The happy return of the "unfortunate" *Ines de Castro*

"Ho continuate la rivoluzione...variate le forme - Bando alle Cabalette triviale, esilio a' crescendo. Tessitura corta: meno repliche - Qualche novità nelle cadenze - Curata la parte drammatica: l'orchestra ricca, senza coprire il canto - Tolti i lunghi assoli ne'pezzi concertati, che obbligavano le altre parti ad essere fredde, a danno dell'azione - Poco gran cassa, e pochissima banda" Who wrote this? On the evidence of the opera we heard at the Teatro Pergolesi di Jesi on 26 September 1999 it could have been Giuseppe Persiani in 1835. (Instead of - as has been repeated tirelessly - Saverio Mercadante in 1838).

Persiani's *Ines de Castro* - his only enduring success - made its first appearance in that curious black hole between *Anna Bolena* and *Lucia di Lammermoor.* a period whose one star is *Norma.* Almost everything unfamiliar that came to the stage in Italy in those years has been forgotten. Those composers who offered an alternative to Bellini and Donizetti have never been assessed, never even taken seriously; it is *presumed* that if the music of this or that opera has not stayed the course it cannot be worth hearing. No bigger error can ever be imagined. A lot of this neglect must be laid at the door of Maria Malibran. This great artist sashayed through Italy in these magic years leaving a trail of admirers and operatic disaster. She was the magnet, composers flocked to write operas for her, and all of them failed, with one single exception. At the S.Carlo in the autumn of 1833 Pacini's *Irene ossia L'assedio di Messina* failed; Coccia's *La figlia dell'arciere* failed in the winter of 1834; as did Lauro Rossi's *Amelia ossia Otto anni di Constanza* (in which she insisted upon dancing a mazurka): the Ricci brothers were lucky in 1835, even though she was not; the diva for whom their *Il colonnello* had been composed broke her wrist when a pig ran under the wheels of her coach and she was thrown out into the street, so its leading role was taken by Carolina Ungher instead, they were saved and Ungher had a triumph, but Vaccai's *Giovanna Gray* descended nose-downwards Titanic-wise at La Scala in 1836; as did Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda.* This last has been vindicated in our day thanks to Leyla Gencer and Montserrat Caballé all the others are still waiting to resurface.The one lucky score written for her in which she found a role perfectly tailored to her genius was *Ines de Castro.* At its resounding prima at the S.Carlo on 28 January 1835, Persiani - it seems - took care to find out *precisely* what she really wanted - which was over-the-top acting and brilliant vocalism both at the same time, not touching music, not the achingly sentimental *melodramma romantico* which everyone now supposes she epitomises - but glossy, and classy, drama.

All sorts of surprises were thus in evidence at Jesi where this opera resurfaced for us thanks to the incomparable enterprise of the teatro iesino and Paola Ciarlantini. The first was the music itself. Frankly, Cammarano's gothic horror of a plot has nothing very much to do with the opera, Persiani's score is forceful, imaginative, sometimes innovative and well-articulated but cannot be called atmospheric or unduly affecting. No heart-on-the-sleeve stuff. His often beautiful melodies feature strongly, but are not seductive or melting. His orchestration tends to be charmless (with some notable exceptions); his characters do not appeal to the senses but to the purely intellectual perception of drama. In a very real sense his dramaturgy derives from the *teatro di prosa* and from a non-lyrical tradition, his Ines displays all the histrionic attitudes of a Mrs Siddons or an Adelaide Ristori, bold, outraged and outrageous, she embodies tragedy, grandiose gesture not lovelorn romance.

(opposite) Act II Lisa Houben as Bianca and Maria Dragoni as Ines (with her offspring)
(photograph Courtesy Teatro Pergolesi di Jesi)

If there was to be a *rivoluzione alla Mercadante* in the music of Persiani it was against the mood of the day as sustained by his more famous contemporaries. There is a kind of radical austerity in his writing that discards the ultra-romantic fashions of 1835, hinting at earlier neo-classic, more statuesque modes, both old-fashioned (Persiani's musical education was not really conventional) and reproachful to the music of the moment. No doubt it was the scores of Spontini and Cherubini that were closest to his heart. But the vocal writing is thoroughly up-to-date, no more florid music was ever conceived, both Ines and Don Pedro are confronted by prodigal challenges fit only for a Malibran or a Duprez.

The opera is preceded by a very long overture that gives the impression of having been written much earlier, episodic, replete with inappropriate brio and a crescendo which Mercadante would certainly have deprecated. In 1835, and at the S.Carlo, a *preludio* was almost mandatory. Perhaps it was tacked-on later. The score balances aria and ensemble very neatly, each principal has a major vocal stint, there are duets for every configuration of voice, the *finale primo* is a massive statement, in huge blocks and a construction of formidable distinction. The most appealing single item is the *romanza* for Ines in Act II with an enchanting introduction/accompaniment for 'cello and harp, very nicely-coloured, memorable music. Act III began with a lilting coro and went on to include a tenor aria which was impressive. I personally found the *scena di follia* (Ines is dealt a fatal poison by Gonzales) which brings the opera to a close rather underpowered musically despite a fine melody and vocal hurdles of the first order. Everyone, I dare say, will insist that the music is Donizettian, certainly some of Donizetti's solutions come and go, and then there is (occasionally) a hint - not more- of Bellinian cantilena - but this is simply the surface, underneath is a robust muse that is individual and not emulative.

