UNA FRUSTA MUSICALE

I trust my reader at some time has come across that most excellent collection of writings known as *La Frusta Letteraria*, written by Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789). He wrote under the pen name of *Aristarco Scannabue*. Baretti provides us with much of the literary background to Goldoni, who, of course, was fundamental to the development of the libretto for the comic stage and for poets such as Da Ponte, Foppa and Rossi. Baretti writes so well and helps to entertain the quiet hours of these dark autumn evenings. He drew up the first Italian-English/English-Italian dictionary (1760) living for a number of years in England and was buried there, as was the case with many valiant Italians of the period. Baretti became the friend of illuminaries such as Boswell, Burke, Gainsborough, Goldsmith, Johnson, and Reynolds. He was at the heart of the music world and enjoyed the friendship of Abel and J. C. Bach. Reynolds painted a fine portrait of his friend reading, in which he holds a book close to his eyes due to his short sight.

Is it not the time when we need a few kindly whips to spur along the music world in Albion's domain towards a greater interest in the music we love? Are we not fed up with the diet of operas set loose on us by the establishment, the endless waffle of presenters employed by Radio 3, and the banalities of Classics FM? It is always the few enthusiasts who keep music alive and who produce interesting performances. There can be more honesty in an amateur revival than uninspiring professional shows sung with mediocrity in underpants and bras. Our Chairman in the Society's last *Newsletter* drew attention to the fact that *Il Paria* was revived by the few who believed in what they were doing. And then there are all those lesser known Italian, French and German opera houses which bring back for us the music of Coccia, Pacini, Pavesi, the Riccis, Rossi ... and Pucitta under the guise of Mayr! But the more this problematic work is studied, the more it reveals itself to be a tangle of sources, a real pastiche, a frightful muddle. It is suggested that there are fragments of very early Mayr possibly hidden here and there. However you only have to listen to a tape of *Verter* to know that the music as it stands cannot be by Donizetti's master. I remember Professor Gazzaniga years ago warning me of the difficulties of relying on attributions scrawled on manuscripts. He was half way through transcribing Peters' aria at the close of the first part of *L'amor coniugale* when he realised that what he was working away on could not be by Mayr – it was a substitution aria by another composer!

Remembering Mayr, recalls the opposition in the Seventies towards the great man as the newly formed Society struggled with *L'amor coniugale, La Passione* and the *Te Deum*. It is said that it was even hard in those days to get his name into the Society's constitution. The critics one reads in newspapers showed their usual limited enthusiasm for works that stretched their limited imagination a little further than the *Nozze di Figaro, Fidelio,* the *Messiah* or a Mozart Mass. But now thirty years on our efforts have been justified. There have been seven international conferences dedicated to Mayr; two books on the composer; Calvi's *Life and work of Mayr*; Uta Schaumberg's two volumes on the tragic operas; and the Fondazione Donizetti promising the publication in the near future of Mayr's letters. Furthermore there are now at least twelve works on CD, many, it must be admitted, unfortunately not all that well performed or satisfactory. Be that as it may. As for Guild Music Ltd when they recorded *Che originali*, a sell out was never expected! This year Guild have released Mayr's *Missa Solemnis in C minor* (1826) with delicious fill ups from unknown Mozart under the direction of Franz Hauk. [Guild GMCD 7231] Hauk's soloists, choir, orchestra and direction make this the best example of Mayr's religious music to date on disc. It was not for nothing that when reading the autograph many years ago I described the work as 'Mayr's *Lord Nelson Mass*'. I know that opera buffs on the whole don't relish hearing the religious music which was so much part of the work of our composers, say from Mayr to Pacini, but for buffs to neglect this recording would amount to living in a blinkered world. For example, take the *Kyrie*. It is a reworking of the so-called *Kyrie di Novara* in which the young Donizetti sung, in particular at the music festival held in the Church of San Gaudenzio, Novara in June 1812. Listen to the opening bars, do they remind you of anything? Of course, they do – they recall the opening bars of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Trio No. 3 in C minor, opus 1. Listen to Beethoven and then go back to the Mayr *Kyrie* and listen again carefully to what Mayr does with Beethoven's few bars as the densely woven sequence of ideas evolves. It is the work of a master. Quite possibly the students at the *Lezioni Caritatevoli* knew and played the Trio with Mayr, Antonio Gonzales, or even a student, at the piano. Is not the teacher saying to his students, 'Listen, this is what can be done with a few bars inspired by Beethoven. Make sure you learn from the good where so ever you may find it!'

