BERGAMO BASSES AND BARITONES
MARINO FALIERO AND *BELISARIO* AT THE 2020 DONIZETTI FESTIVAL

Charles Jernigan, December 2020

This year's Donizetti Festival was held on line. Below, Charles Jernigan reviewed two of the main works featured: *Marino Faliero* and *Belisario*. Information and subscriptions (tickets) to watch the streaming are available at https://www.donizetti.org/en/festival-donizetti/donizetti-web-tv/.

Marino Faliero and *Belisario* are two of the most interesting operas among the dozens of unknown or little known titles in Donizetti's oeuvre. The former was premiered in March, 1835, in Paris while the latter came in February,1836, in Venice. They bracket Donizetti's most famous tragedy, Lucia di Lammermoor, which premiered in September, 1835, in Naples. One of the most interesting things about *Marino Faliero* is that it was performed as part of an unofficial contest of three operas intended to introduce the three most prominent Italian composers of the time, Bellini, Donizetti and Saverio Mercadante, to a Parisian audience. Rossini was the ring master, engineering invitations to the composers for new operas to be presented at the Thèâtre Italien. Bellini came first, with *I puritani* (January, 1835), which turned out to be an overwhelming hit which has stayed in the repertory to this day. Donizetti was second, two months later, with *Marino Faliero*; Mercadante's *I briganti* was performed a year later in March, 1836. Donizetti's opera was successful, and it enjoyed many performances throughout the nineteenth century. *I briganti*, like the others, went to London with the same stellar cast which had premiered it, but then it disappeared, not to be revived until the innovative Wildbad Festival brought it back to life (and issued a recording) in 2012.

Marino Faliero

The pandemic plan for *Marino Faliero* was to stage it in the orchestra seating section (platea) of the Teatro Donizetti, with the idea that a limited audience would sit in partial isolation, socially distanced, in the boxes around and above the playing space. Opening night was planned for live broadcast on Italian TV (RAI). The other work, *Belisario*, was to be in concert form in the same theater, with Placido Domingo adding the title character to his immense repertory. But a resurgence of the virus in the fall made a live audience of any kind impossible and Domingo canceled due to "health reasons" (although he had contracted the virus in the summer and recovered). Rehearsals were undoubtedly underway by the time the government banned live audiences at theatre events, so performances went ahead as planned, on broadcast television and streamed to a worldwide audience who bought a "ticket" for 59 euro to watch all three festival operas as many times as desired. Roberto Frontali replaced Domingo as the title character in *Belisario*; Javier Camarena, scheduled to sing Fernando in *Marino Faliero* also canceled, replaced at the last moment by Michele Angelini. In spite of it all, the show went on.

Marino Faliero was a Venetian diplomat, commander and member of the ruling councils of patricians, who became Doge in 1354, before being arrested and beheaded for treason in 1355

after a failed coup attempted to overthrow the patrician aristocracy and install Faliero as an all powerful prince rather than as elected Doge. Today, his portrait in the Doge's Palace is painted over by a black shroud. The execution scene was painted by Delacroix in 1827 and the story dramatized by Byron in 1820 and by Casimir Delavigne in 1835. Giovanni Emanuele Bidera based his libretto on these plays. Although there is a love triangle between the elderly Faliero's young wife Elena and Fernando, the Doge's nephew, the main thrust of the plot is political with the patricians represented by the arrogant young Steno. Steno, a member of the powerful Council of Forty, insults the artisans and workers, led by Israele, Captain of the Arsenal, and more specifically, he has leveled insults against Elena, he Doge's wife. Elena's lover, Fernando, decides he must leave Venice to save her honor. When Steno is insufficiently punished, the outraged Faliero is convinced by Israele to join with the conspirators in an uprising against the aristocracy. Steno kills Fernando in a duel and the conspiracy is betrayed to the patricians. Israele and Faliero are arrested and condemned to death. Elena confesses her love affair to Faliero in the end, and he, facing death, forgives her. The opera ends as Elena despairs as she hears the axe fall.

