# PACINI'S *AMAZILIA*

## *a transatlantic choice*

The French-based Rubini Society has come up with the ingenious idea of resurrecting Giovanni Pacini's remarkable *Amazilia* to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. Set in Florida, it was one of the very few operas of the day to portray the Conquistadores in a good light, as the manipulators of a *lieto fine*, no less, thus ensuring that the Naples Gala for which it was first staged would end with agreeable (if somewhat grotesque) optimism.

The history of this score is typically confused. Pacini, clear-headed enough where his compositional practices were concerned, spinning-out notes like a musical combine-harvester, scores neatly packaged and processed on demand, was an arch-muddler of dates and times; he spent almost every hour at his desk, and consequently lost track of time and place with ease. It seems that the opera was commissioned as early as January 1824 for the birthday of Ferdinando I of the Two Sicilies. No one knows what caused the delay but the libretto was not passed by the censors until after this birthday had taken place and the opera did not get to the stage until 6 July 1825 when Ferdinando was dead and buried. It seems certain that the composer sketched his score soon after the commission was received (he was far too impatient to wait for for the censors and frequently wrote page after page of his operas without the benefit of anyone's verse but his own - in any case Giovanni Federico Schmidt's text would contain few novelties as he well knew) but he was able, as a result of the long delay, to re-tailor the whole to an astonishing triumvirate of stars it was proposed should give it a belated hearing.

These were years of change in Italian opera, Rossini had departed and neither Donizetti or Bellini had truly arrived. Pacini, already a celebrity held a kind of watching brief for operatic continuity in Naples. For once he could forge ahead without a sideways glance and the operas he wrote in this interim are of the greatest interest even if no one has subsequently paid them much attention. Like the *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* which is almost contemporary, this *Amazilia* is full of surprises.

The first of these surprises is that the opera emerged as a 1 Act score, especially as it was published in 2 Act form. Operas however, such as *Amazilia*, destined for a Royal Gala *prima*, were quite often written in a one act version simply because audience concentration would be low. Then, it was centred on three singers almost exclusively: Pacini abandoned the lavish casting so popular in the Rossini era and wrote a score focussed on a *trio*. That the trio consisted of Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle, Giovanni David and Luigi Lablache, fabulous singers all, was only part of the explanation. Pacini conceived a vocal equity rare at that date, with parity established between the registers; thus, though *basso* and *tenore* have entry arias, Amazilia herself (*soprano*) makes her entry only in a *gran'duetto* which culminates in due course (with all sorts of coming and going in between) in a monumental *terzetto*. Amazilia gets her big moment much later in the opera when she has a *gran'scena* of exceptional length and emotional complexity, the composer pulling out all the stops with a recitative and *"rondò con coro"* (in fact a C Major aria and *cabaletta* - astonishingly *a slow* cabaletta) which too leads to a second *terzetto* which ends the opera. But wait a minute. Did not Donizetti receive huge praise for his *terzetto finale* ending to Act 1 of *L'esule di Roma* (1828) which everyone thought very daring? Did not Bellini get whistled for doing the same thing in *Norma* (1831)? Is not *Ernani* (1844) still held forth as an example of operatic invention simply because it ends in a trio? Pacini preceeded all three with *Amazilia*, and when he divided the opera into two (for Vienna in 1827) he did it in such a way that *both* acts ended in a trio!

But this is beside the point, it is not the novel construction of the score which attracts attention but its openness to the new romantic mode, *Amazilia* begins in a Rossinian vein - the Rossini that is of his later Neapolitan years, expansive, imaginative, but formula bound - and increasingly jettisons formula as the score progresses, *Amazilia* in fact captures change on the wing and represents a terminal point of one style and something of an augury to a romantic future.

These intimations of change, indeed, almost never impinge on the Rossinian forms he inherited and (like Donizetti and Bellini) he hardly ever challenges. There is the usual sequence of *scene* (*recitativo/aria/cabaletta*), the usual *cori*, the occasional *banda*, and so on, Pacini effects change only by mood, by simplifying the vocal and orchestral line in favour of expressiveness rather than balance. That the opera appears to have an overall tonality is frankly a red-herring, it is simply that the formal incrustations of ornament gradually become less insistant and a lyrical expansion progressively takes over. A breakdown makes this clear:

1. *Sinfonia*: cheerfully Rossinian, complete with *crescendo*.
2. *Introduzione, coro and cavatina (Cabana)*: this bass aria is astoundingly florid yet symmetrical, incorporating a bipartite call-to-arms of very conventional facture.
3. *Scena (Zadir)*: a tenor *entrata* in the familiar *andantino/allegro* form, set very high for the voice with elaborate (written) cadenzas.
4. *Duetto (Zadir/Amazilia)*: tripartite, with a *marcia* (for *banda*) as *tempo di mezzo*; jaunty and with almost delerious violent cadenzas despite its tragic character. Terminates with a *unisone* stretta.
5. *Marcia, recitativo, coro and terzetto (Amazilia/Zadir/Cabana comprimari e coro)*: a generically organised sequence of linked episodes for orchestra, chorus and soloists ending in an angry trio for the principals; *allegro maestoso/Allegretto/allegro vivace* culminating in a furious *fortissimo* concertato.
   [The 2 Act version of the score ends here, with this trio as *finale primo*]
6. *Scena e duetto (Cabana/Amazilia)*: a vividly contrasted duet making a feature of Amazilia's *fioriture* offset against Cabana's threatening but dignified behaviour.
7. *Coro, scena ed aria (Zadir)*: an innovative and unusually flexible solo, fluctuating in mood and preceeded by a long *sostenuto* orchestral ritornello.
   [The above two sections were added to the 1 Act score in order to extend it sufficiently in 2 Act form]
8. *Coro, recitativi, gran'scena and terzetto finale (Amazilia/Zadir/Cabana/comprimari e coro)*: a quasi-continuous sequence in related keys, with a persistant mood of anguish, in slow tempi (*andante/meno mosso/andante grazioso*) with Amazilia's moving slow cabaletta 'Parmi vederlo..ahi misero' as its centrepiece; highly dramatic with key words underlined by melismas. The abrupt (*maestoso*) *lieto fine* in marked contrast and key with the rescued lovers warbling happily against the laments of the discarded lover Cabana.

This freely evolving opera certainly demonstrates all the merits and otherwise of Pacini's *ad hoc* style of composing that he tamed only in his last years. But *Amazilia* is full of imagination and reveals a composer eager to embark on the wilder shores of romantic expression even at the cost of the florid vocal flights which were his trademark (he was not called the *"Maestro delle cabalette"* without good cause). Little justice has been given to his inate if capricious musical integrity. Savona, next year (1992) is proposing to revive Giovanni Pacini's *Medea* (1843), a vehement score, *Amazilia* should supply a fascinating and novel counterbalance to the sobriety of the latter. [For details of the Rubini Society; see Newsletter No.51 p2: times and places for the revival of this *Amazilia* will be given in the next Newsletter]

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