A man for all stagioni

Meyerbeer and *Margherita d'Anjou*

The *politics* of musical revival are tricky everyone will agree, do listeners expect to find their tastes confirmed? And must they always bend an ear forward in uncritical deference like *His Master's Voice?*

The admirable Opera Rara has chosen Meyerbeer (more-or-less a waste-land everywhere else) for re-examination, most especially that felicitous Meyerbeer of his Italian honeymoon, long out of sight under the carpet. In fact of course Meyerbeer's decade in the *pesarese* sun is not one of *apprenticeship* or anything like it but one in which almost all his musical contours were confirmed, his vocal light and shadow defined. A period - not of operatic indulgence or adolescence but of maturity - escape from nationalism, and the fount of that graft he found harder and harder to believe-in as he grew older and more famous. Indeed, fame was not a spur to Meyerbeer, it was his cross. In Italy, in contrast to his German upbringing he *enjoyed* composing, and once he left the so-called *"enchanted garden"* with its extravagant blossoms, the theatrical jungle took over until he expired literally beneath its deadly perfume (as in *L'Africaine* which is his self-portrait).

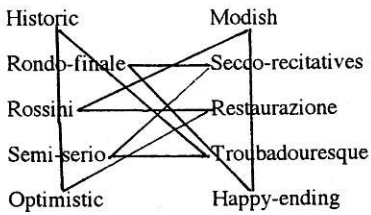
This Italian idyll gave rise to all the features we know so well - his modernism, his grasp of the theatrical nettle, but also to most of his limitations - though well-heeled it is his survival instinct that emerges most clearly at this stage, indeed, *Margherita d'Anjou* (1820) is pivotal, an opera at the cross-roads, where one foot skates sideways while the other is making quite a big step forward.

First was the problem of libretto. The six Italian operas of Meyerbeer plump for decidedly canny subject-matter: that is, two Scottish settings, three based upon neo-oriental exotica and one - the first of the series - upon sentimental drama. He was in the Italy, after all, not only of Rossini, but also of Mayr (the pioneer patron of both Meyerbeer's poets). These plots - though glancing slyly at his idol - are not without their confrontational aspects, even challenging the *pesarese* on his weakest ground. At this greenwood stage in his magic garden Meyerbeer had ideas of his own. He left nothing to chance, almost every number in these early operas is over-stuffed, going over the top time-after-time, dramatically as well as vocally. This is the real first-inkling of *grand-opéra* to come.

Even musically, the Rossinian epigone we hear so much about is subject to qualification. Of course there is an echo, and Rossini was quite right to make fun of it. Almost all the major vocal statements begin with the tic-toc bass of infallible Rossinian infectiousness but once the melody has emerged all kinds of interventions reduce the predictability of the development, *pertichini,* key changes, asides and so on which erode the anticipated pattern (the *solita forma* of Mr Harold Powers). *Tempi di mezzo* tend to throw everything at the listener while *cabalette* and *strette* simply settle for maximum terminal punch. An irresistible parallel, to my mind, is that of Salvador Dali: Rossini supplies a perfect timekeeper, a watch whose rhythms captivate, while Meyerbeer, like Dali, bends the watches and hangs them from trees.

(Opposite) Carlo, the Duke de Lavarenne and Queen Margherita (Alastair Miles, Bruce Ford and Annick Massis) rehearse their imposing roles (Photo Courtesy Opera Rara)

Meyerbeer tries to engage the listener on every possible front. *Margherita d'Anjou* is an excellent example. You can make one of those pointless diagrams so beloved of musicological students:



leaving you with a cats-cradle of mixed-motives, centred upon a primedonna who is both historic and fictive (the non-widow of Henry VI); engaged in a passionate conflict that never took place (not in Scotland, and not at that date); in a noveletish bubblepack (Isaura and her faithless duke); and music that is both funny and portentous. It is a score that has everything, including the impetus of perfect success.

There is, in fact, a very strong suspicion that this perfectly beautiful opera is nothing but an all-purpose score - given the time and place. Meyerbeer was not content simply to be shrewd (like Verdi), or messianic (like Wagner), but proposed to be the best all-round champion there has ever been on the operatic stage - hence his international trophies. Can we claim that Meyerbeer was the first truly *global* composer, the first wholly market-oriented maestro? And thus, the most eligible for revival in our pragmatic age?

