PRO OPERA and ADELAIDE DI BORGOGNA by Alexdr Weatherson

Nineteenth century books on Rossini scarcely mention Adelaide di Borgogna, Stendhal gives it a few words and Sutherland Edwards, writing immediately after Rossini's death gives it three terse lines; as was observed at the time it seems to have lived and died in the year of its birth (1817). Reasons for this are understandably hard to find at this distance, perhaps it was the place of the premiere, Rome, when the Maestro's heart was in Naples, or perhaps it was simply the cast that caused it to fail. Both the operas immediately before (Armida) and after (Mose) and both written for Naples, had Isabella Colbran as their star. She was the sensation of the hour and Rossini was excited enough by her talents to give up writing opera buffa in her honour. She perhaps, was the first of the great Spanish divas, a vivid dramatic soprano with an exceptionally agile voice and a natural gift for the demented duchesses and perjured princesses in demand for opera seria. The Rome cast was not outstanding, certainly not outstanding enough to persuade the critical Romans - deprived of a Colbran, that the great operatic entertainer was able to revert at a stroke to portentous plots, creaking conventions, and the elephantine structure of this kind of opera. Rossini too seems to have been in an even greater hurry than usual: there are familiar borrowings and adaptations and he was unwise enough to revive the cembalo continuo for the recits, a notion that seemed archaic even in the most conservative of capitals and at the hands of the composer most credited with supressing such things (starting with Elisabetta, Regina d' Inghilterra in 1815). The Romans were not pleased and the opera was a flop* Now after a lapse of some 160 years, Leslie Head and Pro Opera are to revive Adelaide di Borgogna at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the 19th November 1978. But is it in fact 160 years? Once a revival of this kind is under way the species of investigation involved, and finding the scores, the parts, the libretto, is a kind of detective story, throws up all sorts of red herrings. For example the vocal score- amazingly after such an apparant fiasco a vocal score was published- turns out to date from 1855; for a music house (Ricordi) to take this trouble so late in the day seems to imply that some sort of performance was in the air. As yet no midcentury revival seems to have emerged, but what has is a number of scattered performances not long after its Roman debut. Weinstock states that it 'had a few later stagings in Italy' and mentions

a performance at Livorno in 1825, the invaluable Opera Rara has come up with a libretto for a staging at Florence in 1820, so on two accounts at least Adelaide was not quite the failure we have been led to believe. Rossini, on the other hand dismembered it swiftly, nine numbers were transferred to Eduardo e Cristina (1819) which was a melange of Ermione (1819), Ricciardo e Zoraide (1818) and Adelaide, and a most unjustified success, so that after 1825 and in the normal course of things Rossinian, the opera could be imagined to have vanished into thin air, diluted happily into all sorts of other productions. The operas of this early Ottocento, and certainly Rossini's tended to be confections of sorts, a certain amount of new music judiciously blended with bits of (hopefully) forgotten scores, the whole thing cooked up together to a new libretto, arias and ensembles chopped up, music transposed up and down, fitted out with new recits and adapted to totally new situations. What was a cheerful declaration of love, at a slower tempo and in another key could become a suicide aria, or a declaration of war on the Ostrogoths, the Picts, the Scots or any other such unlikely group. All, certainly, was grist to the Rossinian mill. Happily by Rossini's day it was usually all Rossini's music, the generation before his was not so mealy-mouthed: arias by other composers, so long as they were popular ones, could find themselves inserted into anyones new opera, often completely uncredited. Copyright in any form was slow to get going or enforce

In the event for such a little known work Adelaide contains a surprisingly high proportion of new music. This was really a tremendous achievement. 1817 was a year of $3\frac{1}{2}$ operas for Rossini but never was he so resourceful, never were his ideas so free flowing. The year leading up to the end of his Neapolitan period were his most prolific; the near decade that followed in France contained only a few genuinely new works and after the retirement of Colbran (1824) his enthusiasm for the stage gradually declined. In the case of Adelaide however the general speed of production led to accusations of recourse to an abuse more usual in later life when he declared that he was too old or too ill to complete his scores himself. He was accused of farming out some of the numbers to a friend, in this case to Michele Carafa, Principe di Colobrano, a very accomplished musician with some operatic successes to his credit (ie a Gabriella di Vergy in 1816) Nothing as yet available in the music either confirms or denies this story. It is clear however, that the original production was fitted out with his apprentice overture to La Cambiale di Matrimonio , and here another mystery seems to present itself. A published edition of Rossini's complete

overtures by Fratelli Fabbri includes a version of an overture, described as being to Adelaide di Borgogna and based on a manuscript in the collecton of Maestro Gallini of Milan, which has considerable variations from the original to La Cambiale. It seems then possible that at some later performances Rossini made a special adaptation of his original choice. Leslie Head howver, with the idea of an authentic performance in mind, has decided for the Elizabeth Hall exhumation to use the full overture and ignore what may have been second thoughts on the part of the composer.

Any attempt at resuscitation of such an opera must first tackle the music itself, from whatever manuscript sources are available, and this Urs Schaffer has done, undertaking considerable research as well as preparing new orchestral material. In view of the ever changing nature of such scores, Schaffer has tried to reconstruct the opera in a version possibly more authentic than that of the vocal score of 1855.
This has meant a number of slight changes, most notably in the inclusion of some music which seems to have been intended for Adelaide and then, perhaps later dropped. This includes extra arias for tenor and bass, and to balance them a lovely duet has been added, for soprano and mezzo, from Aureliano in Palmira (1813). What we are to be offered then is what amounts to an unknown opera from Rossini's best period, with an extensive range of music never heard before outside of Italy.

Rossini's opera seria succeeded in changing the tenor of the lyrical theatre in Italy almost completely. Unlike his opera buffa which was quite traditional in form, he was to use this genre of opera to advance the notion of romantic theatre: as as such Donizetti was his principal heir and all students of Donizetti will look forward to this exciting revival. A.W.

Note: * Just about every authority agrees on this, the main exception being Grove (5th.Ed) which states oddly that Adelaide was 'well sung and warmly received' !.