THE 2023 ROSSINI OPERA FESTIVAL, PESARO

Charles Jernigan, August 2023

This year's Rossini Opera Festival is the first we have attended since 2019, before the Pandemic. It renewed our love for the composer from Pesaro (and his hometown)—a love which goes back to 1985 and our first opera here in the Festival, *Maometto II,* with an unforgettable cast including Chris Merritt, Cecilia Gasdia, Lucia Valentina-Terrani and Samuel Ramey as Maometto. We have returned in most of the years since, seeing productions of all of Rossini's 39 operas along with cantatas, religious pieces, instrumental work and songs. Pesaro has not changed much in all those years, but the performance of Rossini and the likelihood of seeing some of his rarer works has changed. The fact that so many of his works have entered the repertory or are at least seen from time to time worldwide is due in large part to the programs which continue to train singers to perform his music, once considered too difficult for all but a handful of singers—and the careful scholarly work of creating critical editions of all of his music carried on at Pesaro. Authentic performances of Rossini were once rare, but no longer, and the world has recovered a major artistic voice.

Eduardo e Cristina

This year the ROF scheduled the last of his 39 operas to be played here, although the 28th in order of composition, the *centone Eduardo e Cristina.* Some publicists would like to have us believe that ROF's performances represent a modern world premiere, but *Eduardo e Cristina* has been previously performed in our day, both times at the Rossini Festival in Bad Wildbad, Germany. The first time (1997) was a staged performance and the true modern premiere of the work; twenty years later, in 2017, Gianluigi Gelmetti led a sterling performance there in concert form. In 2023, ROF finally took up the work after years of seeming ambivalence about performing it—while many other operas have been performed numerous times. The musical performance was based on a new critical edition, which will soon be in print.

Rossini himself did not have much hope for *Eduardo* before its first performance in Venice on 24 April, 1819. His friend Giuseppe Cortesi who was the manager of the Teatro San Benedetto there had begged him to write a new opera for the theatre. Cortesi had an ulterior motive too: he wanted to offer his daughter Carolina the opportunity to debut in a new Rossini work. Rossini agreed, but 1819 was an exceptionally busy year for him, beginning with the definitive revision of *Mosé* and it would continue with *La donna del lago, Ermione* and *Bianca e Faliero* as well as *Eduardo e Cristina. Ermione* had premiered less than a month before *Eduardo* and *Ricciardo e Zoraida* had debuted four months earlier, in December, 1818. So it is not surprising that the beleaguered composer resorted to earlier music for the Venetian opera; that is what makes *Eduardo* a *centone* or a pastiche—the use of existing music set to a new text. Obviously, Rossini chose music which he thought was good even though most of it came from two recent failures, *Adelaide di Borgogna* and *Ermione* (with significant sections from *Ricciardo e Zoraide* and *Mosé)*—all of which had been unheard in Venice at the time. The new opera would use an existing libretto too, one by Giovanni Schmidt for Stefano Pavesi's 1810 *Odoardo e Cristina.* Schmidt's libretto was tinkered with by two other writers who worked with Rossini, Andrea Leone Tottola and Count Gherardo Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini, who recast Schmidt's words to fit the already existing music. If there is truth in the story, no one was more surprised than Rossini when the

quickly fashioned new/old opera turned out to be a hit in spite of some grumbling that Rossini was pulling a fast one by using old music.

The truth is that *Eduardo e Cristina* has a lot going for it: a simple story, affectingly told and spectacularly good music, with plenty of opportunity for good singers. The story takes place in Stockholm where King Carlo's Swedish forces are fighting the Russians; Eduardo (a mezzo pants role) is head of the Swedish army. Unbeknownst to Carlo, he is secretly married to the King's daughter Cristina and they have a son, Gustavo, who has been kept hidden. When Eduardo returns as a conquering hero, Carlo offers the hand of his daughter to an ally, a fellow royal, Giacomo, Prince of Scotland. Cristina is horrified, and when her son rushes into her arms before her father, she is forced to admit that Gustavo is hers. Shocked, Carlo condemns his daughter to prison and death when Eduardo enters and declares himself the father. Now both are condemned by the outraged Carlo. Cristina, though imprisoned, refuses an offer by Giacomo to marry her and adopt Gustavo if she will renounce Eduardo; the King will have Eduardo executed to make way for the marriage. Suddenly the Russian forces threaten anew and Atlei, a friend of Eduardo, releases him from prison. He in turn frees Cristina and goes to lead the Swedish forces to new victory, saving King and kingdom. Carlo finally forgives both Eduardo and Cristina in time for a happy ending.

