L'ebreo melodramma tragico in un prologo e tre atti, music by Giuseppe Apolloni. Teatro dell'opera giocosa, Teatro Chiabrera, Savona 29th October 1989.

Crispino e la comare melodramma fantastico-giocoso in tre atti, music by Luigi and Federico Ricci. Teatro dell'opera giocosa, Teatro Chiabrera, Savona 11th November 1989.

The intrepid *Teatro dell'opera giocosa* revived two rarities this year, both of mid nineteenth-century vintage,* a time when Verdi had taken over the centre of the lyric stage, when almost any opera by any of his contemporaries had to be measured against his success. How hard it was to maintain an individual voice can be judged by these two operas, both triumphantly received at the outset, both subsequently neglected. *L'ebreo* vanished completely after some decades of revival, Apolloni's name even being omitted from the reference books (*Fétis*, poor fellow, giving him four lines in which he made two major errors).
How much has been lost by such wilful neglect can be judged as a result of Savona's initiative. In *L'ebreo* we heard a grand melodious opera, full of well-made music. It is true that the strains were not *new*, nor were there any real surprises in harmonic structure, orchestration, or dramatic conception, but there was a prodigious melodic resource, a continuous stream of memorable tunes splendidly phrased in eloquent singing. Was this enough to justify revival? It was as far as I am concerned, who neglects to read Jane Austin simply because Dickens or Flaubert hogged the centre of the stage? Act I of *L'ebreo* was sheer joy, opening boldly with a declamatory recitative by the baritone, linked to a necklace of arias, duets and ensembles (including a *ballabile* rather too saccharine for current tastes),encompassing a wonderful cabaletta for the tenor *'Amarti, amarti ed essere'* I went on singing for days, and a *duetto* for baritone and soprano *'Romito fior nel tramite'* which Verdi would have been proud to acknowledge - urgent, vivid, entirely attractive. Act II contained a *preghiera* for the *ebreo* of the title role with harp accompaniment, melifluous and moving with a *unisone* coro, *Verdian* to be sure, but who should care about that when the music was so accomplished and so wonderfully sung as it was by Simone Alaimo who in this opera found a truly starring role. Is it that we are forbidden to hear music that simply sounds like good Verdi?
Nor was Apolloni's score without thoughtful construction. He found fruitful thematic links from the *preludio* onwards, there was even a sort of *leitmotif* cunningly threading its way through the soprano's outbursts. The libretto, by Antonio Boni, a *vicentino* crony, was full of holes and illogicalities (heaven only knows why *Leila* should have been so insistant on becoming a Christian when her *amante* was a Moor and her father a self-destructively devout Jew!), but not worse than many others. The production at Savona I did not find very helpful, too square, too centralised, insufficiently supplied with melodramatic fantasy such as *this* opera, above-all, requires, but it was staged with conviction and well-played and sung. The opera is not a *music-drama* but a *melodramma romantico* of a well-tried kind, full of stops and starts that requires that kind of over-the-top staging such as Ponchielli would demand (if, that is, someone would take the trouble to cast an eye over Ponchielli's splendid theatre). Indeed, the sum total of Apolloni's achievement is rather nearer to Ponchielli than to Verdi, his *melody* being the raison d'être,and not the intrinsic drama. Apolloni's characters, *Issachar*, *Leila* and *Adel-Muza* are vignettes who thrive only within a general framework of *grand-opéra* artifice and whose relationships remain confrontations set between the set-pieces (*tableaux vivants*) of the *concertati*. That such a traditional formula is employed here should not detract from Apolloni's real achievement, *L'ebreo* was his single theatrical success.
The interpreters, led by Simone Alaimo, succeeded in bringing this opera back to life. His heroic singing, huge voice, fine acting and total commit-

ment was the lynchpin of the production. He has become a great singer. The role of *Leila*, written for Marianna Barbieri-Nini and frequently sung by her at the end of her career, was taken by Fernanda Costa (in the wake of a well-received *Maria Stuarda*). An attractive vocalist and figure on the stage (unlike Barbieri-Nini who must have looked thoroughly unconvincing) she deployed a not-yet quite powerful enough soprano with some skill, apprehension of the vocal pinnacles to come taking its toll - who could fail to be daunted by Barbieri's ferocious cabaletta *'Tra i beati in paradiso'*- but sharing the honours of the many *duetti* stylishly and with a relish for the genre. Dino di Domenico, as *Adel-Muza*, no actor sadly, stood and sang his fine music; Armando Caforio, as *re Ferdinando*, is gifted with a sonorous bass but had little help from the production. Massimo De Bernart kept the opera on a tight rein but allowed the passing beauties their full due; Apolloni lives, as they say, thanks to his riding of the melodramatic climaxes with taste and understanding.

