A FEMALE OPERA COMPOSER IN 1835 ITALY?

CAROLINA UCCELLI'S ANNA DI RESBURGO AT TEATRO NUOVO

Charles Jernigan, July 2023



The search for Carolina Uccelli began with a misprint. Will Crutchfield -maestro, musicologist, music critic, savant - was scanning the lists of operas and composers in Vol. IV of Francesco Florimo's monumental tomes cataloguing all of the operas produced in Naples in the early years of the nineteenth century when he came across an intriguing entry for a "Carolina Miceli" and an opera called *Anna di Resburgo*, performed according to Florimo at the Teatro San Carlo in 1835 to a libretto by Gaetano Rossi. An opera by a woman? In 1830s Italy? Performed at a major opera house? Enticing for a bel canto lover and music historian indeed, but subsequent searches turned up nothing about "Miceli" until Crutchfield found a corrected entry in Giovanni Salvioli's much later "Bibliography of the Italian Dramatic Theatre…" which noted that the composer was named not Miceli, but Uccelli, and that the theatre of the premiere was not the San Carlo, but the jointly administered Teatro del Fondo.A search for the score turned up one copyist's manuscript in Naples' Conservatory library (where Florimo had been the archivist a century and a half earlier). "Chicken scratches," Crutchfield called it, but evidence of "a born opera composer" too, and the long task begin of making the manuscript score usable for a performance of this completely unknown opera by a completely unknown female composer who had dared the heights of opera production in the very city which had made the careers of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and so many others.

Who was Carolina Uccelli? Born near Florence in 1810 as Carolina Pazzini, she married a well known medical doctor and professor from Pisa and bore him a daughter, Emma. Uccelli had begun composition of songs by the time she was 17, and a collection of her songs and arias was published in Milan in her seventeenth year. In 1830, when she was 20, her first opera, *Saul*—the manuscript is lost— was produced at Florence's Teatro della Pergola with Rossini's strong encouragement. *Anna di Resburgo* was composed when Uccelli was in her early twenties, and produced in Naples when she was 25. It enjoyed a few performances at the Fondo with several members of the same extraordinary cast which had premiered *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the San Carlo a month earlier; perhaps there was one additional performance at the San Carlo early the following year—and then silence. Perhaps Uccelli worked on an opera called *Eufemio da Messina*, but it was never produced (or finished). She wrote a cantata to celebrate Maria Malibran when that lionized singer died, and then she retired to a domestic life, raising her daughter, but not however giving up composition, albeit smaller salon pieces and songs and arias for divas of the era, works which society deemed "suitable" for a talented woman. After her husband died, she eventually moved to Paris, and traveled, concertizing, with her daughter Emma, now grown and a singer. One of their "gigs" was at one of the famous salon concerts offered by her friend of many years, the retired Rossini, at his apartment in the Rue d'Antan. She died in 1885, her career as an opera composer before she turned 30 long forgotten, reduced to "Miceli," an incorrect cypher in a long list of composers and their works, except for her, all of them men.

Anna di Resburgo was finally heard again 189 years after its birth at the Alexander Kasser Theatre on the campus of Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey on July 20; next week it moves to the Rose Theater on Columbus Circle in New York for one additional performance. The semi-staged production was by Teatro Nuovo (TN), Will Crutchfield's bel canto brain child. Before the opera, an overflow audience was treated to a piano-vocal concert by the TN Resident and Studio Artists and one of Will Crutchfield's fascinating musical analyses of the opera to come. The singers performed eight concert arias and songs by Uccelli, accompanied by Timothy Cheung at the piano. The works were revelatory, two of them written by the seventeen year old Uccelli, the Bellini-esque "Non invan su questa sponda" and the aria with cabaletta "Frena le belle lagrime," There were the almost obligatory salon pieces of the era: "Il rimprovero," strongly recalling Desdemona's "Willow Song" from Rossini's *Otello*; a drinking song ("Orgia"), a lively tenor piece, "Il menestrello" ("The Minstrel"), a song in French and most charming, a duet for soprano and mezzo ("I rematori") which Uccelli wrote for herself and her daughter Emma to sing on their concert tours. The texts were likely by Uccelli herself. Many of the singers seemed to be past the student stage, including Jeremy Brauner (tenor), Laura Nielsen (soprano), Juan Hernandez (tenor) and Robert Garner (baritone).

