Il ritorno di Mayr

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Which of them, do you suppose, would have been most surprised – Ulysses or Simon Mayr – on finding himself in *Japan* instead of Ithaca? Whatever could have happened? A defective compass? Something gone wrong with the satnav? An ill wind? Maybe they took Ulysses' cry on landing too much to heart: '*Ma dove son?... Che miro?... È un sogno il mio?... Un errore?…'*

Il ritorno d'Ulisse was composed for the carnival festivities of La Fenice in Venice on 26 December 1808, an *azione eroica per musica in due atti* it had a decidedly retro plot in those days of Napoleonic realpolitik and came and went with the speed of light. Johann Simon ("*Gio. Simeone Mayr"* he is called in the libretto) was then at his apogee, with an almost uncontested dominance of the Italian musical stage and spouting scores large and small in all directions. The degree of wastage was astonishing, within the twelve-month stint of 1808 he had worked on four operas: one comedy, one *burletta* and two full-length serious scores spread between Rome and Venice not one of which made any great impact. *Il ritorno d'Ulisse,* the last of this quartet, a substantial score, extended, impassioned, impressive, composed for two of the greatest voices of the day, was never ever revived anywhere afterwards, indeed not anywhere in the world until now. Happily its score has survived in the unrivalled Mayr archive in the Città Alta of Bergamo.

But whatever dreams of glory its hero may have had on returning to his homeland, Mayr could never have cooked-up the parameters of the opera's return to *his* – Samurai, Kimonos, Kabuki and Hari kiri were on the Regensburg menu and surely as indigestible and as remote as possible from the cuisine of nearby Mendorf even if served-up like pasta (everyone sang in intelligible Italian). His *ritorno in patria* was so compromised visually that it was necessary to detach sight from sound almost throughout.

How long will it be before designers begin to note that the settings they propose have nothing whatsoever to do with the *sound world* of the operas they present to the public? The Bavarian master's idiom was never less than that of his roots, his day and his age, whereas his great rival to come, Rossini, could lay siege to the castle, Mayr would be found already inside, playing those wind instruments that colour his music, accents specific to an enlightenment culture, recognisable in every bar, immutable and precise. No one doubts

the potency of Greek legends, the *story* of Ulysses's return may well have the universality required to apply it anywhere in the world forever and a day but this music – in its time-warp, Bavarian-Viennese-Venetian - frankly does not. And even though incontestably universal in its human passions, in this visual and dramatic setting for his homecoming it became as absurd and irrelevant as any Ithaca in exotic extremis.

Regensburg (formerly Ratisbon) was the city in which the twenty-three year old Mayr had first put himself before the public, printing there his very first songs, the twelve *Lieder beim Klavier zu singen* in 1786 and this altogether welcome exhumation of his *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* was a highly imaginative project on the part of the sparkling Theater am Bismarckplatz, confided to Anders Wiklund and Ricordi Munich. There was never the slightest hint of betrayal – far from it. Certainly the stilted language and situations of Luigi Prividali's damp squib of a text provoke a dollop of Rice Wine - it was the second text he had supplied to Mayr the first being *Zamori ossia L'eroe dell'Indie* of 1804 written to open the Sanquirico opera house at Piacenza, but this is a far less piquant offering, nothing is instantly striking in the well-worn plot except for the outsize depiction of Penelope, the abandoned queen torn between hope and despair. She, here, momentously, becomes a prototype for future operatic consumption, both in Italy and elsewhere. The opera has intemperately moved the focus (the main course) from Ulysses to his *wife.*

Though he had the famous tenor Andrea Nozzari as his original Ulysses it is to the original Penelope in the person of Lorenza Correa – one of a constellation of Spanish divas who were to dominate Italian Opera in the coming years – that Mayr directed his most moving music. This shift to the *primadonna* was both new and pivotal, Penelope found herself literally hemmed-in by the macho studs dear to Napoleon (his opera of choice was Paër's *Achille* of 1801) thus she is not only being threatened by her husband and her cross-dressing suitor but also by Hercules [*Ercole in Lidia*] of 1803, by the conquistador Alonso [*Alonso e Cora*] also 1803, by Zamori, the Indian hero (whose turmeric throne failed him in a revamp as *Palmira* in 1806) and by the Emperor Trajan [*Traiano all'Eufrate*] in a cantata in 1807. (*Rousseauesque* pairings like *Eraldo ed Emma* of 1805 and the masterly *Adelasia ed Aleramo* of 1806 were nostalgic glances at an eighteenth-century mode).