Dr Hauk is working closely with Guild Music. In March they are recording *La Passione* (1794) and then in the following year, *Atalia* (1822), the great staged oratorio which Donizetti saw massacred by Rossini's lack of

commitment at the San Carlo.[1] In this context, I wonder what Britten's baton would have made of Tippett's *Knot Garden*? (!) Add to these recordings a promise of *San Luigi Gonzaga* (1822) and rumblings concerning *Alonso e Cora* (1803) and we may safely predict that Mayr is having a well-deserved renaissance. I would, however, in this context make a plea for the Bavarian State Radio to release their *Luigi Gonzaga* with Arleen Auger in the title role - her performance was ecstatic, a fitting memorial to a fine singer. With the long recitatives cut, the broadcast moved forwards at a forceful rate, revealing the dramatic power of Mayr's late works.

Attention must also be drawn to the work of the *Simon Mayr – Gesellschaft* in Ingolstadt. There were shaky foundations to the Society when it was set up after the first Ingolstadt Mayr Symposium in 1992. For a number of years members were asked to subscribe with no return. Perhaps there were a few concerts and Bavarian Sandersdorf beer festivals but this did not make the Society 'international'. Then Dr Hauk and Dr Iris Winkler took matters into their own hands with dramatic results. Dr Hauk looked towards the revival of Mayr's music and Dr Winkler became Secretary organising excellent conferences and publications. Dr Winkler's work did not end there. She undertook to found and promote the *Mayr Archiv* in Ingolstadt where gradually microfilms and bound copies of all the composer's music and writings are being organised, together with a library that will be as complete as possible and ranging over all relevant aspects of Mayr's complex personality and work. To this end Dr Hannelore Bauer has given the *Archiv* her husband's work and library. Eventually Ingolstadt will become a centre for Mayr studies and research equal to the *Fondo Mayr* in Bergamo.

The Society publishes a substantial newsletter/journal essential for those interested in this renaissance, a rebirth which can but illuminate the world of Italian nineteenth century music and help the revival of interest in the composers, singers and personalities associated with Mayr's work and life. One composer who will benefit is Donizetti as we increasingly focus him with a greater understanding of his times and desist from 'looking back' at him through Verdi tinted spectacles or with contemporary concepts which were, quite simply, not around at the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is much to learn from the tale of Orpheus!

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[1] See Zavadini 11. I am told on the highest authority a number of letters recorded in Zavadini have gone missing. This fact is holding up a new updated *epistolario*.

In this context it was a joy to come across John Rice's excellent book on Salieri[2] for it helps to set so much in perspective, from the importance of Goldoni already referred to and on to the ambience Mayr would have found in Vienna. No wonder he rushed back to his beloved Bergamo to set up his school! Don't miss this book.

At the recent Ingolstadt Mayr Symposium, Daniel Brandenburg dropped a bombshell with his usual infectious humour. He had traced the autograph of the Trieste 1801 *Ginevra di Scozia*! Where was it? In Vienna, in one of the royal collections! Of course, the composer must have taken it with him and quite possibly sold it to the Empress Marie Therese who, as John Rice pointed out in a splendid paper, greatly admired Mayr. This discovery makes the composite edition with music by Weigl that was heard at Trieste now irrelevant. I wonder what Opera Rara will do with their recording? How essential it is to get not only good performances recorded but also to use authentic editions of the operas. But then the Donizetti renaissance started with poor editions and dreadful pirate recordings. Do you remember how records were reached for from under the counter when the coast was clear? It was a dishonest business, breaking the laws of copyright. However Machiavelli would have pointed out that the end justified the means. Just consider how the Bergamo revival of *Marino Faliero* cut the opera to shreds!

May Parma now set the records straight!

Platonide Scannabue

[2] John A. Rice, *Antonio Salieri and Vieneese opera*, University of Chicago Press, 1998.