The libretto is diffuse, but it provides powerful scenes and confrontations, especially for the Doge. Perhaps its greatest interest is its emphasis on quasi historical political maneuvers, foreshadowing many a Verdi tragedy, especially Don Carlos and Simon Boccanegra—itself the tale of another tragic Doge, this time of the Maritime Republic of Genoa. The illicit love affair between the Doge's wife and his nephew is almost secondary, but it personalizes and deepens the political tragedy. In other words, Bidera and Donizetti are doing what Verdi would do so successfully thirty years later, combining a private story and a public one.

Another unusual feature of *Marino Faliero* is that the central figure is a bass, not the tenor or the soprano. Almost as important is the baritone, Israele. The tonal and narrative weight is on them. Donizetti was very influential in the gradual definition of the baritone voice in opera, as distinct from the bass, and we can see that going on here. It certainly helped that Donizetti had, arguably, the greatest singers of the era at his disposal—the famous "Puritani Quartet": Luigi Lablache (Faliero), Antonio Tamburini (Israele), Giovanni Rubini (Fernando) and Giuli Grisi (Elena). They premiered all three works in the "opera contest" of 1835-36 and took the productions to London after the Paris premieres.

Bergamo promised a sort of modern equivalent, at least in part, with Javier Camarena scheduled to take the excruciatingly high-lying Rubini tenor role, Michele Pertusi as the Doge, Bogdan Baciu as Israele and Francesca Dotto as Elena. Camerena bailed with three weeks to go and was replaced by Michele Angelini. It was a solid cast and a well sung opera. Angelini was perhaps a little nervous at first, and understandably tentative, but he was splendid by the time he got to his second aria, replete with several high Ds. Riccardo Frizza, once again proving himself as THE Donizetti conductor of our day, was superb in driving and shaping the score. It was a satisfying musical performance.

Unfortunately, the staging was one of the worst imaginable, even making allowances for the requirements of the pandemic. An erector set of scaffolding with metal stairs and platforms was

constructed in the platea (sets by Marco Rossi), and the singers came and went on stairs, stood on the platforms and scarcely interacted with each other at all. Mimes (figuranti) writhed and performed various maneuvers like slow motion gymnasts, around, above and below the singers for no apparent purpose, distracting from the drama and the music. Even with projected subtitles (only in Italian) and an explanatory libretto in one's lap, it was impossible to follow a coherent story in what should be compelling historical drama. This production completely obfuscated the opera when it should be the sacred duty of stage directors to clarify what is going on for the audience. Stefano Ricci was credited with direction of this travesty.



Erector Set with Murky Lighting



The Giant Squid Sings





Two further shots of the staging taken from https://operawire.com/donizetti-opera-2020-review-marino-faliero/

The costumes, by Gianluca Sbicca, were ridiculous. Angelini wore a baseball cap as if he had wandered into the opera by accident. The figuranti sometimes wore huge headdresses of giant squid and fish, and sometimes the singers were forced to don them too. As these mute figures "swam" through the erector set structure, it seemed that the director's concept was to place the whole drama underneath the murky Venetian lagoon. Later in the production, singers (including the "dead" Fernando) were attached to strings and manipulated as if they were marionettes. Vapid, over obvious symbolism! Nor did the shadowy, often dark lighting, by Alessandro Carletti help.

To make matters worse, this production was broadcast live over RAI TV, and the video production (by Arnalda Canali) aided and abetted the awful stage direction. After decades of

telecasting opera, one would think that a competent television director who knew something about music could be found. The camera often focused on those ridiculous figuranti writhing around the set in their masks while the singers were in the throes of trying to express the intense emotions in the libretto and the score. Thus tragedy became farce. If anyone new to opera tried to watch this on live television, they would never look at another opera again.

Belisario

The concert performance of *Belisario* was in a different world. This opera, premiering in Venice eleven months after *Marino Faliero*, is another work which features a historical figure involved in political events joined to a personal tragedy involving his wife (Antonina) and his daughter (Irene). Once again the opera's focus is on the lower end of the vocal spectrum—a baritone.

