NOTES FROM PESARO

by Charles Jernigan

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The ROSSINI OPERA FESTIVAL ended last night with a sterling performance of the Mass which Verdi organized for Rossini after the latter's death in 1868. It is in 13 sections, each section composed by a different composer of the era (the last by Verdi himself), but it was never performed in Verdi's lifetime and in fact remained unperformed until it was discovered by David Rosen in 1970 and performed in Germany in 1988 (and subsequently recorded). It had never before been performed at the Rossini Festival. The sections vary in quality, but the final section by Verdi, which he later transferred to his Requiem Mass for Manzoni, is incandescent.

Otherwise the Festival consisted of three main operas—the rarity *Zelmira,* a wacky take on *L'Italiana in Algeri,* and Rossini's first staged opera, *La cambiale di matrimonio* done on a double bill with his song collection "Soirèes Musicales."

Zelmira was performed with a spectacular cast of singers with the orchestra of the Teatro Communale in Bologna under the leadership of Giorgio Sagripanti in a production by the Spanish stage director Calixto Bieito. Bieito initially made a name for himself in the opera world by staging standard works in a subversive way with ample nudity, violence and graphic sex, shocking staid opera audiences in Europe, a Quentin Tarantino of the opera world. Now Bieito seems to have progressed from challenging the Western values embodied in culturally iconic works like Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* or Bizet's *Carmen* to a totally nihilistic world of unremitting negativism and meaninglessness.

There was no nudity and the violence in this *Zelmira* was muted, but the production undercut all of the values we usually associate with opera and Rossini, suggesting that everything about the social and cultural experience of opera is meaningless—the music, the performance, the production and the audience itself. A few examples of directorial devices which point to negation will suffice, but there were dozens. Ilo is the tenor hero of the opera and Rossini gives him triumphal martial music and a spectacular and really difficult aria for his entrance. Bieito turns him (sung by the wonderful Lawrence Brownlee) into a totally defeated, disheveled soldier who gravitates towards PTSD -inspired madness and homelessness; Bieito's view contradicts the story and the music. Worse, Ilo (and the other singers) are forced to constantly move in circles around a huge platform stage, singing to only one part of the audience at a time, who are seated in a large circle around the stage platform. As they move around, the incredible vocal work of the singers is undercut. The dead King Azor, who does not appear in the opera as written, was nonetheless on stage throughout this production, even before the opera began, performing various meaningless acts and leering at women. The High Priest wore a green wig and a diaper. Why? Who knows? The point of the production was that it was pointless: nothing had any meaning. There were no supertitles to follow the story, probably because the production so often contradicted the libretto, but also because the sung words are meaningless. Nihilism, a widespread phenomenon in Europe and America now, when so many institutions and figures have lost their meaning—religion, politics, democratic institutions, and the arts—seems in Bieito's production to have now infected opera. The reasons that one goes to the opera are shattered. Even the actions involved with an evening of opera— buying a ticket, dressing, traveling, listening, applauding—they are all meaningless. Bieito is not so much mocking the institution or the audience as telling us that a cultural act has no more meaning than anything else.

If the 'meaning' is meaninglessness, then we saw no reason to stay. We left at the intermission. Total negation for an hour and a half was enough. If the music was without value,

the hard work of the singers and the orchestra meaningless and the production an endless circle of repeated acts without any reason, why stay? Our act of nihilism was to leave and buy an ice cream. Italian gelato by itself is anti-nihilistic.

Or perhaps Bieito was just muddled and had no idea what he was doing.

Rosetta Cucchi's production of *Italiana in Algeri* was at the other end of the philosophical spectrum, sort of. She reimagined the story of Isabella, the Italian woman in search of her long-lost boyfriend Lindoro, as a group of drag queens whose bus breaks down on a road trip. "Isabella and Her Girls" are arrested by the cops controlled by Mustafà, who is a despotic ruler bored with his wife Elvira. The stranded Italian drag queens promise him some kind of new stimulation, sexual or otherwise. In a clever pre-opera show, the group pulls up in a rainbow-painted VW bus in front of the Teatro Rossini and the "police" chase the extravagantly dressed Drag Queens, eventually herding them into the theater so that the opera can begin. It is a funny bit of mayhem in wild clothes and bright colors.

Cucchi uses Isabella's patriotic aria "Pensa alla patria" to make some kind of serious point about gay liberation or Drag Queen acceptance or the liberty to live your life as you see fit, but it doesn't fit the text and in fact the whole drag overlay does not work: Isabella is clearly a woman, a mezzo-soprano, and not a man in drag. She is looking for a lover, who is a man (Lindoro). The production turns out to be an exercise in camp, not a serious call for Liberation in spite of old newsreels showing demonstrators for gay liberation or for transexual rights or for drag queens. Cucchi clearly believes a social cause has meaning unlike Bieito, but she has chosen the wrong vehicle to promote her view. *Italiana* is a delicious opera buffa: it ridicules silly "Turks" and Italian men (Taddeo), but exalts the power and intelligence of Italian women. It is not *La Cage aux Folles* or *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.* The singing was very good. Daniella Barcelona at 59 is still wonderful and the two buffo basses, Giorgi Manoshvili and Misha Kiria, were very good indeed. Tenor Josh Lovell has a dulcet *tenore di grazia* voice, but he missed some high notes pretty badly and his voice broke in his second act aria. Maybe it was all an inside joke: Daniella Barcelona has spent her career in *travesti* roles dressed up as a man. Can we call her a "Drag King"?

The third evening was a sort of double bill. The one act opera was Rossini's *Cambiale di matrimonio* which was teamed up with four singers performing the "Soirées Musicales," a collection of twelve songs Rossini composed in the early 1830s. This rather strange evening did not attempt to make a point about a contemporary social issue (Drag Queens) or express a societal malaise like Nihilism. It was just pleasing and fun. The songs were orchestrated for the occasion by Fabio Maestri and presented in a straightforward way before the curtain by four young singers: Vittoriana De Amicis, Andreas Niño, Paola Nevi and Gurgen Baveyan. In the opera the well known and funny buffo bass Pietro Spagnoli played Tobia Mill and the excellent Paola Leoci was his pretty daughter Fanni. Her lover Edoardo was Jack Swanson and the Canadian Slook, who showed up with a bear in tow, was Matt Olivieri. Ramiro Mataran and Inés Lorann were the two servants Norton and Clarina. One-time tenor Laurence Dale directed a charming, traditional and funny production. There was a realistic two-story Georgian London row house on stage and period costumes on the singers. The only false note was the bear, who stayed on stage throughout most of the opera, wearing out the joke. Christopher Franklin conducted.

If there was an antidote to the nihilistic *Zelmira,* it was the final section of the Mass for Rossini, Verdi's "Libera me, Domine" a great cry for freedom and meaning directed towards a cold universe and sung by the magnificent Vasilisa Berzhanskaya, The Universe may not be listening, but the desperate cry, one of Verdi's greatest works, is by itself an affirmation of art's greatest duty—to give us meaning in the vastness of time and space.