I will leave these questions to the reader.

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The Royal Festival Hall concert on 2 November 2002 was probably one of the best-rehearsed ever heard there. A really sumptuous cast (we will keep our fingers crossed from now on). a stupendous chorus and the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by a David Parry engaged as never before. *Margherita d'Anjou* is a hard nut to crack. While Romani's bold text invites rule-breaking throughout and insists upon really effective comprimari with good voices, Meyerbeer's muse throws almost everything at the listener from the start, indeed his *Introduzione*, full of vocal incident and incorporating an extended *cavatina* for the primadonna without actually saying so epitomises the admirable iconoclasm we encounter from beginning to end in this opera whatever the various musical sources and styles. The elegance of the phrasing of Annick Massis in the title role, her dialogue with the coro and Carlo (Alastair Miles) (Meyerbeer seems always to prefer to match the soprano voice with a bass or baritone) laid the best possible example for everyone to come. At the 1820 prima of this opera the composer had a quite important cross to bear. The famous tenor Niccola Tacchinardi (singing the Duke of Lavarenne) loathed Rosa Mariani (singing his wife Isaura) and made frequent efforts to prevent her engagement in a series of theatres, this gave an added spice no doubt (no loathing was in evidence in this concert) indeed, Patricia Bardon (as Isaura) seemed

content to put aside this particular authentic touch and both her *cavatina* with its enchanting *cabaletta,* and her Act I *duetto* with Bruce Ford (as her Grand Senechal of a husband) were authentically brilliant (the *stretta* of the duet a taste in advance of Elisabetta's *sortita* in *Roberto Devereux* - did Donizetti find some sort of parallel between the repelling of Isaura's advances and Roberto's rejection of his unhappy Queen?). Bruce Ford was admirably cast in this opera, his voice in fact more Tacchinardi than Rubini or David, Patricia Bardon very impressive - wide-ranging and with decibels in reserve; she, hand-in-hand with the flawless voice and technique of Annick Massis (you simply had to hear the latter's series of glissandi in her Act II aria - all different and all perfectly finished) carried off the honours of Scotland triumphantly.

The greatest suprise was the ease with which Meyerbeer integrated the mandatory *buffo* - the stumbling block of every *opera semiseria* I have ever heard. The fact that his Michele ie Michael Gamautte (sung by a hugely talented Fabio Previati) is even more daunting in this opera than ever before must have presented an almost insuperable task, but Meyerbeer simply takes on his implausability, his absurd intrusions upon the sad musings of Isaura, and his role as a kind of of *deus-ex-machina,* with perfect nonchalence, an ease that more than anything else reveals the kind of omnibus talent that would carry the young German maestro into the gloriously picaresque world of *grand-opéra.* He manages as a bonus even to convey a kind of filigree beauty to Michele's patter which is not disruptive but a ground-bass of sorts, not simply comic, not brutally down-to-earth as is usually the case, but a mild roccoco diatribe setting-off the passionate orisons of the principals lightly and with sympathy. The Act I trio for tenor, mezzo-soprano and buffo with its echoing horns - the piece in this opera I should most claim for Frenchified heredity - was a most beautiful example of *opéra-comique avant-la-lettre* in its finesse and delicate frieze of tracery.

Margherita d'Anjou has many purely instrumental delights which too point to a sonic independence, more Mayr than Rossini perhaps, notably the violin obbligato before the tenor aria, and the mini-concerto before Margherita's Act II cri-de-cœur. There is some deft scene-painting with ingenious orchestration, a lot of noise (*grand-opéra* intuitive, yet again, if in bud only), voices-off, processional comings and goings, banda, and so on. Nothing much left to chance. His melodic gifts keep up beautifully. It would be hard to be disappointed by an opera like this, within yet without familiar bounds and given a performance here in London - by an Opera Rara team of real pursuasion before a packed Royal Festival Hall.

A CD is to follow next year, cast as here with the exception of Isaura who will be sung on the recording by Daniela Barcellona. (I wonder if her performance can top that of Patricia Bardon? We shall see.). The factor most reassuring, to my mind, is that four remaining Italian operas by Meyerbeer are still beckoning from the archives, yet another treasure trove for future delectation, yet another challenge to those who have elected to trash this composer in print and on the stage for so many decades.

Alexander Weatherson