The ROF production by Stefano Poda so completely ignores the story that it is impossible to say that the Rossini Festival performed this particular opera. The music was there, sometimes ably performed, sometimes not so much, but whatever we saw on stage, it was not *Eduardo e Cristina*. That opera will have to wait again for its Pesaro debut. Instead we saw Poda's narcissism and angst portrayed through mimes, dancers and acrobats, almost entirely nude much of the time and in whitish body paint. They formed and reformed various poses around the singers, who—fortunately—kept their clothes on. Large metallic box structures were moved around on stage too by the guys in jock straps and the women in string bikini bottoms. A huge whitish backdrop displayed shattered pieces of classical sculpture and large glassed in boxes containing what seemed to be sculptures of men and women lying together formed the sides of the stage. Poda designed the costumes, lighting and sets and directed and choreographed the whole.

I don't know what it meant. In an interview with the Bologna newspaper, Poda declared that realism is dead and that stage directors who update opera to make them seem more contemporary or who have a "concept" are old fashioned. What he proposes, he says, is a dreamscape suggesting the conflicts behind the story, which is itself trivial and not worth telling. He wrote that his production is a kind of art installation expressing conflict and separation anxiety. Maybe, but his nude dancers and mimes reminded me of zombies from some Hollywood epic like *The Night of the Living Dead.* His chorus, clad in long white coats looked like refugees from a Star Wars movie. Poda may have meant to reveal deeply psychological currents through a kind of nightmarish dreamscape, but it came across as crap, unrelated to the opera, even though his troupe included talented acrobats and dancers.

The musical performances only partially rescued the puerile nonsense on stage. Anastasia Bartoli has a very large voice and she managed the coloratura, but her tone was often metallic and sometimes she just seemed loud. Enea Scala as King Carlo sadly shouted even more, and he was clearly inadequate in his big aria, imported from *Ermione*. Well sung, it is a tour de force; poorly sung, it is just long. Daniela Barcelona as Eduardo seemed tired to me, although she was better in the second performance we saw (August 17); or maybe she was just dispirited by having to be in such an awful production. Acting, such as it was, consisted mainly of striking poses. Scala (King Carlo) on the other hand was made to mince around the stage when he wasn't singing, looking deranged, and banging on the genitalia of some large

Greekish statuary which Poda placed on stage. For the happy ending which reconciles Eduardo and Cristina with her father, Poda seems to have Carlo strangle his grandson, little Gustavo. Perhaps Carlo took literally his final words in the opera: "Stringa amor le sue catene" or "Let love tighten its chains." Carlo tightened to death; he clearly had not resolved his inner conflicts. I think it was the only time that Poda paid any attention to the libretto. This opera does not need a composer; it needs a shrink!



Scala, Bartoli, Shkarupa

Gregory Shkarupa sang Giacomo and Matteo Roma Atlei competently. Shkarupa had the thankless task of an aria which was a holdover from the original Pavesi score, but he sang it well. I don't know who played Gustavo (there were two of them at the end, one in white and one in black, signifying something important). Jader Bignamini conducted the 56 person Orchestra Sinfonica Nationale della RAI and the Chorus of the Teatro Ventidio Basso. As usual, orchestral musical values were high, although truth be told, the musical performance was better in Bad Wildbad, particularly the second time around. Both Wildbad performances have been recorded and are available on CD.