The regia and costumes were thoroughly distracting. The set worthy of *Lucia* (however versatile the lighting) was irrelevant in the face of this music; the costumes apeing Bourbon Naples with Alfonso IV in the guise of Francesco I, Don Pedro as Ferdinando II, and Bianca, Infanta di Castiglia as Maria-Cristina di Savoia *might* have made a point, had not Ines been trailing around in weeds worthy of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She looked frightening, rather than affecting, and now and then had to search for her legs.. It was best to avert your eyes. The cast was rather exceptional, especially in view of the well-nigh impossible vocal line. As Ines, Maria Dragoni paid tribute to Maria Felicia Garcia Malibran with a formidable chest voice and splendid acuti, never failing to offer smooth and accomplished fioriture even when prostrate on the tomb of Costanza (or what passed for it). [It is a complete puzzle to know what Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani - a light soprano - actually sang when she took over the role in Malibran's wake, her husband must have made extaordinary transpositions for her] As Don Pedro, José Sempere also did well, gradually coming to terms with the kind of extension and force at Duprez's unique command. Neither of these two did much more than gesture their roles, but then this is perfectly understandable. As Alfonso, Massimiliano Gagliardo was musical; as Bianca - a role sung at the prima by Giovanni Pacini's second wife - Lisa Houben made quite a lot out of rather little, in this production she and Ines side-by-side looked positively surreal (some people will mention *Norma* - but this is nonsense, two kids and two sopranos do not make a *Norma*); as Gonzales - a sort-of Normanno whose tell-tale pointless antipathy is the undoing of the lovers - Gianni Mongiardino lurked and threatened meaningfully. The direction under Enrique Mazzola was truly excellent and accomplished. This is a maestro to whom one can confide revivals of this calibre. We owe Paola Ciarlantini a real debt for returning this opera to us, Giuseppe Persiani is no longer a question mark forever eluding all comprehension. Yet another composer of talent of the wonderful 1830's brought back to life. We await the others. **Alexander Weatherson**

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"The opera of Persiani *Ines de Castro*, had its first performance last Wednesday. I promised you a small acount. I have got it ready for the post this evening. This work is decidedly superb from one end to the other and has obtained a complete success, a success the more meritorious at Naples in that for some 15 years it is the third opera that has succeeded, *L'esule di Roma, L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* and this last, all the others have been whistled pitilessly.

Ines de Castro is an opera largely tailored for a big theatre. There is not one weak number, above all there is a*terzetto* in the 2nd act which draws tears. It is the moment when Ines embraces her children never to see them again. The role of Ines is one of the most beautiful in the repertoire of Mariette. [**Maria Malibran**] That of the tenor, which Duprez has taken with so much honour, is also very splendid! In sum, it is superb; but my dear Parola, in a country where the masterpieces of Rossini have been whistled one after the other, I wonder if it is a composer's merits only to which one must attribute the success of a work?... No indeed, and to explain to you the triumph of *Ines de Castro* I will do what I can to lift the veil over the mystery, one must first of all ensure that 50 ducats are in the pocket of the conductor, without which this gentleman is incapable of goodwill towards the author, of zeal in rehearsal and of unity in his orchestra, one must ensure a second sum in the pocket of the chorus master without which the chorus will have no breath. One must ensure that the costumer even has his little gift without which the actors will look like pigs, and the opera put back a month. In a word everything is for sale here, friendship, goodwill, assistance, everything is reduced to a simple sum: *how much will you give me*? Silence even in the theatre is to be purchased, and silence in the wings is here an object of debate, the poor author who does not fulfil all these conditions will find ranged against him a thousand arms which must infallibly oblige him to succomb. Persiani has had the good sense to anticipate these obstacles, it is said that the poor devil has had to sacrifice entirely the fruit of his labours; as a result, contrary to the custom of the S.Carlo, there has been a good ensemble and luxury in the decor [..] *Ines de Castro* has been resplendent with gilding and richness [...] the success of the opera which no one expected has mortally wounded two parties, the Ronzists * owing to Maria's triumph, and the Barbajists**, what would these last not do to negate entirely the effect of this music?

It has been decreed yesterday that one cannot applaud more than once and to recall the singers more than once. This has meant that the performance yesterday of *Ines*, policed by several gendarmes, has been reduced to banality. Maria was in tears - as nothing encourages her more than the enthusiasm of the public, it is the sole recompense of a true artist..."

Charles de Bériot***
Naples, le 3 février 1835

* ie the supporters of Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis

** ie the lobby supporting Domenico Barbaja, temporarily deprived of his role as inpresario at the S.Carlo

*** celebrated violinist and second husband of Maria Malibran