summer of 1832. 2) how professional Pacini expected his family-member amateur singers to be. While not in the same league of difficulty as the contemporary *La Sonnambula* or *Lucia,* it was on the order of *L'Elisir d'amore* in terms of difficulty and the professional level required of the singers. That must have been one amazing family in terms of musical levels! 3) how good the orchestration is. Pacini wrote in his autobiography that at the time he was studying the music of Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart. It shows.

The critical edition is by Jeremy Commons and Daniele Ferrari, based on the autograph and other working materials which they found in the Biblioteca Comunale in Pescia, the last home of Pacini. Some of the music was written earlier: the bravura aria of Zerlina was

originally in *Gli sponsali de'silfi,* an early Pacini work (Milan, 1815) and Donna Anna's aria "Care sponde" was also found in an orchestrated version for soprano in a collection of manuscripts by Pacini in the Biblioteca of Pescia. Commons also found two versions of the Don Giovanni-Zerlina duet "La man tu mi darai." Apparently the unaccompanied recitative of Act II is lost (the librettist is that man about town, Sig. Anonimo).* Commons filled in with Da Ponte's recitatives except for Zerlina's rondo, which, of course does not exist in Mozart-Da Ponte. Here Commons and Ferrari manufactured some clever stuff in Italian to set up the aria. Mr. Commons was in attendance at Wildbad and this background information is drawn from his informative (as usual) program notes.

The singing at Wildbad was of a high order indeed even if the roles were taken by young (to me) mostly unknown singers. Zerlina was Zinovia-Maria Zafeiriadou, a Greek soprano with a great range and presence, although her high notes sometimes went shrill and missed the mark. Perhaps she will improve with more performances. Geraldine Chauvet (Anna), Ugo Guagliardo (Masetto and the Commendatore), Leonardo Cortellazzi (Don Giovanni), and Giulio Mastrototaro (Ficanaso) were all excellent and animated. Daniele Ferrari (with Commons responsible for the performing edition) led the Sudwestdeutsches Kammerorchester of Pforzheim. The small chorus was the Wildbad Eastern European Choir of the Year, the Philharmonischer Chor Transilvania of Cluj.

The production utilized a unit set of a drawing room with blinds set at an angle in a picture frame in the back. The approach was that Pacini's family decided to get together and make an opera and there was a short recitative at the start to set up this frame. So, occasionally the familiar drama was played tongue in cheek, sort of like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney saying, "hey, let's put on a show to entertain the folks" in the old Andy Hardy films. At other times the singers seemed to actually believe in what they were singing. Of course it was all set in near contemporary times (Masetto wore bell bottom jeans). Oddly, the Commendatore was not killed in Act One and appeared not as the Stone Guest, but as a man in a wheel chair, bandaged and in leg and arm casts. In the end, Don Giovanni failed to go to hell, but he and Ficcanaso stood on a table in a semi-embrace. Ours is not to wonder why..... One is always thankful in Germany if the production does not get in the way of the opera. In this case, it did not.

The opening performance of 4 July that we attended was enthusiastically received by the sell out crowd. All of the scheduled performances sold out, and another was added. The July 4 performance was also broadcast on Deutschlandradio Kultur. One can hope for a recording!

Charles Jernigan

* The whole text seems to have been arranged by the composer's friend Gaetano Barbieri (a letter thanking him exists) and indeed the fine tenor aria, written for Rubini, in Act II, 'Luna conforto al cor' was extracted from *Il talismano o sia La terza crociata in Palestina* (1829) with a libretto by this translator of note who was present at the Viareggio concert it would appear. Some of the music may also have been recycled from *Gusmano d'Almeida,* an opera seria in tre atti with a text by Luigi Romanelli, composed in 1831 and intended for Venice, which was completed but abandoned, dismantled, and mostly reused in *Ivanhoe* which took its place and preceded this *'Don Giovanni de famille'* by some four months. Edit.