Il Giuramento

Washington Concert Opera

May 31, 2009

I never attended a performance of an opera that reversed my opinion of the work -- never, that is, until Washington Concert Opera's revival of *Il Giuramento* on May 31 at George Washington University's Liner Auditorium. My impression of Mercadante's 'reform operas' has always been that they were more studied than heartfelt, more to be scrutinized for self-conscious structural innovations than enjoyed. But there was just enough doubt in my mind to induce me to travel to Washington for one of only a handful of American revivals since Juilliard did it in 1970.[1] Recordings I've heard of past revivals were ruined by flabby, uninspired conducting, poor singing, ill-advised cuts in the name of 'helpfully' streamlining Mercadante's work – and in some cases, a combination of all three. Having been awed by Antony Walker's fabulous conducting at Washington Concert Opera's *Maria Padilla* last fall, I hoped that under his direction I might appreciate the opera a bit more. And though I remain unconvinced that it is the equal of his wrongly maligned late operas, I was completely caught off guard by just how revelatory this performance was.

But two bits of bad news first. I alluded to the problems with local classical music radio commentator Colleen Fay's last pre-performance lecture (these are sponsored by the Guild for the Washington Concert Opera) in my previous review of their *Maria Padilla*. Once again, her program notes and lecture were riddled with inexplicable howlers, claiming for instance that Mercadante's career as an opera composer lasted only twelve years, that he 'laid down his operatic pen' after *Giuramento*, and that this was one of only two modern revivals of the opera. These assertions are so far off the mark that they seem to have been just invented from whole cloth. In the midst of trying to tell the story of the opera, she got it so hopelessly garbled – even getting the names of characters wrong - that she had to move on to another subject. A cursory internet search or a quick consultation of the *New Grove Dictionary* would have provided plenty of accurate information, certainly enough to educate an audience most of whose members never even heard of Mercadante and were most eager to learn. The Guild for the WCO urgently needs to find a new lecturer, one who will present the backgrounds and stories of their operas with the same expertise, love, and care as the WCO's conductor and artistic director. Second, it was very disheartening to hear that the WCO will (presumably due to economic pressures) produce two very standard, rather humdrum works next year *Faust* and *La Cenerentola*. Let's hope they return to their adventuresome ways soon; if any company can do works like *Il Giuramento* justice, it's this one. And the audiences' response to both *Maria Padilla* and *Il Giuramento* give the lie to the idea that such operas are box office poison. Though I haven't seen the numbers, both evenings appeared to be full houses to me.

On to the much happier subject of the performance itself. The new broom of Walker's baton swept all the accretions of past attempts aside. "With scores like this

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[1] In the 19th century, it was performed up and down the east coast in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Savannah by Teresa Truffi-Benedetti of the Astor Place Opera. A further spate of American performances occurred in 1860-61 - then silence until the 1970 Juilliard revival. Eve Queler has made the opera part of Opera Orchestra of New York's repertoire in 1981.

you just have to look at it long enough and eventually you'll see what the composer is trying to do," he told me backstage. And Walker has indeed studied the score intensely – even, as we were told by the president of the Guild for the Washington Concert Opera - consulting Mercadante's rather daunting autograph score to resolve problems in the orchestration. Under his generalship tempi were chosen with great care. Melodic lines, dynamic shading, and articulation in the orchestra were impeccable. Walker also seems to be one of the few conductors of this type of music that know how to make use of a fermata. Mercadante's splendid solo instrumental passages – particularly those for the 'cello and English horn - became almost like arias themselves, the instrumentalists wearing their hearts on their sleeves with as much Italianate sensibility as the singers. This is in stark contrast to the Orfeo recording of the 1995 Martina Franca revival, where aimless conducting turned these beautiful solo obbligato passages into longueurs. The chorus was very musical, well-rehearsed, and clearly understood and gave appropriate dramatic emphasis to the text. Just as importantly, Walker included new, beautiful, and in some cases quite florid cadenzas for his soloists. Particularly impressive was that of the second duet for Bianca and Elaisa, in which Futral and mezzo-soprano Kristina Szabo gave a thrilling coloratura fireworks display in flawless unison, without any detectable mishaps in intonation or tempo. This rich and decadent dish was generously slathered with crescendi and decrescendi, creating an emotional intensity that matched or exceeded the technical brilliance. One of the evening's biggest and most explosive outbursts of applause and shouting was the reward.

