Carlo Coccia in Lisbon

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At the very perimeter of the civilised world, remote and exotic to Italian eyes, the celebrated Theatro de São Carlos de Lisboa had been famous for its seasons of Italian Opera since the start of the century, and indeed well before that. It offered a vital commercial bridge between the whole of the Iberian peninsula and those insatiable theatres of South America greedy for new operas. In 1818 Coccia's *Clotilde* was played before enthusiastic audiences at the São Carlos with such a clamour that the impresario Luiz Chiari took the bold step of inviting its surprised composer to the Portuguese capital to take over artistic control, to conduct and compose. Coccia took up his bags with a sigh of relief, threatened with imprisonment in Genoa, given six days to write an opera, Portugal offered a refuge for the semisubmerged, waving if not drowning in the Rossinian tsunami which had swept away virtually all of his peers the length and breadth of Italy.

Setting foot in the fabulous city in the early summer of 1820 he brought with him a newly composed score, that of his *Atar* which he had written specially for his début. It was given a brilliant Gala staging on 13 May in honour of the King's birthday, the King in question being Dom João VI. The cast was high-profile and included Judith Favini (in the musico role of Atar), Adelaide Dalmani-Naldi, Teresa Zapucci, Luigi Mari, Natale Veglia and Gaspar Martinelli. By a dually sinister trick of fate, this operatic choice (the opera's plot was "borrowed" from that written by Felice Romani for Johann Simon Mayr in 1814, itself more or less a parody of the *Tarare* of Antonio Salieri and a flower of the French Revolution) seems to have precipitated both an impresarial tug-of-war and: a Revolutionary Coup which began almost at once in the streets around the opera house. The King had time to shake his hand and then fled. Chiari at once found himself challenged by a rival, named, of all things, Antonio Simon Mayer, who was favoured by a self-appointed junta. The opera house was thrown into ferment. Coccia could be forgiven for believing that he had accepted an invitation only to come to the wrong party! The season struggled to continue, beset by torment and strikes - operas cancelled, singers dismissed, fiaschi - which came to a head after weeks of dissent and strike only when Mayer was appointed sole impresario in the place of Chiari on 8 November. This seems not to have troubled Coccia too unduly, maybe it was all too familiar. From the moment of his arrival he seems to have concentrated on keeping a low profile, his head well below the parapet; he was discreet, staying at his lodgings between rehearsals, saving himself for his music. In December 1820 there was a reward for his discretion if not for his valour, with a

creditable staging of his somewhat fantastic and mildly innovative *La donna selvaggia* (his Venetian success of seven years before), Mayer, it would seem, left his Italian Musical Director to is own devices, had no ideas of his own and simply went on where his rival Chiari left off.

For some months, despite political corkscrewing outside, there remained an oasis of calm inside the great theatre. *Clotilde* reappeared (1 August 1821) and was greeted with a repeat of its earlier *furore*. Twelve days later came a splendid triumph, *La festa della rosa* Coccia's second opera written expressly for that stage as well as for his cherished Judith Favini. This dramma giocosa with a sentimental plot (Coccia's forte). wistful, somewhat Frenchified, (its text written for Pavesi in 1808 by Gaetano Rossi) became the high point of Coccia's Lisbon stay. Launched memorably on 13 August with Domenico Vaccani, Paolo Rosich, Giovanni Maria Decapitani, Gaspar Martinelli, Natale Veglia, Teresa Zapucci and with La Favini as Carlotta, it received a perfectly unclouded début, everything and everyone applauded, especially the enchanted Neapolitan maestro, repeated ovations, flowers, curtain calls which lasted until the small hours of the morning.

But now came a *decrescendo subito*. As a result of yet another power struggle, yet another shift in the political destiny of the country, capital, and crown, a worried Coccia found himself caught in cross-fire pointed now at Mayer; attacked both on pecuniary and moral grounds this last proved tougher than his predecessor. Indeed, thoroughly corrupt and unscrupulous, Mayer showed himself to be more concerned with survival than running an opera house. His opponents stepped up the pressure, Mayer's régime was accused of incompetence and slovenly productions, Box Office receipts disappeared, the singers were driven to despair and a few fell off the perches. Coccia did his best to stay out of sight and continued with what he knew best - composing. Shortly before the end of the year came his third opera written for the great theatre; on 4 November 1821 was presented *Mandane, regina di Persia* with Adelaide Dalmani-Naldi as Mandane and Pietro Bolognesi as Arbace (its libretto a mismatch by Luigi Romanelli based on the *L'eroismo in amore* of Paër (1815) remotely adapted from from Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto*), with Ercolina Bressa, Domenico Vaccani with the faithful comprimari Gaspare Martinelli and Teresa Zapucci. But the opera obstinately refused to ignite, Bolognesi, was a late recruit to the band of singers but not a happy one, once a celebrated tenor, sought everywhere in Europe he sang out of tune throughout and his lower register was simply a croak. Due to his inadequacy Mayer's opponents had a field-day, the opera was hissed off the stage (which tragic dénouement Bolognesi capped in due course of time by commiting suicide)

