"L'ESULE DI ROMA" BY ALEXANDER WEATHERSON

L'ESULE DI ROMA - Donizetti's first 'great' opera?

Anna Bolena's sovereign status in Donizetti's life and work has shed some of its lustre in recent years. Not diminished - far from it - but the twitching aside of the curtain of silence that covered the operas before it has revealed merits, aspirations, and music of such a high order that her significance as a 'giant step' in his career has become less valid. The fact is, Donizetti had been experimenting fruitfully for at least five years prior to 1830. He had a speculative mind, one fully equipped to digest a whole range of operatic notions; this was a talent conspicuously different from that of the eclectic Meyerbeer for example and followed different paths, the splendid education he had received from Mayr did not condition him to any particular operatic mould (pace the opaque view of Italian opera put forth throughout the German-dominated nineteenth century), his arrival on the stages of Italy coincided with the departure of Rossini and he found his feet only cautiously in the theatrical vaccuum this caused. For the Bergamasc maestro the years 1820-30 marked his operatic education as distinct from his musical education: it is clear that he was searching for a way forward from at least as early as Elvida (182) - with a secure foothold only in opera buffa he was obliged to scramble sideways along many operatic ledges before he reached his 1830 summit but there were moments en route when he could look down with a real sense of triumph.

The influences were complex and L'esule di Roma (1828) shows the traces of several maestri. To grasp the impact of this score it is necessary to know the work of his successful contemporaries-most of whom have vanished even more completely than he ever did. In the Naples of 1828 for example, Giovanni Pacini was a shining star, his genuinely sensational scores such as Alessandro nelle Indie (1824), L'ultimo giorno di Pompei (1825) and Gli arabi nelle Gallie (1827) had set standards in operatic spectacle. More than this, he had propagated a kind of operatic attenuation where the crisp brilliance of Rossini's days had been replaced by music of self-indulgent prolixity, Pacini specialised - not in fact in the cabalette usually linked with his name - but in the long long duetto, where a series of self-generating emotions reflect the rising tensions of the two protagonists. This made a mark both on Bellini and Donizetti. It was unmistakeably Pacini who inspired the two remarkable duets that become the centrepiece of each act of L'esule di Roma, and which owe so much to the famous 'Ah sposo mio' of L'ultimo giorno di Pompei and are of comparable length, exhaustiveness, and passing volatility. (Tosi and Lablache sang in both prime and in two of these three cited duets). Donizetti's opera - which shares its Roman setting - has a free flowing growth that echoes the pacing of Pacini's not-dissimilar type of plot.

Two years earlier, in 1826, Donizetti had set 'for his own amusement' the Gabriella di Vergi of Tottola/Carafa: this was a libretto of the highest theatrical drama and required the kind of vocal projection that would make Rossini's canto fiorito seem bland. If Donizetti's 1826 essay did not do this his L'esule di Roma begins to demonstrate the fruits of the excercise, in this opera it is passion that moulds the vocal line for the first time in his art, the helpless desperation of Argelia is in direct descent from Gabriella and she in turn is the ancestor of many such victims. Paër's Agnese (Parma 1809) was perhaps the model for the 'mad scene' in Act II of L'esule. Donizetti had heard this celebrated score in which a father 'goes mad through shame' during its revival at the Teatro Valle, Rome in 1824 just before his own L'ajo nell' imbarazzo. No doubt its theatrical impact returned to him when required to demonstrate the abject shame of the guilty Murena, unable to wriggle out of his dilemma (Murena, in Italian, is the name of a slimy eel-like fish, so he is the Donizettian precursor of Verdi's Wurm). Rossini of course makes a showing in the score but is notable chiefly for his absence. He is present in the rigid formulation of some scene, in the stylised floridity of some of Murena's vocalisations (Bellini too had difficulty in taking out the bends from a villain's sea-bottom fulminations), but he is conspicuously absent at several vital points. There is no overture, (Pacini too dropped this Rossinian trademark); there is no quartet or quintet to hold up the action; most remarkable of all, there is no concertato to end Act I (traditionalists must have been aghast), the act ends with a trio, quite the most impressive piece of music in the whole work.

