To sum up: as far as the *plot* is concerned it is Giuseppe Verdi who is hovering in the wings. Not Shakespeare with his fable of the fleeting Tudors and their problems of succession [the Henrys as Lear? Their various women – Margaret of Scotland, Bloody Mary (Regan or Goneril?) and Elizabeth (Lady Jane Grey crossed with Mary Tudor ex Queen of France as Cordelia?) and their variously horrible husbands together with the shifty Dukedoms of Albany and Burgundy and other ambitious nonentities, above all its abandon to sound and fury and nothing]. We don't have to look far to find Verdi's Gilda in Cagnoni's opera, his Lady Macbeth and her *brindisi*, her psychopathic introspection, as well as several of his old men (Foscari, Rigoletto, Boccanegra) and a vestige of the Verdian tenor. But the music mostly postdates Verdi; Cagnoni would certainly have fascinated the Bard had he been attuned to the accents of an emergent verismo! **Alexander Weatherson**

NB This is a through-composed opera true to its late nineteenth-century ethos: the numbers serve only as a guide to its articulation



Re Lear:
Might we be about to lose the ultimate fantasy opera?

I suppose we lovers of both opera and Shakespeare often speculate how Verdi's *Re Lear* might have turned out. I imagine it would be quite unlike more recent Lear operas (Reimann: a grand part for the baritone that commissioned it, but little else emerging through a storm of modernist noise - Sallinen: a brave attempt at the comic/tragic irony, but fatally encumbered with a Suomi text (it has yet to receive a performance in English, I think)). Let me hazard a guess at what each of us hears in the virtual opera house of our imaginations: Lear as misunderstood as Philip II, Regan as malignant as Eboli, Gloucester as equivocal a father as Germont, Cordelia as pure as any number of Leonoras. It is a tempting cocktail, and what's more we can 'karaoke' the main scenes in the shower (al fresco or domestic). So what happens when the news comes that a *Re Lear* by Cagnoni (from about the same period in Italian operatic history) exists: never before performed, and will be premiered in Martina Franca this summer? Do we shut it out and retire into our little fantasy 'Don Lear' or 'La Fedeltà' world? Or do we remember Cagnoni's *Don Bucefalo* and try to dismiss him (as many do Donizetti) for being 'not up to such a tragic subject'? Well, we shouldn't be so craven!

Consider the facts. Making an opera of King Lear presents some challenges: a buffo-style story (doddering father puts himself at the mercy of his grasping daughters); then there are alienating events (for

example the blinding of Gloucester onstage). The combination doesn't seem to lie comfortably within the conventions of Italian ottocento opera. To Verdi it should have presented no problems once he had tackled 'the Scottish play', Macbeth. But Verdi told Mascagni he couldn't compose *Re Lear* because *"the scene in which King Lear finds himself on the heath scared me"*. Verdi being scared of anything (even of Strepponi) seems unlikely, but I can imagine him saying that 'softly and slowly' to discourage further probing.

Encrusted with arias and ensembles an operatic version of Shakespeare's King Lear might occupy the theatre for a whole week. How might it be condensed? A good place to start is Shakespeare's source, the anonymous play 'King Leir'. In it the main plot follows similar lines until the finale where Lear and Cordelia are happily reunited. There is no sub-plot involving Gloucester, his mutinous sons by different mothers, or the disguised Kent. Motivation arises more from court politics than the dark recesses of the human psyche. This might be a more usable basis, were it not for the lack of the melodramatic confrontations that draw people to Shakespeare.

But to return to what the Italian operatic genre might lead us to expect; the thought that occurs to me is that King Lear (certainly in Shakespeare's form) lacks love interest (except the tasteless competition between the two 'bad' sisters, Goneril and Regan, over which of them gets Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester). Sentimental considerations would hardly have troubled Verdi but what would a composer such as Cagnoni make of the harridan Regan as she gleefully encourages her husband to gouge out Gloucester's eyes with his bare fingers? The challenges don't end there. What plot mechanism replaces the lust for Edmund (especially since one of the toxic sisters, Goneril, has nearly been deleted)? Finally I will mention the role of the Fool. Like most of Shakespeare's 'comics' his *'jokes'* are not very funny. The Porter in Macbeth springs to mind, and even Verdi made no attempt to musicalise him! The news that Cagnoni's Fool is a soprano fills me with both dread and fascination (a cross between Dick Whittington and his mute Cat?).

What else might Cagnoni's *Re Lear* have in store for us? Unlike the libretti conceived for Verdi (the one by Somma was recently published in facsimile) it is likely to pay only lip service to the conventions of 'number opera'. With one whole act of the play on a wind-swept heath there may be a temptation for the music to descend into Wagnerian film music. Hopefully not! For me the parts of Verdi's *Macbeth* that remain least convincing are those involving the blasted heath and the witches. Verdi's music sounds more like a Girl Guides' fireside singalong, and the most successful production I have seen (Scottish Opera, 2000) had them dressed like St Trinian's girls. One solution might be a *verismo* approach

avant la lettre, but that could easily come out worse than cine-Wagner. The Martina Franca stage in an open quadrangle should be an ideal setting for a play that relies on a thundering display of elemental forces in full cry. But when Donizetti's *Pietro il Grande* was due for its modern resurrection in 2004 modern a storm (in conflict with the constraints imposed by a live broadcast by RAI) led to the performance being abandoned part way through act 1. The ultimate irony was that those staying in Martina Franca could sit in comfort *en plein air* for the rest of the evening nursing a cup of coffee! Let us trust the management of the Valle d'Itria Festival now has greater resolve and holds a supply of overalls and galoshes close at hand.

There is really only one solution to my quandary: I should go the Puglia this summer (not a huge sacrifice when one thinks of the food). My only condition (if only I could impose it) would be that if it rains and the winds howl there must be no question of aborting the evening. Shroud the orchestra in plastic sheets and let *Lear* keep thundering on.... 'Nothing comes of nothing' he must sing lustily (it is one of Shakespeare's more nihilistic plays). With a tinge of vibrato and some surging harmonies there might still (with the help of music) be some sort of redemption for his sins within his remaining life.

Douglas M.Bennett

Teresa e Gianfaldoni Canto XXXIII (Il conte Ugolino)

Tragischer Liebestod

Viel dramatischer gelang die deutsche Erstaufführung der frühen Kantate "Teresa e Gianfaldoni" von Gaetano Donizetti, einer Geschichte um einen tragischen Liebestod. Besonders der Tenor Timothy Fallon sang mit hinreißend flexibler, hell timbrierter Stimme, opernhaft anschaulich. Aber auch der schwere Mezzo von Merit Ostermann und der balsamisch schöne Bassbariton Randall Turners (in "Canto XXXIII") hinterließen einen hervorragenden Eindruck: einer der überragenden Höhepunkte des Abends.

Theater Ingolstadt - 22 November 2008