Elizabeth Futral was in radiant, silvery voice and made a thoroughly convincing Elaisa, surmounting all of its difficulties admirably. Helped along of course by Mercadante's music, this was a moving portrayal, a feat considering Rossi's leaden verses, the convoluted story, and pasteboard characters. She knew the music so well that portraying Bianca's wide-ranging emotions presented no problems. Coloratura was tossed off with pinpoint accuracy. Pianissimi were beautifully floated and seemed to envelop the listener from all sides. Her death scene was tender, restrained, and heartrending.

Much the same remarks could be applied to Kristina Szabó, a young mezzo-soprano who is making quite a name for herself. She has recently triumphed in the role of Rosina, and with her fine coloratura technique it's easy to see why. Here she uses them to great purpose. It is refreshing to see a young singer who doesn't just sing what's printed on the page, but invests each note, each word with real feeling. She has vibrant top notes and all one could wish was a more emphatic chest voice.

Donnie Ray Albert, whom I last saw as Macbeth 15 years ago (with the incomparable Linda Roark-Strummer as his Lady) has seemingly not aged a bit, and offered a suave and chillingly imperious portrayal of Manfredo, a character who is something of a cipher at best. This is a singer who has it all – including the highest notes in the baritone range. The audience particularly thrilled at his cabaletta.

Which brings me to the only minor disappointment among the principals, up-and-coming tenor James Valenti, the Viscardo. One cannot complain about Valenti's voice, which is the real thing – beautiful and Italianate with a very nice vibrato - and certainly not about his leading-man-good looks. It was rather his commitment to the score itself, which was so outstanding in the other principals, that was disappointing. Glued to his score for most of the performance, he sang everything with the same emotion – which was not much. I wondered if he was perhaps a bit indisposed, but no

announcement was made. It was only in the cabaletta of his second act aria that he really go, stepping away from his music stand and delivering a rip-roaring performance capped with a thrilling sustained top C.

This performance – and the audience's reaction – gives the lie to a subterranean assumption that underlies most commentary on the score – that the bel canto composers are only to be lauded for those aspects of their work which moved *away* from bel canto and toward a more modern aesthetic. Everyone makes much of Mercadante's stated rejection of the cabaletta form in his famous letter in which he outlines his 'reform' project. Yet the fact remains that the score does have three arias with cabalettas – and interestingly it was these that elicited the loudest and most clamorous applause. *Giuramento* is a bel canto score through, formal innovations notwithstanding. Walker embraced its true nature and in so doing revealed what many others have gotten completely wrong about this score. Rather than allowing the opera to be what it is, they tried to treat it as a middle-period Verdi opera eschewing cadenzas, excising anything too repetitive in the cadences and cabaletta repeats, and casting the opera with voices that had little in common with those for which it was written. Hearing this opera done with authentic performance practices was a truly thrilling experience.

Dan Foley

Luglio nella foresta nera con Vaccai : *La sposa di Messina*

Bad Wildbad, Kurhaus (18 luglio)

Fulvio Stefano Lo Presti

Nicola Vaccai (1790-1848), compositore marchigiano stimato da Rossini, è oggi, a dispetto del non indegno lascito musicale, nient'altro che un... noto dimenticato. Si tratta proprio di colui, la cui scena della tomba in *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825), fu da Maria Malibran preferita a quella dei *Capuleti e Montecchi* belliniani e da lei (e in seguito da altre) sostituita in quest'ultima opera (la scena conclusiva di Vaccai si può ascoltare oggi in CD sia nell'edizione completa di *Giulietta e Romeo* che in appendice a una recente incisione dei *Capuleti e Montecchi*).

La ricorrenza del 250° anniversario della nascita di Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) è stata l'insperata occasione della riapparizione, sia pure in forma di concerto, della *Sposa di Messina*, quindicesima e penultima opera del musicista di Tolentino. Male accolta alla Fenice di Venezia il 2 marzo 1839 per un concorso di circostanze sfavorevoli, non era stata mai più ripresa. Si deve soprattutto all'appassionato patrocinio del musicologo neozelandese Jeremy Commons, che ha presentato l'opera di Vaccai, se, per festeggiare il compleanno di Schiller, è stata eseguita *La Sposa di Messina* nella revisione di Florian Bauer.

Tra le tragedie schilleriane, che formano un solido pilastro del teatro moderno, *La Sposa di Messina o I Fratelli nemici* (1803) è considerata una delle meno riuscite. Con essa il drammaturgo e poeta tedesco si volle cimentare a imitare la tragedia greca, guardando in particolare all'*Edipo Re* di Sofocle. Ma in Schiller non è il Fato a determinare i destini degli umani bensì il gioco della loro libera volontà.

In una Sicilia medievale e remota (con l'ambientazione non meno vaga e approssimativa di altre opere "siciliane": *Tancredi, Bianca e Fernando, Il Pirata, Il*