John Stewart Allitt

IL DILUVIO BERGAMASCO

(*pages from a diary*)

We arrived and were greeted by torrential rain - it poured down from the heavens; each day it poured and it poured even as we bade farewell. Such in a nutshell was the weather. But amidst this deluge my wife and I quickly found the ark of friendship and the joy of music making, together with all those other things that make Italy so memorable, the food, the delicious ice creams at midnight (after rehearsals), and the wine and coffee for those who crave for such things. The only time we had to ourselves were the hours of sleep, the rest was a merry-go-round of activities.

Ian Caddy had prepared three magnificent editions of Mayr's 'Hannibal' or 'Carthaginian' cantatas composed in 1816 for the Seminary, that is the Seminary up the hill and at the end of Via Arena (the road known to all Donizettians who have made the pilgrimage to Bergamo), the Seminary that was in time to produce Pope John XXIII. Ian Schofield had printed out full scores, vocal scores and parts to be proud of. At last we were to hear the three cantatas performed in the order listed by Mayr as part of the Donizetti Festival. We arrived grateful for Maestro Allorto's faith in our work.

It was not long before Thomas Briccetti was rehearsing the soloists, Paolo Pellegrini (tenor), Ian (bass baritone) and Barbara Frittoli (soprano). We immediately were plunged into Mayr's quite amazing recitatives with their orchestral accompaniment which paint and illustrate the context of the words being sung, Later, once the orchestra joined the rehearsals, we were, as ever, impressed with the instrumental language that one instantly recognises as Mayr's. The obbligato soloists were playing well, especially the Russian leader who had announced to Tom that for her the last cantata was 'a concerto for *violin* and soprano', in that order. Well, without a doubt the first violin part had been written for the great Capuzzi, the pupil of Tartini, and the music was, as the young Germans say today, *prima*. The results of voice and instrument playing were ravishing.

Besides the rehearsals leading up to the concert we were treated to *Gianni di Parigi* (you can keep the whole of *Tristan und Isolde* for the last extended scene between Gianni and the Princess), and we thoroughly enjoyed seeing on stage an opera we had only known from CD's. But more exhilerating in every way was the concert of music by Padre Davide da Bergamo (Felice Moretti 1791-1863). Padre Davide had long occupied an important place in my mind after reading about him in the *Numero Unico* commemorating the centenary of Donizetti's birth. Padre Davide was one of the great organists of his age and had been a student of Mayr. Furthermore we were to hear a Serassi organ. The Serassi were a famous family of organ makers from Bergamo, on whom Mayr had written an extended series of biographies...remember, he too was a fine organist. My ears were thrilled by what I heard. First of all was the sound of the Serassi organ, so different to the stuffy or aggressive sounds that our cathedral organists seem to produce, sounds that immediately send me to the nearest exit or striding across the room to turn the radio off. How these damned organists can ruin sung Evensong! The Dutch organist, Liuwe Tamminga had the whole audience sitting on the edge of their seats. Beautiful instrumental sounds sung out melodies that you or I would associate more with a Mayr or Rossini overture, or even a Donizetti aria, duet or trio. I could not believe what I was hearing. The melody for the Elevation of the Host was somehow all that I love in Bellini and Donizetti translated into religious devotion. Play one of those sinfonias at the end

of a service and you would trot all the way to paradise, I promise you. But just in case one was getting the idea that Padre Davide was just an 'operatic' organist-composer, Liuwe Tamminga gave an extraordinary performance of a piece called *Le sanguinose giornate di marzo ossia La rivoluzione di Milano* (presumably composed circa 1848). Here was music of the power of Liszt or Widor. My wish is to hear all the pieces again. (Harmonia Mundi have put out a tasteless CD which includes two Padre Davide pieces, forget it). We also heard a Requiem Mass and a Litany of Our Lady for male voices. These sounded very much like the close harmony singing one used to hear all over Lombardy and the Veneto but which now, thanks to 'progress' has all but disappeared.

The concert was a promotion for the newly founded *Associazione Padre Davide* which aims to prepare critical editions of Felice Moretti's music and encourage recordings. Write for more information to Via Serio 1, 24050 Zanica (BG), Italy.

Unfortunately I must be more critical of our concert. A Monday evening caught in a deluge does not bode well for a big audience, and such was the case. It was bad programme planning to put the three cantatas in the first half followed by Donizetti's cantata for Mayr *Dalla Francia un saluto t'invia*. It was cruel to start with the tenor, cold, as it were, without a sinfonia as a curtain raiser. At least the Schubert symphony should have been played in the first half, thus saving the cantatas for the programme's conclusion. I guess originally the cantatas were mingled with other works during an evening's entertainment and not rattled off one after the other. However, hearing all three in such a manner made one aware how there is a crescendo from the first to the last which culminates in a 'concerto for violin and soprano'. Barbara Frittoli gave us as a keepsake a couple of miniature revolvers, no doubt to shoot those who failed to brave the elements or anyone else we fancied, perhaps even ourselves! This said, the Orchestra Stabile di Bergamo, and soloists under Thomas Briccetti gave a good performance. How we look forward to the RTE recording for broadcast in the early new year of 1992. Also we must hope for another BBC Mayr concert.

Donizetti's cantata for Mayr is a charming piece, full of hidden meanings. For example, I perosnally felt that the performance failed to draw out the contrast between the sacred and profane dormant in the work due to Donizetti's inclusion of the ancient hymn to St John.

