Il Bel Canto Ritrovato 2024 Highlights

Lauro Rossi and Nicola Vaccaj

Charles Jernigan, August, 2024

Now in its third iteration, the opera festival **Il Bel Canto Ritrovato** (IBR) followed closely after the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro and environs again this year. The ROF closed its doors with a concert performance of *Il viaggio a Reims* on 23 August and IBR opened the next evening in nearby Fano with Lauro Rossi's opera, *La casa disabitata.* This year IBR features two composers from the Marche, both with strong ties to Pesaro: Lauro Rossi, who was born in nearby Macerata and Nicolai Vaccaj, born in Tolentino but a long time resident of Pesaro, where his house still stands, a short block from the Casa Rossini. The Festival featured two main events, a staged performance of Rossi's opera at the Teatro della Fortuna in Fano on 24 August and a vocal concert with orchestra of excerpts from long-forgotten Vaccaj operas at the Teatro Rossini in Pesaro on the 25th. Other events filled the calendar as well--"Il Buffo all'Opera," an interesting concert of comic pieces from operas by Rossi, Ricci and others of the period, presented in Urbino and later in Pesaro, and "I Marchigiani alla Scala," with excerpts from operas by Marche composers (Federico, Vaccaj, Rossi, Nini, Rossini and Salieri) performed at La Scala. Brief concerts from the balconies of Casa Rossini and Casa Vaccaj and academic talks on the composers were also parts of the Festival.

In its day, *La casa disabitata* was considered Lauro Rossi's masterpiece. Rossi (1810-1885), born in Macerata, had debuted in Naples in 1829 shortly after completing his studies there and already had ten operas to his credit by the time that *La casa disabitata* debuted at La Scala on 16 August, 1834, to a libretto by Jacopo Ferretti. It was a great success and Rossi revised it some ten years later under the title *I falsi monetari* for performances in Torino. The opera circulated widely for many years, as far afield as Spain and even in Mexico, where it was performed by a troupe led by Rossi himself. It was the 1844 version, edited by Damiano Cerutti, which was revived for the first time in the modern era in Fano, although it was decided to use the original title, *La casa disabitata,* or "The Uninhabited House" for that concept is more central to the plot than the other title, "The Counterfeiters."

Ferretti's plot for *La casa disabitata* goes back a long way, all the way to Plautus' ancient Roman comedy *Mostellaria,* in which the clever slave Tranio convinces the owner of a house that the structure is haunted so that Tranio's master can carry on an affair inside with his girlfriend without being disturbed. Feretti's libretto, based directly on a play by Giovanni Giraud (Rome, 1808), posits a wealthy Spaniard, Don Raimondo Lopez, who has left his house some six years earlier in search of his beloved, Annetta, who mysteriously disappeared. As he has been away searching for her, the house has been taken over by a bunch of counterfeiters headed by Don Isidoro, who is also Raimondo's major domo. It is Isidoro who has kidnapped Annetta and held her prisoner in the house, trying to induce her to love him as he has fallen for her. To keep the curious away Isidoro and his men have given it out that the house is haunted. Raimondo returns from his searching to find Don Eutichio and his wife Sinforosa in the market square by the house. Eutichio is an impoverished poet/librettist who has just been ejected from his lodging along with Sinforosa because he can't pay the rent. Raimondo, meanwhile, has offered his house rent-free to anyone who can stay there. Eutichio decides to take the offer in spite of the ghoulish reputation and although his jealous (and older) wife suspects that he may be planning to use the house for an assignation with a girl.

In Act 2 Eutichio is in the house as midnight approaches. The counterfeiters, dressed as ghosts and demons, torment him until he eventually collapses from terror. Annetta, who has managed to finally escape from her prison, enters the room and inadvertently wakens Eutichio, who thinks she is a ghost. She has just convinced him that she is flesh and blood when Sinforosa bursts in; she believes that Eutichio and Annetta are having an affair and a cat fight begins between the two women. Isidoro enters, dressed as a ghost, and is shot by Eutichio. Raimondo, who has suspected nefarious activities all along now arrives and sees his beloved Annetta. All ends well: the "ghosts" are unmasked, Annetta and Raimondo are united and Eutichio and Sinforosa are reconciled.

