Awaiting Anna: Carolina Uccelli and The Evolution of *Anna di Resburgo*

Charles Jernigan, June 2024

Who was Carolina Uccelli? I must confess that I never recall hearing her name before Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo announced a performance of her opera *Anna di Resburgo* next month in New York. She was Florentine, born Carolina Pazzini to minor nobility in 1810. She married a well-known medical doctor and professor from Pisa, Filippo Uccelli, who gave her a daughter. She was obviously a talented amateur musician from an early age, and with Rossini's encouragement she produced her first opera, Saul, at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence in 1830. Apparently, she wrote both words and music. The score of Saul is lost, but it is her next (and last) staged opera which is the subject of the Teatro Nuovo revival. When Uccelli wrote it, she was only 24 or 25 years old.

Will Crutchfield is enormously positive about the music and the performances should reveal its quality, but the libretto too has an interesting history, which is worth considering.

The story begins before the curtain rises. Two local rulers in County Lanark, in medieval Scotland, were friends and comrades until one of them—Roggero—was murdered. His son Edemondo was discovered standing over the body holding a bloody dagger. He was forced to flee for his life with his wife Anna while they left their young son Elvino in the safekeeping of a local nobleman, Olfredo. Anna, meanwhile has returned to Lanark disguised as a peasant bard named Egilda to be near her son. In the meantime, the other ruler, Duncalmo, has died and his son Norcesto has become the overlord. Norcesto decrees that no stranger may be given refuge in Lanark without proving their identity until Edemondo is found. "Egilda" sings a plaintive ballad, but Olfredo's daughter Etellia suspects she is a disguised noblewoman, and Olfredo knows this to be true: she is Anna, young Elvino's mother. Olfredo offers her protection. Edemondo now arrives in disguise also, but Anna recognizes him and their joyous reunion is seconded by Olfredo, who believes in Edemondo's innocence.

At a village fete, Norcesto discerns Edemondo's features in little Elvino and orders him taken into custody. Anna, beside herself, reveals her true identity, but Olfredo restrains Edemondo from revealing his. As Act 1 ends, the child is taken into custody.

Act 2. In the castle, Olfredo and Etillia have come to see Elvino, but so has Anna, followed by a furious crowd demanding that she reveal the whereabouts of her husband. When they threaten vengeance on her and her child, Edemondo reveals himself and is dragged away to prison. Anna confronts Norcesto, whom she suspects of being the real murderer. She demands that he swear that he did not kill Roggero, and after some hesitation, he does.

Outside the Council Chamber where Edemondo is on trial, Etella is waiting for a verdict. Her father comes from the judgement chamber and narrates what has happened: Edemondo has been condemned to execution at the tomb of the father he is thought to have murdered. The final scene takes place in the graveyard where both Roggero and Duncalmo are buried. Norcesto, tormented by his knowledge that an innocent man is going to his death, thinks he sees the ghost of the murdered man calling for vengeance. He hides as the cortege approaches, but at the last moment honor wins and he steps forward to admit his false accusations, which were caused by shame because it was his own father, Duncalmo, who was the true murderer. The shocked crowd begs Edemondo's forgiveness, and he and Anna unite in a final duet of happiness.

The story goes back at least to 1803, when Étienne Méhul's *Héléna*, set to a libretto by Jean-Nicolas Bouilly, was produced in Paris. The story is essentially the same as in Rossi, but the action takes place in Provence, in the vicinity of Arles and Tarasçon. *Héléna* is an opera-comique in the tradition of *pièces a sauvetage*, rescue operas. These works, in which an innocent is saved—rescued—at the last moment, were particularly popular in the aftermath of the French Revolution (The trumpet call in Beethoven's Fidelio, another rescue opera, is said to originate in Héléna.) Initially popular, Héléna fell out of favor when the librettist, Bouilly, was accused of patterning his story too closely on his own earlier libretto for Cherubini's *Les deux journées ou le porteur d'eau* (1800). That similar story in turn was said by Bouilly to be based on a real incident from the French Revolution.

In 1814 the story was plucked by Andrea Leone Tottola (presumably from Bouilly) for the libretto for Giovanni Simone Mayr's *Elena*, which premiered in Naples. Tottola kept the Provençal setting, but turned Bouilly's opéra-comique into an Italian opera *semiseria* (albeit with spoken dialogue), a serious story with a comic buffo part in the person of the rich farmer Carlo (the Olfredo of this version), who, in the tradition of the Neapolitan operatic stage, often speaks and sings in Neapolitan dialect. Mayr's opera was well received and moved to La Scala in Milan, where it lost its Neapolitan element and used secco recitatives instead of spoken dialogue. The Tottola libretto was used again, at least twice: by Ramón Carnicer in Barcelona in 1821 and by Carlo Coccia in Lisbon in 1822.