Adelaide di Borgogna, or Kiss Me, Olga

Clearly the director of this rarely performed Rossini opera, Arnaud Bernard, did not listen to Poda, because he came up with a tried and trite concept to get around telling the story straight. *Adelaide* was not very successful at its debut in Rome in December, 1817 (and Rossini immediately raided the music for *Eduardo e Cristina*, so it was interesting to see the two works more or less back to back). Roman audiences and critics quickly apprehended the reason for the failure—a weak libretto, probably by the same Giovanni Schmidt who was behind *Eduardo* and *Armida*, the opera which preceded *Adelaide* by a month. The story is vaguely (very vaguely) based on medieval history, circa 947. Adelaide's husband, Lotario, the late King of Burgundy, has just died, perhaps by nefarious means, and Berengario has taken control of the kingdom. To consolidate his rule he wants to marry Lotario's widow to

his son Adelberto. Adelberto would like nothing more since he is quite taken with Adelaide, but she, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with either of them, and she hopes to be rescued by the German Emperor Ottone. Amid various battles between the Emperor's forces and those of Berengario and intermittent peace conferences, the winning side goes back and forth until Adelaide is held hostage in the Castle of Canosso near Lake Garda, while Berengario is captured by Ottone. Eurice, Berengario's wife arranges to free Adelaide in hopes that her husband will also be freed. In the end, Ottone fights the Burgundian forces for Adelaide, tying a white veil of hers around his arm in true chivalric fashion. He is victorious and the people hail him as he places the crown on Adelaide's head, pledging to marry and rule with her.

The creaky plot is seconded by creaky poetry, and Director Bernard decided that he would 'rescue' the libretto by placing a separate contemporary drama around Schmidt's medieval "dramma per musica in due atti." During the overture, mimed action and an empty backstage set tell us that we are at rehearsals where the Rossini Opera Festival is preparing a production of *Adelaide di Borgogna.* The prima donna (Adelaide) catches the tenor (Adelberto) making out with a blonde in a sports bra, and they have a mimed argument to Rossini's music. (They are evidently a couple in 'real life', whether married or not is unclear.) This spat reflects the conflict in the opera between Adelaide and Adelberto, and it goes on throughout the evening as the tenor tries to placate the angry soprano. Meanwhile she is consoled by the mezzo-soprano who sings the pants role of Ottone. On the side of the stage, the Director tries to get the singers to follow instructions and the chorus director works to train his chorus, some dressed in medieval costumes and some in contemporary street clothes. An onstage pianist rehearses the singers (and will accompany the *secco* recitatives). Luckily, the generic words of Schmidt's libretto could apply to the opera's story or to the frame story of the fight between the singers.

In other words, Bernard turns *Adelaide di Borgogna* into *Kiss Me Kate,* where the actors rehearsing Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* fight with each other on stage and off. There is an added layer of "meaning" here too, since the Adelaide, Olga Peretyatko, had a very public, social mediated fight with her former husband, the conductor Michele Mariotti when she discovered through texts that he was being unfaithful. In the end, when Adelaide and Ottone are about to be united in marriage, the mezzo (Varduhi Abrahamyan) sheds her regal costume and lets her hair down as she proposes to the soprano. The *lieto fine* will be not a union between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Burgundian queen, but a lesbian wedding between a soprano and a mezzo! Bernard's frame interacting with the Rossini opera in rehearsal actually works pretty well, but in the process he turns a historical drama into a comedy, not too far removed from Donizetti's *Le convenience ed inconvenienze teatrali*—except that Donizetti's work is *supposed* to be a satire about the pitfalls of opera production.

As the evening progresses, the work to be staged comes together more and more—the singers and chorus are seen in medieval costume and very old fashioned painted backdrops and sets come into place. It seems that *Adelaide di Borgogna,* the opera, not the play, will be a very traditional production.

At base, the productions of both *Eduardo* and *Adelaide* deconstruct the original works and push the audience away from any possible involvement in the life of these characters, whom the stage directors do not trust to have an involving story to tell. They wink and deflect to tell us about something else. In one of them we get the Director's choreographed "gut feeling" about the psychological conflicts which lie behind the story and in the other we get a contemporary story about backstage gossip surrounding the opera, which is clearly to be seen as a very old fashioned story of little worth. My own reaction to this *Adelaide* was

bemusement and occasional boredom. The parts I liked best were the well-lit scenes from the medieval tale with painted scenery, everybody in costume pretending to be knights and soldiers and beautiful damsels in distress. I wasn't so interested in the tabloid fodder of the frame.



