G · ROSSINI ·

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At our 2008 AGM in Bilbao, our Chairman reviewed the state of operatic revival. He noted that we have virtually run out of Bellini as well as Rossini, and that there are only three Donizetti operas still to be revived. Hence we are witnessing a shift to Pacini, Mercadante, Coccia etc., with single-composer festivals such as Wildbad and Pesaro experiencing a "crisis of repertoire". What Pesaro has done this year is indicate a possible way out from this crisis by mounting a production of an opera already exhumed, but in a revised version.

Zelmira premiered at the San Carlo, Naples, in February 1822, with a cast including Colbran in the title role, David as Ilo, Nozzari as Antenore and Ambrogi as Polidoro. He added a very beautiful scene for Emma, the heroine's attendant, for Vienna in April of that year, to suit the talents of Fanny Eckerlin. The Opera Rara recording uses the Naples score plus this Vienna aria. Rossini made a third version for the Théâtre Italien, Paris in 1826, with Pasta and Rubini in the Colbran and David roles, and it was this that Pesaro offered this summer.

The aria for Emma remains and there are some relatively minor changes to recitatives. The major changes occur at the end of the opera. Zelmira loses her aria finale, which is transformed into a trio for her, Ilo and Polidoro, and in compensation is given a whole, dramatic, "new" aria just before the rescue and final happy ending. Philip Gossett's fascinating introduction to the Critical Edition gives chapter and verse in great detail. The recitative for Pasta's new aria has been reconstructed from alterations and inserts to the autograph, but there is no trace of the new aria itself. However it has been possible to reconstruct it from manuscripts in the Fonds Michotte in the Brussels Conservatory, the Naples Conservatory, and surprisingly, the score of *Ermione*. The first section of the aria, "Da te spero, o ciel clemente", is newly composed, beautiful and florid in not very different manner from the original it replaces. But the very dramatic, declamatory, coloratura-free cabaletta "Dei, vindici ognor voi siete" is largely taken from *Ermione*'s final scene, hence the inverted commas above.

The trio that ends the opera is based on Zelmira's original cabaletta, but it starts with two lines of the original aria "Riedi al soglio", the second of which has altered text. It then cuts to the words and music of the original cabaletta divided up between the three principals. Thus some of Zelmira's fearsome roulades are now given to Ilo, including her final grand flourish, which is assigned "Rubini" in the autograph. At Pesaro it was brilliantly taken by Juan Diego Florez, who however ducked the challenge of a new preceding phrase that starts with a thrice repeated alternation of high E♭ and high D! Gossett suggests that "Rubini may well have insisted he be permitted to share centre stage with Pasta at the final curtain".

It was certainly interesting to hear both the new music and the adaptation of the old music. *Zelmira* is so rarely performed that it makes good festival fare in either edition. Is the new version an improvement? My own opinion, based on a comparison between the Opera Rara recording and two performances at Pesaro is "no". Firstly, when Zelmira launches the Paris finale with "Riedi al soglio" she sounds as though she is beginning another large-scale aria, not surprisingly as in the Naples version that is exactly what it is. But coming immediately after the new aria for Pasta it sounds out of place, a momentary jolt. Secondly, the *Ermione* music is too deranged, too epic for the gentler Zelmira. (Do I say this just because I know where it comes from? Perhaps an innocent ear would hear it differently?) Thirdly, dividing up the original cabaletta between three characters produces an effect similar to the vaudeville finale to *Il barbiere*, and makes it seem too light-weight, an effect not counteracted by the

(opposite) "All the stars" Bill Ashbrook (4th from left) and colleagues, Torre del Lago 2002

music's repeat. The sense of vocal rivalry produced by the alternating voices, fun though it was to hear Florez and the admirable American high mezzo Kate Aldrich vying with each other, also produced an effect out of keeping with the rest of the opera – somehow it was the wrong sort of relief from the extended horrors that precede it.

And of horrors we had plenty. *Zelmira* is set on war-torn Lesbos, and the director Giorgio Barberio Corsetti took every opportunity to remind us that war is brutal and bloody. Much use was made of a mirror that reflected what was both on stage and an intermittent commentary of extraneous action below it. When it changed position it wobbled disturbingly. When its images changed, or the actors below dragged dead bodies or bathed blood-stained corpses, they did so at just the wrong moments, distracting from the music, the singers and the drama. I could go on. Apparently Corsetti was loudly booed on the first night, and no-one I talked to had a good word for his efforts. However, the festival's Sovrintendente, Gianfranco Mariotti, praised him highly in a newspaper interview, so I suspect he will return.

Of the other singers Gregory Kunde and Mirco Palazzi as the villains and Marianna Pizzolato as Emma made fine impressions. Only Alex Esposito as Polidoro disappointed somewhat, failing to match Florez in the fioriture of their wonderful Act II duet, though elsewhere he was as moving as the production allowed him to be. The musical direction of Roberto Abbado was excellent; his tempi rightly made no concessions to the length of the evening. It is a long evening, and yes, the plot creaks. Zelmira's repeated inability to explain the truth defies credibility. But the beauties of the score and almost all the singing justified it. Act I lasts almost two hours. Is it the longest single act in all Rossini? Wagner makes us sit longer without a break on only 5 occasions (*Parsifal* Act 1, *Die Meistersinger* Act 3, *Götterdämmerung* Prologue and Act 1, *Das Rheingold* and *Der Fliegende Holländer* in the 1-act version). When (or rather, if) Rossini made his famous remark "Monsieur Wagner a des beaux moments, mais des mauvais quarts d'heures", could he have forgotten *Zelmira*? Not that I think *Zelmira* has even one dud 15-minute period, but concise it isn't.

The other two operas on offer were *La scala di seta* and *Le Comte Ory*, both in the Teatro Rossini (*Zelmira* was in the Adriatic Arena). Alas, both were compromised. The former just didn't sparkle under the conducting of Claudio Scimone, who seemed to love it to death – it was just too slow – and who sanctioned (instigated?) an over-elaborate continuo whose descriptive qualities would have made a good accompaniment to a silent film, but here over-stretched the recitatives. Decent(ish) singing; the Giulia, Olga Peretyatko, seemed another singer in her concert. There was a brilliant set, but too many extras doing "business". The singers acted well and provided you ignored the basic non-sequitur of the updating it was fun despite the conducting. For *Ory*, we were in a hotel where the guests were playing out an old mediaeval tale. So at a stroke, out went any sexual danger and half the fun. Good singing and playing. The Ory, Yijie Shi, had the notes, but too much of a whine in the voice; the Adèle, María José Morena, almost all the agility. Paulo Carignani conducted splendidly, coping, on the evening I was there, with the absence of Lorenzo Regazzo as the tutor and a replacement who with a bit more rehearsal could have been fine. Both operas had their mirrors, though less damagingly than in *Zelmira*. In *Ory* it hardly mattered one way or the other; in *La scala* it served only to show that the singers were not in fact climbing a ladder!

Despite all the reservations, Pesaro and Rossini remain a delight. Next year we are promised *Sigismondo*, *Demetrio e Polibio*, and *La Cenerentola*, the first at least, in a new Critical Edition.