The music is a veritable torrent of catchy, Italianate melody. Isodoro and Annetta both have Romanzas in the opening scene, his suave ("Amo sprezzato, ed ardo"), hers defiant ("Aprirò fra voi la scuola"). In the next scene a market chorus is infectious and Raimondo has a brilliant aria with cabaletta. Eutichio and Sinforosa introduce themselves in a comic duet, followed by a quartet. Annetta, in her prison, sings an irresistible "Canzone alla spagnola" followed by a lively duet with Isidoro before the big *concertato finale* of Act 1. Act 2 has a great duet between the suspicious Raimondo and the treacherous Isidoro, followed by a long, funny scene and aria for Eutichio as he tries to revise his libretto for a new *Don Giovanni* according to 'modern' tastes and is tormented by the "ghosts." A funny duet with the escaped Annetta turns into a trio when Sinforosa arrives, full of jealousy and spite, and everything ends with the happy *finaletto*. I am not sure whether this joyous finale comes from the 1834 score or the revision of 1844, but it sounds a lot like the finale of *Don Pasquale* (1843). Coincidence? Reminiscence?

The chorus has a lot to do in this opera and the various ensembles are even more delicious than the solos, the orchestration is solid and interesting. Does it sound like someone else? Not like Rossini, occasionally like Donizetti, but it is probably safer to say that Rossi and Donizetti sound like each other at this stage in their careers. Rossi, however, has his own voice, more like the Neapolitan *popoloresco* side of Donizetti rather then his more formal voice. Those who have heard the CD recording of Rossi's *Il domino nero* will know what I mean. Rossi's music certainly evolved with the times, as performances of his late *Cleopatra* (1876) in the theatre named for him in Macerata showed a few years ago. But it is his propensity for comedy and catchy melody that we have here, and probably in several other comic operas of this period like *Dottor Bobolo, o la fiera* (1847)--an opera I would certainly like to see performed.

The IBR production in Fano was astonishingly good from a musical point of view. Enrico Lombardi led the Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini with absolute clarity and concision in a completely unknown score which the orchestra (and chorus) which had been working hard on operas in the Rossini Festival had precious little time to rehearse. Mirca Rosciani, the Choirmistress, deserves equal kudos for this opera contains a lot of choral music. Although special television monitors were set up to help the overworked chorus remember their lines, they did not seem to need it, and acted as well as sang as villagers, counterfeiters, "ghosts" and "demons."

The principal singers were also extraordinary in performing this unknown music. Tamar Ugrekhelidze revealed an attractive mezzo-soprano, especially in the Spanish rhythms of her Act 1 "Canzone alla Spagnolo" and Vittoriana De Amicis had a precise and brilliant coloratura soprano for Sinforosa, although she looked (and is) decades younger than Sinforosa is supposed to be. Jennifer Turri was a pert Ines, more or less the lead singer of the chorus. Antonio Mandrillo's solid tenor was a strong asset in his aria with cabaletta and in the many ensemble pieces. Likewise, Matteo Mancini as the dour Isidoro. Perhaps best of all was

Giuseppe Toia as Don Eutichio, the impecunious poet. He acted well, better than the others, and sang superbly in the buffo role. Martin Csölley as Alberto rounded out the cast. In fact, there was not a weak link among the singers, as is often the case with advanced students. Like the orchestra and chorus, they had little time to rehearse, and the opera has several really complex ensemble numbers. Bravissimi to them all.

The simple production was by Cristina Pietrantonio. There were background projections in black and white designed by the students of the Sezione Audiovisivi e Multimedia of the Liceo Artistico Mengaroni of Pesaro. Costumes were a mix of period and contemporary attire, while the counterfeiters transformed into ghosts with the aid of dark veils over their faces. In one scene they brought out large balloons on sticks with eyes painted on them. Title cards, such as were used for silent films, indicated the scenes. It was simple but effective. For the most part, the singers did not act much. I think they often had their eyes glued on the conductor, a product of the music's unfamiliarity and a lack of rehearsal time. Toia's Eutichio and sometimes De Amicis' Sinforosa were the exceptions. Ferretti, who also wrote the libretti for Rossini's *Cenerentola* and *Mathilde di Shabran,* wrote a very funny libretto here, and the production did not always take advantage of the potential comedy. With more rehearsal time or more experienced singers, or both, *La casa disabitata* would be a very funny work. However, the brilliant musical performance will lead to a must-have CD (by Bongiovanni) in due time for all of us who love bel canto. (The CD of last year's Bel Canto Ritrovato opera, Ricci's *Il birraio di Preston* has just been released, and it too is a must-have for bel canto lovers).