And so we left Bergamo, not before obtaining a set of the new Ricordi Fonit recording of Mayr's *La rosa bianca e la rosa rossa*. It is also somehat disappointing, uneven singing and recording balance being the main problem. The performance is, however, thanks to Thomas Briccetti's hard work on the score, a major step forward from that old tape of the original Bergamo revival that was once found in the collections of enthusiasts. We still have a long way to go in learning how to interpret and perform Mayr, whose often curious rhythmic patterns and fascinating instrumentation make far more sense once the text of an opera or cantata is studied. He constantly 'paints' the drama with sound. The art is knowing how to draw all this together around the human voice. The opera has many beautiful melodies and was a mine of ideas for Donizetti. For a start listen to the choral sections, the ensemble that closes Act I, think of *Lucia*, even *Poliuto* in the drama of Act II. We should also remember that we must thank Mayr for discovering the talents of Felice Romani.

Well, now its back to one's desk with new plans and dreams. The extraordinary thing is, that in their own time they are often, with much effort and the enthusiasm and help of others, realised.

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For the convenience of those members who were unable to be at the concert in which the three Mayr cantatas were performed during the Donizetti Festival at Bergamo in 1991, the descriptive programme notes are printed

overleaf/

Giv : Simone Mayr

MAYR'S THREE *'HANNIBAL'* CANTATAS

Johann Simon Mayr (1763-1845) composed at least 56 cantatas. The known works break down as follows: there are 21 substantial cantatas for more than one voice. Among such works we find *L'Armonia* (1825) which is scored for soloists, chorus and orchestra of proportions which we today more readily associate with Berlioz than with Donizetti's teacher. There are 5 cantatas for soprano solo, 19 for tenor solo and 11 for bass solo. As will be heard tonight, these often resemble an aria preceded by recitative or concert pieces which composers such as Mozart and Beethoven are remembered for. Mayr informs us that he was approached by singers to write cantatas for their use. These should not be confused with the numerous arias he was asked to compose in order to be inserted into revivals of his own operas as well as those of others.

The cantatas for solo voice may in general be associated with Mayr's delicate use of obbligato instruments, no doubt composed for friends and colleagues to play, for example, Antonio Capuzzi, who taught violin studies at Mayr's school. Thus they represent music making at its most intimate, vocal lines and instrumentation being 'tailor made' for the appropriate occasion. There is little doubt that the cantatas generally received only one performance and then they were eventually to find their way to the *Fondo Mayr* in the *Biblioteca Civica* to gather dust until 'discovered' by modern enthusiasts and revivers.

The texts of the three 'Hannibal' cantatas are by an anonymous hand. Their Metastasian tone serves to indicate, not only intellectual tastes in the Bergamo of the time, but also Mayr's retreat after the rise of Rossini and Romanticism into the proven world of classicism. In 1819 the Milanese poet, Carlo Porta wrote verses which would have met with Mayr's approval.

Romanticism

'... sta tutta in la magia
De moeuv, de messeda come se voeur
Tutt i passion che gh'emm sconduu in del coeur.'

Emotion without the control of the intellect was for Mayr an anathema.

The choice of the theme is intriguing. Surely more is indicated than just the Hannibal of history. 'Hannibal' was in Mayr's time a name associated with Napoleon's career, but by 1816 the self-styled emperor had lost his fortunes on the field of Waterloo and was safely exiled to the remote isle of St Helena. The first cantata for tenor illustrating Hannibal's youthful ambition and the second for bass-baritone portraying his defiant state of mind at defeat and the threat of exile could well serve to reflect the rise and fall of Napoleon. However, having said this, one must still interpret the final grand scena-like cantata for the wife of Asdrubal. Livy records a number of Asdrubals. Tonight's was no relation to Hannibal but a most miserable specimen of a leader whose camp in Africa of 20,000 men was destroyed by Scipio in the last punic war. When all was lost, Asdrubal fled to the enemy and begged for his life. Scipio showed the wretched man to the Carthaginians, upon which his wife uttered a thousand curses and threw herself and he two children into the flames of the Temple of Aesculapius which she and other Carthaginians had set ablaze.

What are we to make of this piece? Mayr was a gentle and self-effacing man, yet he was fascinated by the Medea myth which drew from his imagination one of his finest operas. Mayr lived in times when the wise still,

like Dante, saw beyond the literal tale to other levels of interpretation. In the *Inferno* the Medusa plays a powerful role. There is an echo in the tale of Medea, for both figures represent negative feminine energies. The unforgiving side of the human soul which may only respond to adversity with destructive acts fascinated Mayr. Donizetti learnt from his teacher's example with operas such as *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Maria de'Rudenz*.

Could this splendid cantata not be taken as a warning to a possible spirit of negativity descending on Lombardy and the Veneto for, with the fall of Napoleon, certain enlightened reforms could be swept away in the wake of the occupying Austrians? If this is so, then Mayr and his freinds are at the heart of the Risorgimento.

A further thought seems to amplify this interpretation. In 1815 Mayr's first patron to whom he owed his career, Baron Tommaso v.Bassus, had died. V.Bassus took the name of 'Hannibal' in the Order of the Bavarian Illuminati. The Illuminati were concerned with social reform as well as spiritual renewal in an age of change. Goethe, a member of the Order, is in many ways the figure who best sums up the aspirations of the Illuminati; for example, in a novel like *Wilhelm Meister*. The schools of Pestalozzi and Mayr's *Lezioni Caritatevoli* are examples of this social conscience influenced by the Illuminati.

Musically, the three cantatas form a whole; not only do certain musical ideas echo in the scores, but also there is a marked crescendo of emotion as the three pieces are heard. All three are good examples of how Mayr used obbligato instruments: the clarinet in the first, the horn in the second and the violin in the third. The second cantata has been performed by Ian Caddy in England and Ireland, but tonight is the first occasion in modern times when the three works are performed together as intended by Mayr.

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