Will Crutchfield's lecture on the opera, illustrated by many musical examples, demonstrated his real enthusiasm for his discovery and clearly pointed out Uccelli's "fingerprints," including unusual harmonic progressions and experimental orchestrations (an accompaniment for drum and flute, for instance, two very unusual instruments to hear together). Most of all, Crutchfield pointed out Uccelli's innate understanding of how to "build" a complete evening's opera musically, particularly the taut second act. He pointed out that perhaps we should not judge her work in comparison to the greatest operas of the century by the major composers—Verdi, Wagner, Rossini, Donizetti—but to the *second* opera by those towering figures. In comparison to *Un giorno di regno* or *Das Liebesverbot* or the like, Uccelli is the clear winner.

The score, as performed by the soloists of Teatro Nuovo with their period orchestra and choral forces, bore out all the enthusiasm manifested by Maestro Crutchfield beforehand. The libretto by Gaetano Rossi, written for Meyerbeer's *Emma di Resburgo* in 1819, was revised by Uccelli. The story goes back even farther, all the way to Méhul's *Héléna* in 1803, which set the tale of a tragedy averted and innocents rescued in Province, in France. Giovanni Simone Mayr had picked up the story for an Italian opera, *Elena*, with libretto by Leone Tottola, and others had followed suit. Rossi moved the locale to Scotland (Roxburgh) for Meyerbeer, then much in vogue in the aftermath of Walter Scott's immensely popular novels. It seems quite likely that the eleven year old Uccelli would have seen Meyerbeer's opera when it was produced in Florence in 1821, and the story seems to have stuck with her.

Here is a tale of a strong woman, a mother and her child, a happy marriage, and a rescue from injustice which allows the family to be united again against all odds. In some ways it went against the grain of the times, with frail Romantic heroines and Byronic heroes who suffer tragic fates. Before the curtain rises, Duncalmo has treacherously murdered his friend Roggero, the Lord of Lanerk and set it up so that Roggero's son Edemondo will be accused of the crime.
Edemondo has been forced to flee, leaving his Wife Anna and their son Elvino behind. Anna has gone into hiding, disguising herself as a peasant while leaving Elvino to be raised by Olfredo, a kind landowner. Meanwhile Duncalmo has died, confessing his crime to his son and heir Norcesto di Cumino.

In Act One, a celebration for Olfredo is taking place when a new edict from Norcesto is read: strangers cannot be given hospitality unless their identity is confirmed until Edemondo is found and judged for his father's murder. A harp heralds Anna, disguised as a peasant; she sings a troubadour song which covertly details her own unhappy circumstances. Her 'nobility' of utterance and particularly her love for little Elvino more or less blows her cover for Etelia, Olfredo's daughter. Edemondo, disguised himself, arrives because he cannot bear the separation from his wife and child. Anna recognizes him and Olfredo professes his belief in his innocence and vows to help him. Norcesto, arriving unexpectedly, recognizes Edemondo's features in the child and orders him carried away. Anna, distraught, reveals herself, but Elvino is carried off to Norcesto's castle.

In Act Two, Olfredo and Etelia come to the castle in search of Elvino, followed almost immediately by Anna. A mob has followed her, demanding that she reveal the whereabouts of her husband, threatening her and Elvino should she refuse. Edemondo, hidden in the mob, seeing his wife's danger, reveals himself, and he is taken away to be judged by the Council of Elders. Anna, left behind, accuses Norcesto of the murder of Roggero and tells him to swear that he is innocent if he did not do it. Norcesto, clearly conflicted and perturbed, does however declare his innocence of the crime of murder. Meanwhile, Olfredo breathlessly narrates the deliberations of the Council to Etelia: he is condemned to be executed by the tomb of his murdered father. In the graveyard, Norcesto is torn between what he knows is right—stopping the execution of an innocent man—and his shame at his father's crime and his own coverup. When he hears the crowd approaching with Edemondo, he hides. As Edemondo prepares to die and he and Anna bid a final farewell to each other, Norcesto steps out and confesses. The crowd begs Edemondo's forgiveness; Anna and Edemondo unite in a joyous duet.