Some three months earlier than L'esule di Roma (prima 1st

January 1828) came the score which marked the demise of the Rossinian supremacy for good, this was Bellini's superb Il pirata (prima 27th October, 1827). Donizetti's score shows little of its impact (it would have its biggest effect on Anna Bolena), he needed time to digest such a radical change of direction and in fact both poem and music were cast in a far more predictable mould. The opera is in two acts at a time when this was beginning to be old-hat, its plot in classical antiquity came in the same tradition as the three Pacinian scores mentioned earlier, and was far from the 'gothic' strangeness of the Romani/Bellini Il pirata. Even so, L'esule di Roma is quite as much a pointer to a new age. From the first notes it is mood that dictates the flow and the dynamics of the score, the cast is pared-down to three protagonists - soprano (victim), tenor (lover) and bass (villain) - this would suffice Italian opera for a very long time. The opera moves forward almost without effort, the tenor uses his aria di sortita as a kind of lyrical-recitativo to set the plot going, to establish his vocal colouring and to make his unsuspected presence in Rome the more moving when - from the side of the stage - he watches the arrival of Argelia unobserved. (Anticipating Poliuto but with roles reversed. Certain kinds of theme run through all Donizetti's classically set scores). She, unhappy and regretful, enters without an aria di sortita and her gentle arioso merges into the great central duet with the skill and dramatic effectiveness that shows the hand of a master. From then on the score never lets up, although symmetrical in many of its features this symmetry is cunningly disguised.

Bellini indeed praised L'esule - if chillingly. To Florimo he wrote 'vedo che ci sta della buona musica' and added crossly that he would dearly love to find such a subject himself and that Gilardoni would never discover its equal. Bellini's part in this score would come only after his revision of Bianca e Fernando had taken the stage at Genoa in April 1828; Donizetti noted well the effect of the dungeon scene in Act II of this opera and added one of his own to L'esule di Roma when it was revived at La Scala in July of the same year. He thus provided an emotional continuity and a more effective cumulative climax to the score (but made the 'mad scene' rather superfluous so that in later stagings it was often dropped). No doubt this soon came to the ears of the ever-alert catanese. It is certain that this opera with its strong melody, bold contours, striking innovations, powerful stage drama and deft handling made an impression on all those who had previously dismissed the Bergamasc as simply an adroit comedian. Everyone revised their opinion of him at this stage. His ability to make music work for him - often with simpler material than either Bellini or Mercadante would have tolerated, made Bellini tremble, and Donizetti was soon to replace Pacini as his most hated rival.

For the rest of us this imaginatively scored, richly impassioned opera can be seen to launch the second phase of his career. Rossini's generously percipient remark to the effect that the Act I trio-finale would 'have been enough to make any composer's reputation' was huge praise; we hope to go further, to make his standing as a great composer come earlier in his long list of works than that great barrier Anna Bolena has yet permitted.

The plot

Settimio (tenor) has been exiled from Rome by the devious Senator Murena (bass). He returns secretly to see Argelia (soprano), the daughter of Murena, with whom he is in love; Settimio has proof that he is innocent and that Murena is a traitor but tries to spare Argelia this knowledge. To Murena he offers his hand, and this last is overcome with shame and cowardice when Settimio is arrested again and condemned to death. After agonies of self-reproach Murena resolves to confess and goes to follow Settimio to die in the circus. As Argelia waits in helpless despair cries of joy are heard. Settimio has been defended from the other beasts in the circus by a lion with whom he had struck up an Androcles-like friendship in the desert to which he had been banished. In the face of this miracle the Emperor Tiberius frees Settimio and forgives Murena (while stripping him from Senatorial rank). The lovers are reunited.

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