Penelope is not yet a fully-fledged *romantic vittima,* that is still to come, she has "all the threads in her hands" but instead of spending his time tormenting her suitors (one only remains in this opera)

Ulisse devotes all his efforts to tormenting her! This is truly a portent. She has become centre stage and is now the causus belli of the plot. To this extent the 1808 *Il ritorno d'Ulisse,* even if it remained so briefly under their noses, with its relentless attack upon Penelope struck an important major chord upon which his contemporaries would improvise hugely for decades. (Rossini indeed, with a list of *vittime* of his own and a Spanish diva in his pocket, was not long to follow suit)



Lorenza Correa: "Penelope" in 1808

The plot of the opera has many complexities that escaped the Regensburg edition, I fear, and all the mysteries, invocations and arcane rituals dear to Mayr have been treated like instant noodles,

without texture or flavour, and went down in one gulp. Arriving on the shores of Ithaca amid rumours of his wife's betrayal *Ulisse* adopts a false identity, and as he is so much changed - bearded and haggard, after his long journey - *Penelope* fails to recognise him (there is no moribund dog to do the job for her). His faithful old *Leucippo* (baritone) however (played at Regensburg by a smart young Japanese warrior) has no problem at all with recognition (!) and hands over his sword. The hated rival for the abandoned queen's hand - *Plistene, Re dei Molossi* who is soon to be confronted at the point of a (Samurai) sword - has a curiously decorative role both here as in the original production, sung at the Venice *prima* by a soprano-in-travesty (Napoleon disliked castrati) Adelia D'Almani, must have had an enormous vocal range to make up for her lack of six pack, a muscular lacuna made worse in this Regensburg staging by the improbable costumes her modern successor was obliged to wear.

On his first real encounter (in an asymmetrical duetto) with his wife, noting with interest her unhappiness (and ignoring her expressions of loyalty) *Ulisse* turns up the pressure by telling her not only that he is "*dead"* (Act 1 Sc.VI) but that he died "*of grief*"; this has a highly gratifying impact upon his unfortunate spouse and the first act ends in a satisfying agony (*concertato*) of remorse, indecision, reproach, rejection and impotent fury.

In the second act the ball is firmly in *Penelope*'s court, she, it transpires, alone must decide who is King: '*Della Regina i voti attende il Ciel'* (Act 2 Sc.VIII). She opts to appeal to the Oracle for advice; *Asteria,* a zany priestess-seer (soprano), goes into a trance but comes up only with oracular demands for blood. The queen despairs and intervenes helplessly as husband and suitor prepare to fight. At the very height of the combat, however, the Heavens open and the goddess *Minerva* (soprano) appears to put *Ulisse* back on the throne of Ithaca/Japan; thus the comedy is ended in the only way to be expected in those years of the king-making Parisian despot - with an edict imposed from above. Everyone lives happily ever after, even Plistene, or so it would seem.



Eun-Joo Park: "Penelope" in 2010

The Regensburg performance was well prepared. Strings of beautifully-crafted arias unroll immediately after the opening storm, each one ever-more subtly coloured and often enough brilliantly audacious under Mayr's flamboyant usage of the most remarkable woodwind writing imaginable. They have none of the astringent rhythmic precision of Rossini of course but have an immediacy and emotive contour that is another side to the dramatic coin. The *Penelope* of Eun-Joo Park rose to the challenge with a fine vocal stamina and command, from the complicated duet with *Plistene* - which opens her role - onwards, the demands made on her are continuous and relentless, her anguished cantabile '*Nelle mie pene estreme'* (Act 1 Sc.X) with its bassoon accompaniment was graciously shaped and delivered, as too was her succession of desperate protests, appeals, denials, prayers and invocations - all very convincing and touching and very well taken. Gesche Geier invested the bellicose role of *Plistene* with aplomb, with no visual support whatsoever for her military pretensions, she made an excellent case for her prowess purely vocally, the ferocious range and florid fervour of her cabaletta con coro '*Sempre indomito e feroce'* (Act1 Sc VIII) really lived up to its content. *Ulisse* is curiously sidelined vocally in this *azione eroica,* indeed, quite as much as in the plot itself where he is unable to impress anyone on the stage (except *Leucippo*) with his claim to the throne. At least here in Regensburg a good case was made for his heroic status by his sabre-wielding proficiency in the martial arts, a role originally

typecast for a lethargic Nozzari this *baritenore Ulisse* was taken with conviction by the lean and athletic Enrico Lee. *Leucippo* (Jung-Hwan Choi), and his mirror-image antagonist the *basso profondo Taltibio* (sung by Sung-Heon Ha), were both imposing; as *Asteria/Minerva* (Bianca Koch) had to find her identity while endlessly sidetracked by unhelpful costume changes. There was an odd dancer who added nothing to the décor or the appetite of the spectators, and though the conducting of Tetsuro Ban was often rather summary the orchestral *professori* rose well to a continuously remarkable succession of *obbligati* of a wickedly testing kind.

So what *did* Mayr find on his return to his homeland in 2010? An elegant score, some authentic passion, many poignant situations, but only a coded contribution to the indistinct years before his masterwork *Medea in Corinto*. His loyal Regensburg has added to his fame, but the challenge such long lost operas make to modern revival has actually been ducked by unwarranted exoticism on this momentous occasion and in no way resolved or exorcised.