the revival of Gemma di Vergy at the S.Carlo of Naples in June 1838

John Black

GEMMA DI VERGY was first produced in Milan (La Scala) on 26th December 1834. Its first Neapolitan performance, at the Fondo Theatre, came just over two years later, on 4th March, 1837. It was moderately successful, being given seven times at that theatre; it was also given once, complete, at the S. Carlo, and there were five performances at that theatre of isolated acts. By the end of June the run had finished. As far as I can see, this revival is not mentioned in any of Donizetti's letters, and it is unlikely that he would have had much to do with it, since he was in Venice for the production of PIA DE' TOLOMEI, and only left for Naples on or about 22nd February.

No more is heard of GEMMA DI VERGY in Naples till the following June, when it was revived, this time at the S. Carlo, on 26th June, 1838. There were 16 complete and two incomplete performances between then and 4th September. There is no mention of this revival in Donizetti's correspondence either, but this is in no way surprising, since he was occupied with POLIUTO at that time.

The 1838 season at the S. Carlo had limped on throughout the spring and summer with a number of well tried works. The most recent success had been ROBERTO DEVEREUX, first performed the previous October (1837), but it had been taken off in early April. Sarmiento's ALFONSO D'ARAGONA, a new work, was introduced at the end of May, but only managed three performances. Perhaps the management thought that a revival of GEMMA DI VERGY would re-awaken public interest. There is no specific record in the files of the Superintendency of Theatres that permission to put it on was sought, but the interval since the last production was perhaps short enough for the original approval to be still operative. Nevertheless the decision to mount it must have been a hasty one, since there is evidence that it was prepared for the stage without any scenery being available for it. The Superintendent's approval had to be obtained for scenery and costume designs as well as for the text, and there is preserved in their files (in the State Archives in Naples) a memorandum from the Designer at the Royal Theatres, Antonio Nicolini, which reads as follows:

SCENERY TO BE USED FOR THE OPERA GEMMA DI VERGY

AT THE ROYAL THEATRE, S. CARLO

25th June, 1838

Act I

No. 1° Hall opened up with backcloth = the 3rd scene from the opera L"ASSEDIO DI CALAIS.

2° Hall of Justice = Hall of arms, with facing doorway, in the middle, used in the opera LA STRANIERA.

Act II

3° Ground floor room = Use for this room or gallery from the opera ROBERTO DEVEREUX.

4° Gothic room with windows, at night = use for this study (+), at night, from the opera ROBERTO DEVEREUX.

These scenes are the best which can be used for the opera GEMMA DI VERGY and they are in good order (*).

(Sgd.) Nicolini

(+) "gabinetto" (*) "decenti"

Underneath Nicolini's signature there are statements, similarly worded, signed by Donizetti and by Bidera (the librettist of GEMMA DI VERGY) agreeing to this arrangement from their own points of view. GEMMA DI VERGY was in fact performed the next day, presumably with the scenery that Nicolini listed in his memorandum.

A word on Antonio Nicolini is necessary at this point. Born near Florence in 1772, he was invited by the distinguished choreographer Gaetano Gioja to join the staff of the Royal Theatres in Naples in 1807, as designer of scenery. He was appointed official architect of the Royal Theatres three years later, and worked there exclusively till his death in 1850, undertaking a few architectural commissions outside the theatre. His principal fame as an architect rests on his reconstruction of the S. Carlo theatre after the disastrous fire of 12 February 1816, a task he accomplished in less than a year. He went on to design sets for no less than 146 operas and 115 ballets for the S. Carlo as well as others for the Fondo Theatre. At the same time he was the Director of the 'Reale Scuola di Scenografia', and his pupils there found fame all over Italy; among these was his son Fausto, who succeeded him as architect of the Royal Theatres in 1848.

His interpretation of the visual aspects of romanticism played an important part in the development of the 19th century melodrama.

The situation revealed by this document raises two questions; the first, how it came about that the scenery used previously was not still available; the second, how appropriate the substitute scenery was for its new purpose. The first question cannot now be answered; GEMMA DI VERGY had been in the repertoire from March to June of the previous year, and it can only be assumed that the scenery had been broken up and reused for other productions. I do not know if this was normal practice, with the sets being rebuilt for each revival, or if on this occasion it had been assumed that the opera would not be performed again and that it would thus not be necessary to keep the scenery in store.

The suitability of the substitute scenery can best be assessed by listing the sets specified by Bidera in the libretto, and putting beside them a description of those suggested by Nicolini. Bidera was always careful and precise in his descriptions, and so was Cammarano, the librettist of L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS and ROBERTO DEVEREUX, two of the operas mentioned. Romani - the librettist of the third, LA STRANIERA - was in this respect bald and unhelpful, but it may be assumed that the Neapolitan designers had produced something appropriate to the time and place in which this opera was set. Unlike Donizetti's L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS and ROBERTO DEVEREUX, both of which were first performed in Naples, Bellini's LA STRANIERA had received its first performance in Milan (in 1829).

GEMMA DI VERGY was set by Bidera in the period around 1420, while Charles VII was on the throne of France, and in Berry, at the Castle of Vergy (that is in the region around Bourges in central France). It requires two different sets for Act I; in Act II the first set is the same as one in Act I, and is consequently not mentioned in Nicolini's memorandum, but two other sets are needed, making a total of four to be found for the whole opera.

1° Act I, first set: "A gothic hall with a balcony from which the drawbridge of the castle can be seen, and in the distance a church adjoining the castle." (from Bidera's libretto).