Peretyatko and Abrahamyan

The singing itself was pretty good. Olga Peretyatko is still lovely to look at and has her coloratura intact, although the voice has lost some of its sheen and she some of the charisma she exhibited a few years back in works like *Matilde di Shabran.* She is still a pretty good comedienne. Varduhi Abrahamyan in the heroic pants/lesbian lover role of Ottone was splendid in her arias "Soffri la tua sventura" and "Vieni, tuo sposo." The tenor, Adelberto, sung by René Barbera, has a tremendous aria in Act 2, "Grida, o natura," when he is torn by his love for Adelaide vs. his desire to free his father from imprisonment, and Barbera dispatched it in grand fashion with secure high notes and coloratura. Berengario was sung by bass Riccardo Fassi, Eurice by Paola Leonci, Iroldo by Valery Makarov and Ernesto by Antonio Mandrillo. All were fine, especially Fassi.

In both performances we saw (16 and 19 August) the conductor was Enrico Lombardi, who stepped in at the last minute for the announced conductor Francesco Lanzillotta, who had suffered broken bones in a motorcycle accident which occurred after opening night. Lombardi was the young assistant to Lanzillotta, and he performed splendidly, leading the Orchestra Sinfonica della RAI and the Chorus of the Teatro Ventidio Basso.

The problem with this production for me (and worse in the *Eduardo* production) was the constant stage business and coming and going unrelated to the opera in question. I come to Pesaro to hear Rossini's music well performed by singers trained in the bel canto style, not to see how some director can muck it up. The rest is distraction and it gets in the way of the music. The best moments in this production of *Adelaide* came when the singers were in costume and the focus was on them and not on people chatting, looking at their phones, sipping cokes or fighting in the background. When Olga Peretyatko stepped up in a diffused spotlight to sing "Cingi la benda candida," her big aria, or when Varduhi Abrahamyan stepped out in a wonderful, regal golden costume to sing her big final aria, "Vieni, tuo sposo" there was magic. Time was suspended and for a brief moment the theatre rippled with electricity. The audience was in the moment and entranced. Why destroy that with backstage gossip?

Aureliano in Palmira, or a Tenor, a Mezzo, a Soprano and Three Goats

Rossini spent a lot of time on *Aureliano in Palmira* (1813), but it was not a success, probably for both political and performance reasons. The libretto by the young Felice Romani was something of a throwback to the kind of opera seria which had dominated the eighteenth century, with beneficent Roman emperors and happy endings. That kind of opera would soon be superseded by Romantic melodrama, often with tragic outcomes. It was also the only opera Rossini ever composed for a castrato (Giambattista Velluti); Velluti was the last of the great castrati in opera, and that kind of voice would soon be banned from the stage. The times were changing. In spite of the failure, Rossini realized that there was a lot of good music in the score and he saved a lot of it by transferring it to other works, most notably *The Barber of Seville.* The wonderful overture went intact first to *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra,* his debut opera for Naples, and then to *Il barbiere.* Since this overture is one of the most frequently heard pieces of classical music in the world, one can say that *Aureliano* was vindicated. The latter's opening chorus becomes Almaviva's opening serenade and other sections go to Rosina's aria "Una voce poco fa," another exceedingly familiar piece.

Romani, a classicist, took the story from Roman history, and it is very simple indeed. In 272 BC, Aurelian fought to regain territory in the Middle East then ruled by Zenobia, widow of the King of Palmyra and acting as regent for her minor son. Zenobia is allied and in love with Arsace, Prince of Persia (mezzo-soprano, originally the castrato role). The opera opens in Palmyra where the Priest of Isis is making a sacrifice, and the omens are not good. Arsace is routed in battle and taken captive; Zenobia comes to Aureliano, seeking his release, but Aureliano falls for the beautiful queen and asks for her to surrender. She will not, and next she goes to visit Arsace in prison. Aureliano arrives too and promises him freedom if he will give up Zenobia, but he refuses and promises to battle anew. In Act 2 the Palmyrians have been defeated again, Arsace is a prisoner, and Aureliano again proposes to Zenobia that she give up Arsace or become a trophy on his triumphal return to Rome. Zenobia again refuses and news arrives that Arsace has been freed. In an Arcadian scene, Arsace, fleeing, is welcomed by shepherds and invited to stay among them, far from war. When he hears that Zenobia is a prisoner, however, he vows to fight again. Aureliano again offers Zenobia her crown, but news comes that Arsace has escaped and is leading a new uprising. Aureliano goes off to fight, and wins again. Defeated, Arsace meets Zenobia one last time for a melting love duet. Aureliano, however, by now impressed by the couple's love and dedication, decides to pardon them and let them rule their kingdoms if they will swear fealty to Rome. They agree, and all ends happily. (In reality, Zenobia never swore fealty to Rome and was taken in triumph to the city by Aurelian. By most accounts, she lived out her life comfortably at Tivoli.)