The music is remarkable, unfailingly melodic and appropriate to the dramatic situation. The musical forms are those one would expect in an 1835 bel canto opera—arias, romanzas, cabalettas and ensembles which build to great climaxes. It is an astonishing feat for an almost untried composer of around 23 or 24 years. Of particular note in Act One is the trio of recognition for Anna, Edemondo and Olfredo, "Io ti adoro, o ciel clemente" with its beautiful middle section, and the fine finale of the act. Act Two, with its libretto revised and strengthened by Uccelli, however, contains the real gems. Note the extremely unusual patter aria for Olfredo, "Nel Consiglio già raccolti." The Tottola libretto of the story for G.S. Mayr had turned the Olfredo character into a buffo bass who sang in Neapolitan, but by the time Rossi took up the story, Olfredo was a serious character. Uccelli kept the buffo's tradition of comic patter aria, turning it however into a breathless narration of the deliberations of the Council which lead to Edemondo's death sentence—a unique example of a serious patter song in Italian opera. Or take Norcesto's two wonderful scenes in Act Two—the duet with Anna when she tries to convince him to confess the murder with his guilty equivocations and his aria in the graveyard, again guilt-ridden ("Io ritrovo in ogni oggetto")—both real psychological portraits of a not-quite villain who is far from the cardboard Romantic baddie (e.g. Enrico in *Lucia*). Or take the entire finale of Act Two, built with rising climax on the funereal march which accompanies Edemondo's march to the cemetery for execution. The march, written by Uccelli with a soupçon of dissonance, builds into a powerful climatic ensemble only enlivened by the rescue ending and a happy duet for the faithful couple ("Tra soavi ritorte di amore") set to a joyous tune.

The TN cast was superb throughout. Particularly wonderful was Ricardo José Rivera as Norcesto, his sonorous bass capable of every bel canto turn yet projecting the complexity of the character. Equally good was tenor Lucas Levy as Olfredo, shining in his unusual patter

aria. TN regular Santiago Ballerini (whose work with Crutchfield goes back to his Bel Canto at Caramoor days) proved completely at home with the principal tenor duties of Edemondo while Elise Albian sang nicely as Etelia (who opens the opera with a pastoral aria foreshadowing the happy ending). Chelsea Lehnea, another TN regular, sang Anna with sympathy and easy bel canto pyrotechnics, although hers is the kind of soprano whose voice seems to project principally from the head.

Appropriately, the orchestra leaders (in the period style practiced by TN) were both women: Elisa Citterio was Primo Violino e Capo d'Orchestra while Lucy Tucker Yates was Maestra al Cembalo. Their playing and direction were sympathetic and full of clarity. Derrick Goff was the Chorus Master. Everyone obviously felt the importance of the moment and rose to this special occasion.

Lehnea was the only singer to wear costume-like clothes—a peasant dress in Act One and a wide-hipped Queen Anne dress in bright green in Act Two, both of which contrasted with her short blond, and very modern, haircut. Everyone else donned formal wear. The production, by Marco Nisticò, was, however, staged, or almost staged. There were painted set projections in the style of *primo ottocento* stage design by Adam Thompson and effective lighting by Devon Allen and Jason Flamos.

Carolina Uccelli had the very great misfortune to stage her opera just weeks after the world premiere of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the very same Naples. In fact, Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani, the first Anna, had just come from her seventeenth performance driving audiences into a frenzy with the Mad Scene from *Lucia. Anna di Resburgo,* which shares a Scottish setting and some story similarities with *Lucia,* does not share unforgettable tunes like "Cruda funesta smania," the Sextet, the Mad Scene or the tenor's final aria. Is it any wonder that poor Uccelli's opera was eclipsed by the new masterpiece being played across town.

Nonetheless, *Anna di Resburgo* is back. Will Crutchfield promises a printed score and (we dare to hope) a CD. We hope that Carolina Uccelli's long lost child is back to stay and that Teatro Nuovo has given it a truly happy rescue ending—at last.