The set suggested for this was that for "the third scene for L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS". In fact, the third set needed in this opera - a room in Aurelio's residence - is almost certainly too domestic in character for this purpose. The second set however, would fit the bill well, and it is likely that it was this one which Nicolini had in mind. Cammarano's description of this scene was: "An interior vestibule of the Town Hall: Calais can be seen at the back, and part of its ramparts". Apart from the date of the action (1347 for L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS), the scene would seem reasonably suitable for the opening scene of GEMMA DI VERGY: both would use a French style of decoration. The absence of a drawbridge is not important - the messenger is described as crossing it just after the curtain rises, but does not really

need to be seen doing so. The church is not mentioned again in the text.

2° Act I, second set: "The Hall of Justice".

The set suggested for this scene was that used for LA STRANIERA, Act II: "Large hall where the Tribunal of the Knights Hospitallers assembles, to whose jurisdiction the province is subject. A door can be seen". This opera was set in Brittany, at the Castle of Montolivo, around 1300, so that the style of the decor, like that of L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS, was not unreasonably anachronistic, and on the grounds of function would seem to be well matched.

3° Act II, second set: "A ground floor room leading to a delightful garden".

For this set, Nicolini made two suggestions; either the room or the gallery from ROBERTO DEVEREUX. The first of these can be safely identified as the set used for the first scene of that opera:- "A ground floor room in the Palace of Westminster, with a large opening at the back, from which can be seen a conservatory full of plants". The alternative would seem to be that for the beginning of the second act (in the three act layout) which Cammarano described simply as "Magnificent gallery in the Palace". ROBERTO DEVEREUX was of course set in London at the end of the 16th century and as such was inherently much less suitable for the period of GEMMA DI VERGY than either of the other operas listed. The first of Nicolini's two suggestions for this set would seem to have been the most suitable, but it is impossible to judge without having seen them.

4° Act II, third set: "A gothic hall with half opened windows. It is night. The scene is lit by a lamp placed in the middle of the room".

The set proposed for this was again drawn from ROBERTO DEVEREUX, described by Nicolini as "The study at night". There is in fact a set described as "The Queen's study" (Gabinetto della regina), being the closing scene of ROBERTO DEVEREUX, but there is no mention of it being night. A much more likely candidate would seem to be the set for the last scene of the first act, which Cammarano described as "The Duchess' rooms, in Nottingham's Palace. Facing are windows opening on to a garden; on one side a table, on which there is a lighted candlestick and a rich casket". While the candle can be taken as indicating night time, Roberto's surreptitious visit to Sara clearly took place at night, since at the end of the scene he refers to the first light of dawn. This is surely the scene which Nicolini had in mind, and, apart from the difference in time and place, might be expected to do well enough.

On the face if it, the substituted sets seem reasonable. It is however interesting to enquire how it happened that scenery from the other operas was available while that used only a year previously for GEMMA DI VERGY itself obviously was not. The

three operas were in fact all in the current repertoire. L'ASSEDIO DI CALAIS had been performed in January 1838 (once complete and twice incomplete); in February (once, incomplete) and in March (once, complete). It was to return to the repertoire in October and November. LA STRANIERA was given in May (four performances, all complete), June (four, all incomplete) and July (two, both incomplete). The dates of these performances in relation to those of GEMMA DI VERGY are revealing. The programmes for the Royal Theatres for the end of June and the beginning of July were as follows (ballets omitted):-

June	14	S. Carlo	LA STRANIERA Act I	(Bellini)
	16	"	LA STRANIERA Act II	
	17	"	DEMETRIO E POLIBIO Act I	(Rossini)
	19	"	BEATRICE DI TENDA Act I	(Bellini)
	21	Fondo	VALERIA	(Sarmiento)
	23	S. Carlo	LA STRANIERA Act I	
	24	"	BEATRICE DI TENDA	
	26	"	GEMMA DI VERGY	(Donizetti)
	27	"	GEMMA DI VERGY	
	29	"	I DUE SAVOJARDI	(Aspa)
	30	Fondo	ADELINA	(Generali)
July	1	S. Carlo	GEMMA DI VERGY	
	2	"	LA STRANIERA Act I	
	6	"	ALFONSO D'ARAGONA	(Sarmiento)
	8	"	BEATRICE DI TENDA Act I	
	9	Fondo	ADELINA	
	10	S. Carlo	LA STRANIERA Act I	
	12	"	GEMMA DI VERGY Act I	

There were no further performances of LA STRANIERA. Remember that the set "borrowed" from GEMMA DI VERGY came from Act II of that opera: that act was last seen on 16 June, 10 days before the revival of GEMMA DI VERGY, and the two performances which took place afterwards, on 2nd and 10th July, were of Act I only. Consequently the set from Act II of LA STRANIERA was not required for its proper use during the run of GEMMA DI VERGY, and though no doubt fresh in the audience's mind, would not have been seen on consecutive nights in different operas.

ROBERTO DEVEREUX had been frequently performed in February, and once in both March and April. It was then taken out of the repertoire, but returned in September. The last performances of GEMMA DI VERGY were on 30th and 31st August, and 2nd and 4th September. ROBERTO DEVEREUX was given on 6th, 8th and 9th September, with a further 10 performances before the end of the

year. Consequently the sets "borrowed" for GEMMA DI VERGY were before the public in their new role until two days before they were returned to their rightful place in ROBERTO DEVEREUX.

It may seem almost unbelievable to us today that in one of Italy's major opera houses in the 1830's the same sets could be used in different operas so closely in time, but the performance records allow for no other interpretation. The audience of the S. Carlo - and the critics too - often complained of the quality of the scenery there. It would seem that they had good reason to do so.