ROSSINI'S *EDUARDO E CRISTINA*

(Wildbad Festival: 26th July, 1997.)

Rossini is notorious for re-using his music. So much that he wrote was recycled in subsequent operas, often more than once, that as one's knowledge of his later work grows, the more frequently one has the experience of greeting old friends. Re-using a *scena* or *aria* is one thing, however; wholesale self-borrowing from three older operas, stitched together with some *recitativo secco* to make a new one - or, more accurately, three quarters of a new one - is quite another. Yet this is just what Rossini was forced to do in the case of *Eduardo e Cristina*, unperformed since 1840, when his habitual mismanagement of his work schedule again caught up with him. In 1819, having failed to write a new opera for the San Benedetto theatre in Venice, it was agreed between him and the impressario that, for a reduced fee, he would 'in part' re-use music from operas composed for Naples and unknown in Venice, chosen to match the action and characters of the new libretto so far as could be managed. These operas were *Adelaide di Borgogna*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, and *Ermione* - his latest opera, and a dismal failure.

The text which was chosen as the peg on which to hang the reworked numbers from these operas had been written in 1810 for Stefano Pavesi by Giovanni Schmidt (Rossini's librettist for *Adelaide de Borgogna*) under the name *Odoardo e Cristina*, and this was revised to fit Rossini's existing music by the poets Tottola (who had supplied the libretto for *Ermione*) and Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini. The collaboration was acknowledged in the printed libretto of the *prima*, in which authorship is attributed to 'T.S.B.' (Tottola, Schmidt, Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini). The rewriting even went to the extent of including parts of the texts of the original operas, as for example at the end of Act I where the dramatic situation is almost identical to that of *Ermione*: a child struggles to reach his mother (and also, in this case, his father). But tinkering with a text in this way does not make for literary excellence, and the libretto of *Eduardo e Cristina*, which is extremely pedestrian, clearly shows its origins. Nor is it easy to believe that, except in a case such as has just been cited, pre-existing music will necessarily prove suitable for the new action and emotions fitted to it. Stendhal was the first writer on Rossini, but certainly not the last, to raise this question: can music written for one set of dramatic circumstances be taken seriously when arbitrarily fitted to another? One might, perhaps, expect to get away with a single number - it was common enough practice at the time - but a whole opera composed in this way can be seen (as it has been) as damning evidence to support the view that rather facile, all-purpose music which fits everything is apt for nothing. How, then, did *Eduardo e Cristina* in performance measure up to such a criticism?

(Opposite) *Finale primo* of *Eduardo e Cristina*, with *Cristina* (Carmen Acosta) and *Eduardo* (Elisedra Dumitru) under arrest, on the orders of *King Carlo* (Omar Jara). Courtesy Wildbad Festival

To answer this question fairly it is a disadvantage to be familiar with the music in advance of hearing it in its new setting. Much, though by no means all, of *Eduardo e Cristina* was familiar to me from recorded performances of its constituant operas. Yet I have to admit that it never seemed lacking in expressiveness or appropriateness to the dramatic situations to which it had been re-set. I confess that I was very sceptical in anticipation, but was surprised how little familiarity seemed to matter in the context of the actual performance. The pulse of the drama - not particularly strong! - carried one sufficiently along, and one did not mind the familiarity. It helped, of course, that the new text was at least consonant with the music, both in style and content, and, given the simplicity of the plot and the incomprehensibility of most of the Italian in the performance - with not a single native Italian speaker amongst the predominantly young cast - any incongruity between music and dramatic situation was simply not at all evident.

The thin and banal plot concerns Cristina, the daughter of the king of Sweden, who is to be betrothed to the king of Scotland, but who is secretly married to a Swedish knight, Eduardo, with whom she has had a son, Gustavo. After the king of Sweden has condemned the couple to death in Act I, in Act II Eduardo is released from prison by a friend, saves Sweden from invading Russians, and thereby earns his ruler's forgiveness and his daughter. The non-singing part of Gustavo is dramtically important, for it is his unexpected entry in response to hearing his mother's voice which first alerts the king to the true situation, and makes clear why his daughter cannot marry the king of Scotland. In some later versions of *Eduardo e Cristina* (the opera had a chequered performance history) Gustavo does not actually appear in the actions at all, with, in my opinion, a consequent weakening of the dramatic impact in Act I. Without Gustavo it is difficult to understand the king's sudden awareness of Cristina's secret.