Worse still, where the unhappy Coccia was concerned, *Mandane* opened the door to Rossini who now took the imagination of what was left of the audience. This notwithstanding, at the start of the next year

appeared Coccia's fourth and final opera for the São Carlos, this was *Elena e Costantino* staged on 6 February 1822. The press now turned on the composer, it accused Coccia of offering them a *pasticcio* (not, in fact, entirely without foundation since there had been reports (unverified) in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of the day that Coccia had staged an "*Elena e Virginio*' at Trieste in 1818 with Marianna Marconi-Schönberger, an opera which had been poorly received, to which assertion the autograph score in the Archivio Ricordi gives some credence). Whatever its origin, and whatever the justice of this accusation and whatever music might have appeared in the score that was performed (the opera included "bits of Rossini" according to the media), given for the Benefit of the composer, with his faithful Favini as Elena and Domenico Vaccani as Costantino, with Giovanni Maria Decapitano, Natale Veglia. Paolo Rosich (and, as usual, Teresa Zappucci and Gaspar Martinelli in walk-on parts), with once more a recycled plot (in this instance, again borrowed from Mayr whose *Elena* had first been staged at Naples in 1814) the opera failed ingloriously. It was the grandest disaster imaginable, the ultimate in fiaschi. Coccia was handed his hat, the company was disbanded and the theatre closed. its doors.

He had already received an invitation to conduct in London (yet a further outpost) and was itching to go. Three weeks later he did so, never to return. His original enthusiasm to feature in the creative life of the magnificent city and in its famous opera house had not really survived its traumatic beginning. It was not quite the end of his reputation in Lisbon: he left behind him a jingoistic cantata *"O génio lusitano triunfante"* (text by Filippo Hilberath) which required no less than three bande, a huge orchestra and a full complement of soloists - the sole relic of those optimistic days when he first set foot on Portuguese soil, and, some time later, at the request of Dom João VI (safely holed-up in Brazil), he had written a *"Hymno Constitucional"* (which was duly sung in Rio). The faithful roster of artists who had served him with loyalty and distinction dispersed, some to return home to Italy, some displaced to Madrid, and a few to remain in Lisbon without engagements. And condemned to a sad fate, a handful of these last were casually murdered by the cut-throat crew of a sailing ship on which they had embarked in an attempt to find work in Northern Europe...

His fame in the city limped along for a few months. A new company having been scrambled together at the start of 1823 his *Fajello* (as *Fayel)* was staged on 24 June with Adelaide Varese, Adelaide Cressotti, José Lombardi and Paolo Lembi together with Teresa Zappucci and Gaspar Martinelli, that pair of comprimari who alone had survived the débâcle. And at the end of that same year, on 10 December 1823, Coccia's music made a last reappearance in that capital when his *La festa della rosa* was revived, by which time the Neapolitan maestro was safe in the arms of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket in London.

What will have been Coccia's parting view of the Tagus as he set sail for ever? Probably his repertoire says it all. Four operas, all with second-hand plots. The prudent composer knew all about survival; physical threat was the worst possible augury for compositional adventure; theatrical misfortune meant retrenchment; an Opera House under siege meant a hasty exodus

At least, he got away alive.

Clari, or the Maid of Zürich

A wonderful wayward offering. not too far (at the start) from either the letter or the spirit of the pesarese but full of unexpected digressions, this Halévy italianizzato may well turn-out to be the jeu d'esprit of the year. its neglected composer enchanted to find new championship even if more-than-a-little overshadowed by its two progenitors: Mesdames Malibran et Bartoli...

the parameters are as follows:

CLARI

Jacques Fromental Halévy (1799-1862)
Libretto: Pietro Giannone
based on the play 'Clari or the Maid of Milan' by John Howard Payne
9 December 1828 Théâtre Italien, Paris
revived
Opernhaus, Zürich
23 May 2008
CAST

Clari	Cecilia Bartoli
Il Duca	John Osborn
Bettina/Adina	Eva Liebau
Germano/Il conte	Oliver Widmer
Luca/Il padre di Adina	Giuseppe Scorsin
Alberto	Carlos Chausson
Simonetta	Stefania Kaluza

Cond:. Adam Fischer

NB In authentic Malibran style inserted are 'Assisa a piè d'un salice' and the aria finale from *La tempesta* by Halévy, first staged in London in 1850