That title character is Belisarius, the great general of Byzantium in the sixth century under the rule of Justinian. Historically, Belisarius reconquered much of Europe about a hundred years after the fall of the Roman Empire to the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. His image is probably immortalized in the famous mosaic of Justinian and his court in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna. The libretto, by Salvadore Cammarano is based, like *Marino Faliero*, on a German play which was translated and produced in Naples in 1826. The libretto specifies that the action takes place in 580 AD, however since Belisarius died in 565, that would seem to be a better date, after Belisarius' campaigns in Italy and the Caucasus had subdued the Barbarian tribes in Italy and the Caucasus. He returns to Byzantium in triumph in Act I, and frees his captives, the Alani, except for Alamiro, an Alani warrior who asks to stay with him. Belisario, who feels a special tie to Alamiro, agrees, but he is soon accused by his wife Antonina of parricide. Convinced by a dying slave that Belisario has had their own son killed, she has initiated a false conspiracy to bring him down. As the act ends, Belisario is arrested and convicted because of her testimony and forged papers. In the second act, he has been blinded in prison through the intentional misreading of Justinian's orders, and the angry Alamiro promises revenge. When Belisario emerges, he is released to the custody of his daughter Irene, who promises to lead him and care for him. In the final act, Alamiro is leading an army of former captives to attack Byzantium and avenge Belisario, but the latter is horrified by Alamiro's plan to wage war on his homeland. It is soon revealed (via an amulet) that Alamiro is really Belisario's son. Belisario leads the Greek army one last time against the Barbarians and triumphs, but he is mortally wounded. Antonina confesses that her testimony has been false to Justinian, and when the dying Belisario is brought in, she begs him for pardon, but he dies before he can forgive her. The opera ends in total tragedy: Belisario dead, his children Alamiro and Irene horrified and Antonina left alone, a reviled outcast.

The concise libretto and the powerful characters led Donizetti to compose one of his most trenchant scores. Each character gets a major aria full of powerful emotions and there are father/daughter and father/son duets which presage Verdi. Particularly touching is the duet between Belisario and his strong willed daughter Irene. Also noteworthy is Alamiro's Act II aria with its martial cabaletta, "Trema, Bisanzio."

The Bergamo concert performance was very strong; it did not suffer the indignity of a production like that of Faliero. The singers "acted" their roles with facial expressions and occasional gestures, which added to the emotional impact. Once again Riccardo Frizza led a taut performance of the Donizetti Opera Orchestra and Chorus, which sang with masks on. Frizza got all the excitement of the martial choruses and rhythms, and conducted with sensitivity in the cantabiles of the central characters, all of whom suffer strong, but very different emotions—powerful and then pathetic for Belisario; poignant for Irene, a strong woman who dresses as a man to lead her father in exile; and angry fury turned to tragic despair for Antonina, who gets to end the opera with a furious cabaletta.

Kudos to (especially) Roberto Frontali, who took over the lead role at short notice. He is a master of smooth legato; Mr. Domingo was not missed. Frontali was well balanced by Celso Abelo in the high-flying tenor role of Alamiro. The opera hinges, however, on Belisario's relationship to the two women—the angry, vindictive Antonina and the loving strength of Irene. There was fine contrast in the mezzo voice of Annalisa Stroppa in the latter role and soprano Carmela Remigio as the bitter wife. Remigio was in fact the very picture of bitterness with her opening aria "Sin la tomba è a me negata" and she ate the scenery (had there been any) in her final cabaletta "Egli è spento, e del perdono." Perhaps the two most touching parts were the duets between Belisario and Irene ("Ah se potassi piangere") and between Belisario and Alamiro ("Quando di sangue tinto").



In all, these two operas, centered in the lower voices, and featuring political figures whose deeds on the larger stage of history intertwine with the personal and familial, are fascinating works even if they are not quite masterpieces at the level of the opera which came about half way between them, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Both make fine listening through the godsend of streaming in this tragic year of 2020, but only one bears watching.

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