The 2024 Rossini Festival, Pesaro

Alan Jackson, September 2024

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There were five operas on offer this year, four staged plus a concert of *Il viaggio a Reims*. Alas, only one, *L'equivoco stravagante*, was in the Teatro Rossini. *Bianca e Falliero* and *Il viaggio* were in the centrally placed Auditorium Scavolini, *Ermione* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in the Vitrifrigo Arena which necessitates a 15/20-minute coach journey. The theatre is a delight, the others poorly suited to opera. (Apart from anything else, be prepared to spend much of the interval queuing for the woefully inadequate toilet facilities.)

My first evening was *Bianca e Falliero* with Jessica Pratt and Aya Wakizono as the two leads. Pratt is still one of the finest bel canto sopranos around despite, to my ears, a slight thinning of her tone in the upper register – her *acuti* are still impressive though. Wakizono was very impressive indeed, the voice lustrous and even throughout the registers. Both singers were totally in command of Rossini's florid writing. Wakizono received an ovation for her big Act II scene and Pratt deserved one for her *aria finale* (more familiar as "Tanti affetti" from *La donna del lago*,) but the director Jean-Louis Grinda thwarted this with an ending that denied any general jubilation, whether ours or that of the other characters. Up till then the production had been acceptable if unexciting - with a mix of costume styles, the doge at least was dressed as a doge – though the opera is Rossini at his most expansive, which itself presents problems for directors. The two leading men, tenor Dmitry Korchak as Bianca's unsympathetic father and Giorgi Manoshvili as her proposed but unloved fiancé, were less remarkable, but still acceptable. Excellent conducting from Roberto Abbado.



Pratt, Korchak



Manoshvili, Wakizono

This was followed by *Ermione* in a production by Johannes Erath that most of the people I spoke to loathed. Me too. I will admit to being not very good at understanding what is behind most *regieteater* efforts, but this one seemed to concentrate on the supporting cast of grotesques that populated Pirro's kingdom of Epirus in the aftermath of the Trojan war with the distractions from the principals that this implies. The Vitrifrigo Arena has a very wide stage and peculiar acoustics. When Juan Diego Flórez as Oreste made his entry from the back of the stage he was hardly audible, though when he and Anastasia Bartoli sang from the front sides their sound seemed the result of amplification. Bartoli was the most impressive singer in the cast. She has a large voice that has suited verismo parts in the past, but which flies through Rossinian coloratura with ease. Her larger-than-life portrayal of the crazed Ermione was convincing. (Incidentally, her mother is a Cecilia, but not that one! Rather Cecilia Gasdia who was the Corinna in the first recording of *Il viaggio a Reims*.) The two men in her life, husband-to-be Pirro and ex-lover Oreste were less satisfactory. Enea Scala tended to shout to the detriment of his florid articulation and I found Florez below his best too. Victoria Yarovaya's Andromaca was sympathetic though unexceptional vocally. Again excellent conducting and playing from Michele Mariotti and the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale Della RAI.

After the traumas of *Ermione* it was a welcome relief to see Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier's delightful production of *L'equivoco stravagante*. The plot is the familiar one of two men wooing the same young girl, Ernestina. The shy one gets the girl in the end, not the idiot preferred by her father. The twist is that the latter believes the story put about by the helpful servant that Ernestina is in fact not a girl but a castrato in woman's clothing! The libretto by Gaetano Gasbarri contains many racy double entendres as well as learned references reflecting the studious Ernestina. The star turn was Nicola Alaimo as Ernestina's father, but the whole cast did well: Maria Barakova as Ernestina, Pietro Adaíni and Carles Pachon as the suitors, Matteo Macchioni and Patricia Calvache as the servants. The ingenious set by Christian Fenouillat deserves a mention as does the Filarmonica Gioachino Rossini under Michele Spotti. How nice to see a production that concentrated on telling the story clearly without any distractions, unnecessary videos, or concepts. A delightful evening in the Teatro Rossini.



L'equivoco stravagante ensemble

The last staged opera was a revival of Pier Luigi Pizzi's "black and white" production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. This, too, concentrates on telling the story. There are a couple of quirks in that both Almaviva and Figaro get to bare their chests and that in the singing lesson scene Almaviva accompanies Rosina on a cello rather than the usual keyboard instrument, but the production deserves its high reputation. The basses won the vocal honours on this occasion, Carlo Lepore and Michele Pertusi in stalwart form as Bartolo and Basilio. I found Maria Kataeva rather charmless as Rosina, too much the viper all through, and a rather dour one at that. But she sings the role well. The Figaro was Andrzej Filonczyk, a lively presence on stage with a large voice but less than clear fioriture, particularly in the duet with Rosina.



Figaro, Bartolo, Fiorello



Basilio, Bartolo, Rosina

Jack Swanson was pretty good as Almaviva; sometimes I thought he overdid the hammering out of each note in the florid divisions, but he rose well to his final aria. This was included as befits a festival performance – that after all is one of the things a festival is for. I think the text must have been absolutely complete. Certainly I don't recall having ever heard on stage Fiorello's tiny recitative between the two scenes of Act I in which he moans Leporello-like about his master. The admirable conductor was Lorenzo Passerini.

The festival concluded with a concert of *Il viaggio a Reims*. I didn't hear the earlier and traditional concert given each year by students from the Pesaro Rossini Academy; this one featured some of the singers from the other operas. So we heard again Maria Barakova as Marchesa Melibea, Jessica Pratt a last-minute replacement as Contessa di Folleville, Jack Swanson as Cavalier Belfiore, Dmitry Korchak as Conte di Libenskof and Nicola Alaimo as Barone di Trombonok. Once again Alaimo dominated, along with Erwin Schrott as Don Profondo. The other principals were Vasilisa Berzhanskaya as Corinna, Karine Deshayes as Madame Cortese, Michael Mofidian as Lord Sidney and Vito Priante as Don Alvaro. All were good without effacing memories of other interpreters on record. All were rapturously received by the audience. The RAI orchestra was conducted by Diego Matheuz. And what a joy it is to hear this wonderful opera. Is there a greater ensemble in a 19th century Italian opera than the sextet from Act I? And to think that its central slow movement lay forgotten until the opera's reconstruction in the early 1980s.

