A PACINIAN SPRING

BY ALEXANDER WEATHERSON



If you thought that the supply of operatic kings and queens had run out with Mary Stuart and Rossini's *Elisabetta, Roberto Devereux* and so on, you are in for a surprise. London has already encountered Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II in *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* but they may have slipped by almost unrecognised, and Donizetti indeed still has an *Alfredo il Grande* in the wings - but waiting behind *him* is a tremendous list including Bonny Prince Charlie (Coccia), Lady Jane Grey (Vaccai) Perkin Warbeck (*Varbek*) (by Galli), Margaret of York (*Margherita di Yorck*) (by Nini), Henry IV (Balfe), Henry V (many composers), most of Henry VIII's unfortunate wives (*pace Anna Bolena*), James I, Charles I (*pace I Puritani* and Queen Henrietta-Maria), 'Crumvello' nearly set by Verdi, Charles II (Pacini), James II, sundry Scottish monarchs (*pace Macbeth and La donna del lago*), not forgetting La Stuarda's mother Marie de Guise - in fact a very long list which no doubt her principal antagonist John Knox (no opera about him! - unless someone can dig up a'Giovanni Obnoxio') would have called a 'monstrous regiment' of queens, princesses, kings and pretenders. Omitting only the George's (too dull) and the Welsh princelings (too unpronounceable).

To add to this, in the coming spring we have another candidate, Bloody Mary, the surprising heroine of Giovanni Pacini's *Maria regina d'Inghilterra* (prima 11.2.1843 Teatro Carolino, Palermo).
Italian librettists adored our monarchs, they felt free to be as rude about them as they liked. Mostly they set them out to denounce them - as immoral (like 'Enrico secondo' mentioned above as illegitimate (like *Anna Bolena*), as a strumpet (like *Caterina Howard* in Matteo Salvi's opera), or as lovelorn, *and* immoral,*and* illegitimate *and* a strumpet, like that international operatic favorite Queen Elisabeth I. Her plain sister Mary Tudor, to us an extremely unpromising topic was viewed by the Italian romantics in a rosy glow quite foreign to her sickly ways. She was of course a good Catholic and this helped, she married Phillip II of Spain which should have confered operatic respectability, apart from this she was only distinguished by dying mercifully early. Given the usual treatment she could however be made to suffer unrequited love like her more personable sister and the librettist Leopoldo Tarantini with Hugo's 'Marie Tudor' on hand gave her the usual works. The twin poles of early nineteenth century Italian opera were suffering and love, especially in high places.

It is not just in London that Pacini is stiring. His home town is reviving this spring his late masterpiece *Saffo* - an opera whose plunging heroine brought about his own resurfacing in the stormy seas of Italian opera in the 1840's.
Giovanni Pacini was born in Catania - like his rival Bellini - in 1796, the son of one of the most brilliant buffo basses of the day. A stage prodigy he was an unstoppable gusher of of theatrical works and in a life that was not abnormally long wrote no less than 90 operas: if it is imagined that they must of necessity be nothing but theatrical pulp you are in for another surprise, many were of such calibre that they were staged throughout Europe and America, and if some were flops, at least they were flops of the most resounding and endearing kind in the best tradition of all such gales of hissing.
His career falls into two distinct halves. Until 1835 he wrote copiously for an insatiable theatre: for four years he retired to Tuscany to nurse his bruises after too many lost battles with Donizetti and Bellini; just before 1840 and *Saffo* he made an extraordinary comeback after which he was never long absent from the stage. It was frankly a brilliant career, he was a celebrity before he was twenty - his much publicised love affair with Pauline Bonaparte (she was twice his age and moribund, but never mind it was a real coup) and the scatter-brained contessa Giulia Samoyloff made the headlines.
For a time his ubiquitous *arie d' assieme* were such popular concert fare that the envious - from Berlioz to Bellini, and the puzzled - from Mendelssohn to Mercadante - ground their pens in rage.

Maria regina d'Inghilterra of course comes in his second phase and demonstrates his gifts. His curious inequalities as a composer come from complex sources, Rossini - while admiring- thought he 'did not know' music, but was probably wrong; he responded badly to competition - when the horizon was clear he could be bolder than most, he was easily bored and tended to brighten up scores unwontedly (he was known unjustly as the 'maestro delle cabalette'), more than any of his rivals he had a feeling for the spacious - if the *grand opéra* had been an Italian invention Pacini would have been its most energetic advocate. *Maria* is as enthusiastically full-blooded as any, it shows his special ability to master a vivid stage-setting in music - his feeling for the topos of any plot; he was probably the first to jettison the rossinian 'number' opera in that the *flow* from piece to piece, from scene to scene, was always unusually masterly. He also- like Donizetti - knew when exactly to pull out the big tune and when Pacini wrote a big

tune it was enormous! For sheer theatrical guts, for real verve and impetus, for stage drama of real force, Pacini is hard to beat and if spring is coming, the summer should prove rewarding indeed.

THE PLOT

Nothing very original at first glance, in fact the situations provided by Tarantini seem to be a rag-bag of Rossini's *Elisabetta,* a dash of *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* - plus large lumps of *Roberto Devereux.* At first glance only: there are indeed some notable ironies in this libretto. Set in London in 1553, Maria (mezzo-soprano) is confronted with a commoner rival (she is actually a duchess but....) for the love of a renegade Scotsman Riccardo (tenor); in fact Clotilde (soprano) loves Ernesto (baritone). Maria, forced to imprison and condemn to death Riccardo, uses Clotilde to help him escape but Clotilde double-crosses her! Unwittingly Maria proceeds to double-cross Clotilde ! As they both wait for the gun to announce the execution, Maria turns to Clotilde in triumph believing that she has saved her (their) joint lover. Clotilde is aghast (thinking that her Ernesto has been substituted) but Gualtiero Churcill (bass) (yes) comes in like the Duke of Nottingham elsewhere and reveals that for the good of the realm Riccardo has gone to the block (he has been the best double-crosser of them all). Maria is at first shattered - but then accepts in (fairly) good gracethe will of heaven and her country. (It is not hard to guess what the real Mary Tudor would have done). For this chess-playing plot Pacini provides some beautiful music in a fascinating score with many high spots, notably a superb barcarola (for tenor) in Act 1 and a scena finale of great power and brilliance. (C) A.W.

PERF. DATES March 23,25,26 Camden Festival-Bloomsbury Th. (formerly Collegiate), 15 Gordon St. LONDON

PACINI CASSETTE: To tie in with the revival of Mary Tudor Ottocento Archive has prepared a prerecordedcassette entitled *"Pacini's Greatest Hits"*- incl music from *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei/ Adelaide e Comingio/ Saffo/ Gli Arabi nelle Gallie/ La Sposa fedele/Niobe/ Il Corsaro and La Regina di Cipro.* Available from the Archive priced at £6.50 to incl postage.

LE MIE MEMORIE ARTISTICHE(Pacini) Autobiography - a reprint of the Florence 1875 edition in Italian/list of opere £8.50