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The other emphasis of this year's Festival was the work of Nicola Vaccaj, and the performance which celebrated Vaccaj was a concert of very rare excerpts from his operas, performed by a phalanx of fine singers and again the Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini, under the guidance of Daniele Agiman, who is also the Artistic Director of the Festival. On entrance to the concert venue, the Teatro Rossini in Pesaro, the audience noted two spotlighted painted medallions on the stage curtain, which had been painted by Angelo Monticelli for the 1818 opening of the house (with Rossini's *La gazza ladra*, led by the composer himself). The painted medallions are of Rossini in one corner and of Vaccaj in the other. Vaccaj (1790-1848) was two years older than Rossini; their parents were friends and the boys grew up together. At the time the rebuilt opera house was inaugurated, they were both considered important sons of the city. Today, Vaccaj's portrait has faded and blurred--on the curtain as in public recognition. The concert on 25 August was entitled "Nicola Vaccaj, Profilo d'Autore." There were generous excerpts from seven of Vaccaj's eighteen operas which spanned a period from 1816 to 1838: *Malvina* (1816), *La Pastorella feudataria* (1824), *Zadig ed Astartea* (1825), *Giovanna d'Arco* (1827), *Giovanna Gray* (1827), *Saladino e Clotilde* (1828) and *Marco Visconti* (1838). His most famous opera, *Giulietta e Romeo*, was not among the works chosen, perhaps because it has been performed in modern times (in Jesi) and recorded. The music has a classical restraint with touches reminiscent of Bellini. It is surprising that most of these works were failures with the public. Such was not the case with the duet "Presso un ruscello limpido" from *Pastorella feudataria,* which indeed did feature a lovely, limpid melody with harp introduction and accompaniment. The buffo aria from *Malvina* was like many such arias from Rossini's early *farse* composed for Venice, and this opera (which failed) was Vaccaj's attempt to break into the Venetian market. All of the pieces showed full mastery of the techniques of the time, both for the singers and the orchestra. One could expect no less from the author of the "Metodo Pratico di Canto Italiano" which Vaccaj wrote while staying in England, where he had hoped for opera commissions which did not happen. That didactic work, still used by singers today, is probably Vaccaj's most important contribution to opera.

Il Bel Canto Ritrovato had four excellent singers to survey this material: Laila Alamanova (mezzo-soprano), Marta Pluda (soprano), Brayan Avila Martinez (tenor) and the famous Bruno De Simone (baritone). De Simone, a veteran of many Rossini Festival comedies anchored the young singers, all exceptionally strong and well-prepared. Pluda has an appealing mezzo, rich and manipulated with flawless technique; Alamanova's soprano is solid and rich-toned from top to bottom and she too is the mistress of fine coloratura technique. Martinez was good too, and of course De Simone is a pro in every sense.

It was a delight and the large audience's applause was long and appreciative. Bongiovanni recorded the concert, and there will be a CD of it as well as the Rossi opera.

Il Bel Canto Ritrovato bills itself as a "Festival Nazionale," but it is an increasingly international festival aimed at both a local and international audience. It is based on the premise that Italian composers, roughly between the dates of 1790 and 1850, produced an enormous number of lyric works to appeal to a voracious audience. The Festival is dedicated to exploring this vast and forgotten repertory, and each year bring to light one or two once popular works, or shed new light on composers who may be "minor" when compared to Verdi or Rossini, but who composed delightful works which do not deserve to gather dust on archival shelves. This is a virtually unexplored treasure chest of the mighty Italian artistic patrimony which should not be ignored, and thanks to IBR the lid of that chest is being lifted.