At Wildbad Gustavo took no direct part in the action of the opera as played on the stage, and the programme synopsis made no mention of his existence. When the moment of the revelation of Cristina's guilt arrived, the explanation was implied by the token appearance of Gustavo playing on a swing behind a gauze at the back of the stage. By this time I had assumed that we were seeing one of the later versions of the plot in which Gustavo plays no part. But I was wrong. The Wildbad performing edition had been meticulously prepared on the basis of the original libretto and the two earlier surviving copy scores (in Pesaro and Brussels), and it was only because of the perversity of the director, Jochen Schönleber, that the audience was deprived of stage action in accordance with the clear stage directions, not only of the crucial point in the plot, but also when Gustavo is earlier reunited with his father, who sings of his love for his son, and subsequently, as already mentioned, at the end of Act I. A pretty stage picture (Gustavo on his swing) was the substitute for stage action mirroring and elucidating the sense of the words being sung. Altering the stage action in this way was director *hubris* of the worst sort, and I am sure I was not the only member of the audience to have been muddled by it.

As the plot contains only one woman, a *travesti* role was not only to be expected as part of the traditions of the period but is necessitated by the need for vocal variety. This is Eduardo, sung at Wildbad by Eliseda Dumitru (mezzo), Miss Dumitru was vocally secure, sang expressively and was fully capable of the decoration demanded by the role. Sadly, however, of all the cast she was

least able to project the part, and even for this small auditorium she was underpowered. Carmen Acosta (soprano), as the other protagonist, also sang well. Her florid singing was always clean, even if one or two of her highest notes seemed uncomfortably strident. She gave a good account of her final *scena ed aria* (which contains, perhaps, the most considerable of the new music supplied by Rossini), but was less at home in singing recitative. Omar Jara as the king of Sweden (tenor) displayed a pleasing voice and managed to give an unstrained and lyrical account of the part, even if the most elaborate decoration of his Act I aria (Pirro's in Act I of *Ermione*) was sketched rather than articulated. The young Russian bass, Konstantin Gorny, as Cristina's suitor, had a voice of typically Slavonic richness and sonority. He made a great deal of his Act II aria (lifted from Pavesi's opera!), which was perhaps the most satisfactory single piece of vocalisation of the evening, Jorge Orlando Gomez in the *tenore secondo* role of Altei did what was required of him well enough, but he seemed ill at ease, and most of the time did not need to simulate the looks of anxiety and woe which the plot makes mandatory for all members of the cast.

The designer provided an abstract setting with a raised central platform, and monotony was avoided by the judicious use of light projections and a changing background. Four lazer-like blue tapes descending from above to suggest the bars of Cristina's prison were evocative and successful. More adventurous were the lighting effects and silhouettes used to suggest the battle in Act II (to rather perfunctory new music) - unexpectedly sophisticated in view of what one imagines must be the technically limited resources of this hall. Costumes this year had been made in-house on what must have been an extremely limited budget, and they looked flimsy and drab: dark green fatigues for the men (with no real distinction between soldiers and courtiers), and green wrap-over dressing gowns for the women. They can have done little to reinforce their wearer's self-confidence.

The Czech Chamber Chorus sang with its usual reliability and enthusiasm - what would international festivals like Pesaro and Wexford do without the Czechs? - and the Virtuosi di Praga, about 40 strong, played admirably. The conductor, Francesco Corti, chose sensible tempi and only occasionally swamped the singers. The enormous panache with which the recitativo secco was accompanied deserves special mention. Despite the drawbacks of a rather unsuitably small hall, with a shallow stage and no pit, the standard of performance achieved was remarkably high. Justice has now been done to *Eduardo e Cristina*, and this production marks the completion of staged productions of all of Rossini's operas somewhere in the world since 1989, the year in which the Deutsche Rossini Gessellschaft, which runs the Wildbad Festival, was founded. It was, therefore, an extremely worthy feather to add to its cap. Immense research had been undertaken to establish an authentic text, and the results have published in an exemplary collection of essays on every aspect of the opera, whose appearance coincided with the performance at Wildbad.+

[+ *Rossini's* Eduardo e Cristina. *Beiträge zur Jahrhundert-Erstaufführung*. Herausgegeben von Reto Müller und Bernd-Rüdiger Kern. Leipziger Universitätsverlag. 1997]

It would be wrong, after these Wildbad performances, to claim that a masterpiece had been

rediscovered, but as a vehicle for virtuosic vocal display *Eduardo e Cristina* could hardly be bettered, and the immense success it had all over the world up until 1840 (in ironic contrast to the much worthier *Ermione*) is not hard to understand. On the stage it works as well as many more famous operas, and one is grateful to have had the chance of seeing it. But I doubt if its resuscitation will be more than temporary. Viable as it is, purists will undoubtedly prefer to hear most of the music in its original settings, and, although some of Rossini's new music is quite interesting, in my opinion it is neither extensive enough nor good enough in its own right to merit more than a very occasional airing. However, a recording is promised, and readers will eventually have an opportunity to make up their own minds about that.

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