The production by Mario Martone (scenery by Sergio Tramonti and costumes by Ursula Patzak) is from 2014. Martone kept the story in its ancient Roman setting, placing only the fortepiano onstage, sometimes hidden by scenery, sometimes not, perhaps to remind us of the importance of the recitatives or that the opera tells a contemporary story too, though in an ancient setting: in our day Palmyra has been destroyed by the war in Syria, and the Middle East is ever in turmoil. However briefly, the presence of that fortepiano and its player, Hana Lee, on stage breaks the illusion and makes us think that this is not just a story from history's dustbin. The production, originally in the Teatro Rossini, had to be transferred to the much larger stage of the Vitrifrigo Arena because the eighteenth century jewel box theatre is closed until it can be retrofitted for earthquakes (Pesaro had a noticeable earthquake in December, 2022). The background and scenery suggest a desert landscape with tent-like structures except for the Arcadian scene which was distinguished by three long-hair goats from

Greece. The idyllic shepherd life is in sharp contrast to the battles between empires, as the music ("O care selve, o care/stanze di libertà") and goats reflect.



Zenobia (Blanch); Zenobia and Arsace (Lupinacci)

ROF brought over four goats for the production this year from Greece, but one escaped after the dress rehearsal and went off into the pastoral countryside surrounding the Arena, where there are ample water sources and grasses and trees. Perhaps that fourth goat noticed the sacrifice of a 'goat' by the Priest of Isis in the opera's opening scene, and took off for safer climes. In any case the powers that be decided to leave Goat # 4 to itself, but we did have three handsome goats on stage and "shepherds" to clean up afterwards with shovels and brooms.

Although cute, the goats did not upstage the singers since ROF offered its best cast of this summer's Festival for *Aureliano,* with Sara Blanch as Zenobia, Raffaella Lupinacci as Arsace and Alexey Tatarintsev in the title role. Ms. Blanch is the real thing: tall and striking with a silvery soprano and faultless coloratura. She is a good actress too and portrayed the proud warrior queen as well as the woman in love in sentimental duets with Arsace. Particularly good was their long final duet, "Mille sospiri e lagrime," for which Blanch and Lupinacci came out into the audience on a runway and sang from the front of the orchestra pit. There were no superfluous distractions, and the audience could enjoy another moment of theatrical magic and wonderful singing. Tatarintsev was also very good in the tenor role of Aureliano. His great aria "Più non vedra Il perfido" was wildly applauded. Marta Pluda (Publia), Sunnyboy Dladla (Oraspe), Davide Giangregorio (Licinio), Alessandro Abis (Sacerdote) and Elcin Adil (Un Pastore) made up the rest of the cast. George Petrou managed to conduct the familiar music that went into *Babiere* so that it did not sound like a comedy. Several themes from the overture are taken from the Act 1 Finale, and they sounded great in context. He led the Orchestra Sinfonia G. Rossini and the Chorus of the Teatro della Fortuna of Fano, where the nine year old Gioachino had played the viola in the orchestra in 1801 while his mother Anna sang in the opera on stage. It was a good a compelling reading of a long opera. As done in Pesaro, with all recitatives intact and all the music, the performance came in a little

short of four hours, with one intermission. It would have been hard on the *sitzfleisch* if it had not been so good.



Back in 2014, I had not liked the physical production much, but in 2023 it seemed so superior to the new productions of Bernard and Poda, that I positively reveled in it. Martone always left the singers alone to do what they did very well—sing; and he respected the story and told it clearly, never interposing himself and half-baked ideas into the opera as it has come down to us. Bravo to him, and to his 2023 cast which captured the magic again.