In 1819, the story was picked up again, this time the librettist Gaetano Rossi for Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Emma di Resburgo*, which debuted in Venice on June 26, 1819. It was the third of Meyerbeer's Italian operas. The story remains the same, with the major change that the setting has been changed to Scotland, specifically County Roxburgh (Resburgo) and the libretto has lost its comic element and buffo bass role. One assumes that the locale change is due to the new popularity of Scotland for Romantic tales, a fashion inculcated by the novels and poems of Sir Walter Scott and the poems attributed to a medieval bard, "Ossian." Rossi and Meyerbeer beat Rossini by four months in the use of Scottish settings in Italian opera: his La donna del lago, based on Scott's poem The Lady of the Lake, premiered in September, 1819, in Naples. It was really the spark which lit the wild fashion for Scottish settings in Italian operas. In the new libretto, Héléna/Elena becomes Emma and Constantino becomes Edemondo. Musically, Meyerbeer's *Emma* is a thoroughly delightful Rossinian work, as is Carnicer's *Elena e Costantino*.

It was about fifteen years later when Carolina Uccelli used but updated Rossi's libretto to make it more in accord with the high Romanticism of the 1830s. Edemundo, whose role was written for mezzo soprano travesti in Rossi/Meyerbeer, becomes a tenor in Uccelli, and there were revisions to Rossi's libretto, especially the ending. Rossi and Meyerbeer had ended their opera with a Rondo-finale showpiece for the soprano, as Rossini did for so many of his opera serias, including La donna del Lago. Uccelli, however, ends her libretto with a trio/ensemble "Tra soavi ritorte d'amore."

It is, however, still a "rescue" opera with a happy ending which may have seemed out of date in 1835, the year of its debut at the Teatro del Fondo in Naples. According to notes from Teatro Nuovo, the opera was performed four times in Autumn, 1835, at the Fondo and then moved to the Teatro San Carlo for a single performance, possibly early in 1836. The cast was stellar: soprano Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani (the first Lucia), the tenor Napoleone Moriani and the baritone Giorgio Ronconi, who sang in seven of the world premieres of operas by Donizetti, and who was the first Nabucco.

It could well be that the career of Uccelli's Anna was cut short because another opera on a Scottish subject which debuted in Naples in the Fall of 1835 overshadowed it: *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Cammarano's libretto for Lucia is of course full-blown Romantic tragedy—madness, death and suicide—while Uccelli's opera harks back to an earlier time and must have seemed a bit old fashioned in 1835. It is interesting to note that the libretti for both Anna and *Emma di Resburgo* set their final scenes in the cemetery of the hero's family, among the family tombs. Edgardo is there for a duel with Lucia's brother Enrico; Edemondo is being taken there for execution by the tomb of his father, whom he is believed to have killed. Edgardo learns of Lucia's death there and stabs himself most melodiously. Edemondo is saved at the last minute by the conscience-stricken Norcesto in time for the lieto fine. The Romanticism of the cemetery setting lends its atmosphere to both works.

Donizetti, however, was a man; Uccelli was that rare avis, a female opera composer in early nineteenth century Italy. Donizetti went on to write another twenty-five operas or so in a meteoric career; Carolina Uccelli, whose husband had died in 1833, likely retired to a domestic life and the raising of her daughter who had been born in the late 1820s. After around 1846 she spent several years touring with her daughter, a singer, including an evening at one of Rossini's famous soirees in Paris. Her daughter's name was—Emma.

For more information, see Cori Ellison's interesting article "A Born Opera Composer" in Opera (June, 2024), available on line: https://www.opera.co.uk/features/a-born-opera-composer/. Also, the Notes on the Teatro Nuovo website are informative. There has been no modern performance of Mehul's *Héléna* to my knowledge, but there exists a fine concert performance of Meyerbeer's *Emma di Resburgo* from Vienna with Vivica Geneux and Simone Kermes. Once issued as a CD, it is now available on YouTube. Mayr's *Elena* and Raymond Carnicer's *Elena e Costantino* are available on CD and the latter is available on YouTube (audio only) in a performance from Madrid in 2005.