Of course *Crispino e la comare* was in complete contrast, at once sophisticated and artful, as befitted the *fratelli* Ricci at their peak after twin careers full of knowing music. How strange this opera is, the blackest of comedies, both internally (as far as the brothers themselves were concerned), and externally (as far as the sinister tale is concerned). What is it all about? Little have past audiences cared, the opera was usually a success - not because of the ambiguous plot - but because the vocal gems and the plethora of dancing tunes invariably despatched them from the theatre in a state of entrancement. But the *Teatro dell'opera giocosa* has cared for once, tackling the cruel story, the arcane bizarrerie of the *comare's* manifestations, and the kitsch score with an enviable courage. *Crispino*, a starving cobbler living during the "Belle Epoque" fantasises his revenge in the form of a medical impersonation set in eighteenth-century Venice of a Longhi-like charm, undone by excess he returns to reality (and poverty), with the hope of some charity. The Teatro Chiabrera indulged this fable both with an extravagant setting and by pointing the frivolous music with the utmost care, taking certain permitted liberties. *Crispino e la comare* was written as a *melodramma fantastico-giocoso in quattro atti*, not the *tre atti* as staged here in Savona, this is permissible because, during its long performance history, this opera went through many metamorphoses sanctioned by the composers, versions cut, translated (*ie* employing different dialects) and transposed for different artists. Savona indulged in suave redeployment, with an *allestimento* adroitly skirting parody, sarcasm, operetta, pantomime and farce, with ravishing settings and a decided flair. The Act I *duetto finale*, Federico's unmistakeable music, a scintillating affair, *Annetta* (Daniela Lojarro) flicking-in her notes amidst *Crispino's* (Roberto Coviello) marvellously clear syllabic enunciation, the whole against a backdrop of the *Serenissima*, under a rain of golden pennies worthy of an operatic divinity descending upon Danae.

Not all the production went as well as this. The *comare* arrived by boat, instead of from the depths of the well prescribed by Piave, thus (as *La Morte*) she was deprived of the downward dimension to which she is entitled, but the boat looked impressive. The *scena della Frittola* stole the thunder from the ensuing *scena dei Lumicini* (which received only a perfunctory staging) thus ducking the wholly sinister nemesis that *Crispino* should encounter in the opera. On the credit side, the stunning cynicism of *Annetta's* consumer-conscious *'Io non sono più l'Annetta'* (black négligée, Munroe lookalike), replete with breathy café-chantant charm, captured the essence of the score whose one foot is in a Vienna that is yet to come. On the credit side too, Alaimo's *Fabrizio*, teeth gleaming under a broad moustache, an Edwardian masher whose *'Io sono un po'filosofo'* was a tour-de-force, the cabaletta *'Donnine amabili'* sung in the platea with pralines flung into the enraptured audience. The celebrated *terzetto* was the success it must be, and was encored the second evening. Here and elsewhere Coviello earned a huge ovation, as did Antonio Marani, a splendid *Mirabolano*. Serena Lazzarini brought an excellent musical reserve to the *comare*, so often

deadly (for the wrong reasons). Nowhere in this production was there any undersinging, and how often can one say that?

If the Ricci brothers are to make a come back, and it has never been clear why they ever went away, this *Crispino e la comare* may prove to be the turning point. Such a complete accord as that achieved at Savona by Beppe De Tomasi (*Regia*) and Paolo Carignani (*Direttore*) may be taken for granted by Ligurian audiences but is surely an example for other and larger theatres not too far from our doorstep.

Alexander Weatherson

* The third opera of the season at Savona, *Torvaldo e Dorliska*, belongs to an earlier operatic era of course.