THE GASSMANN COMETH

L'opera seria by Gassmann and Calzabigi at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris on 30 th March 2003 conduced by René Jacobs

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For those of you for whom the definition of 'Opera' is confined to those works listed in Loewenberg then Leopold Florian Gassmann's *L'Opera seria* (1769) does not exist. I know that Loewenberg can be quite sniffy about farse, but I thought he was OK with buffe, but I thought that overlooking a seminal work in the history of opera would be inadmissible as an excuse for such an august reference book.

Gassmann, a Bohemian, will probably survive in musical history as the bridge between Gluck and Mozart. He succeeded the euphonious Gluck as a court composer in Vienna, where it was during an illness of his in 1773 that Mozart came in hope that some advancement for himself might result. In the event Gassmann's early death in 1774 (from an allegedly unforced fall from a carriage) gave the Swan of the Salzach no opportunity-the laurels falling instead on Gassmann's protégé, and Mozart's alleged nemesis, Salieri. Beloved of Joseph II (Gassmann penned the Emperor-in-waiting's re-nuptial opera-possibly the only aspect of Joseph's second marriage that he enjoyed), his 21 operas were not as highly thought of as his chamber music. None of his music has yet been 'discovered' by our muzak-invested world, although a *Stabat Mater* of his turns up regularly as a fill-in on the BBC Radio 3 Through the Night.

If Gassmann remains resolutely in the shadows of musical history Ranieri de Calzabigi is bathed in reflected light. Credited (probably on his own self-publicity) as being the prime mover behind the Gluckian reform of opera in Vienna, he claims a posthumous glory at odds with his lifetime notoriety. Born in Livorno he was attracted to Metastasio and even started publishing an edition of the Caesarean Poet's works before the money ran out. Cursed with a bad skin he hawked his mathematical skills round the capitals of Europe, using his prettier young brother as a marketing front, to set up lotteries wherever unlicenced greed prevailed. Most failed sooner rather than later (the Parisian one, started in the aftermath of Law's dubious Louisiana 'bubble', had some help from the far wilier Casanova). Frederick the Great, through a tip off, saw Calzabigi for what he was-an artful dodger-and kicked him out (or was that his brother?). In Vienna he rediscovered a skill that he and most other Italians were taught but paid little heed of; fluency in versification. His artful and colourful word-smithing, and an iconoclastic view of the dramaturgy of opera seria, gave him a whiff of the immortality he craved after Gluck had clothed it in tunes that bore repetition. But by then he had already retired back to Italy, from whence he kept up his bilious correspondances, and died eventually in Naples, having upset most of the folk there.

If those are the parents who have given their genes and their genius to this particular operatic progeny then what of the child itself? Well, it comes from the long tradition of theatrical satire that mocks not just the theatrical illusion itself but also the vanities of those who specialise in creating it. It is difficult to locate a start-point for the long history of such works. Della

Corte's *Satire e Grotteschi di musiche e di musicisti d'ogni tempo*, Turin 1949-the book that introduced me to *L'Opera seria* through many cartoons of events in the opera-blames 'Attic salt and Italic vinegar'; in other words Greek wit and Italian pique. In terms of the operatic versions there is no doubt that by the early 1700's (and courtesy of that apostle of high-mindedness, Signor Pietro Metastasio) it was already alive and well in Naples (*L'Impresario delle Canarie* by Sarro of 1724). An altogether gentler satire is evident in Gluck's setting of Metastasio again in comic mode (*Le Cinesi*, 1754-first set by Caldara in 1735), and the cocktail of operatic exaggeration and xenophobia has remained a dangerous one (vide the depiction of Monostatos in some recent productions of *Die Zauberflöte*). Once the 19th century takes over all hell breaks out (in many ways) and I need only mention in passing Donizetti's *Le Convenienze Teatrali* among the many. Only in the politically correct and culturally confused 20th century could it be argued that the tradition has, perhaps, been overtaken in the irony stakes by what has been happening on the world stage. But that would mean passing over such delightful pokes at Italian singing styles as those that appear in Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier, Ariadne* and *Capriccio*. It is indeed a rich tradition within which Gassmann and Calzabigi's contribution is not yet recognised.

A few words about this particular production of *L'Opera seria*. It originated at the Schwetzingen Festival in 1994 with some performances in Berlin at the Staatsoper in 1998. It had also been performed in Innsbruck (Festwochen der Alten Musik) in 1997. Also before I go any further I better explain the title of this review of mine. It is a mis-spelling of the title to a song by Flanders and Swann. The song tells the tale of a week of disasters caused by tradesmen each of whom, through his mistakes, generates work for the next, leading from the eponymous gas man through the joiner, the electrician, the glazier, and the painter to the gas man (again). En route the music contains as a ritornello, for no particular reason, a quotation from Beethoven's *Egmont*. The song therefore contains at least two parallels with *L'Opera seria* - a litany of faulty workmanship with its inevitable consequences, and a modest contribution to the debate "Can music ever be truly 'funny'?"

Before reaching Paris I had sought out the text of *L'Opera seria* in the British Library amongst a collection of libretti (possibly edited by da Ponte's rival, Casti) published in Milan in 1826. Calzabigi had previously published it in 1774 in his native Livorno and thus probably lit the blue touch-paper that produced Sografi's *Le Convenienze Teatrali* 20 years later. I found that the poet had headed his text self-servingly (but wholly in keeping with his immodest character) with the following from Horace:

Respicere exemplar vitae, morunque jubebo,
Doctum imitatorem

Loosely, When the copy reflects life and I make the rules that makes me a cunning imitator. With what Horace said elsewhere about imitators (*O imitatores, servum pecus*: O imitators, you slavish herd.) the irony of Calzabigi's invocation reverberates endlessly through one's thoughts.

And so to the performance itself. When the curtain rises after a

conventionally lengthy overture the audience is met with a scene of deceptive unfamiliarity. In the distance can be seen the auditorium of a large theatre viewed as though from the back wall of its stage. In the foreground lies the detritus familiar to anyone accustomed to dramatic productions- borrowed props packaged either for arrival or to be sent back. Three characters, a librettist, a composer and an impresario (who occupies an important-looking desk and comfortable lug chair, impressive but threadbare) debate the pros and cons of their latest serious opera in a rapid-form ensemble that clearly owes its origins to opera buffa, not the opera seria tradition. It took a little longer, and further accumulation of equivocal evidence before the total incongruity of the scene finally sank in. The distant auditorium is the one in which we sit, but it is empty except for some scenery (a large cut-out elephant). The stage (viewed from behind) is equipped with modern electric lighting, and yet all the characters that come and go are clearly from the eighteenth century. Into what kind of topsy-turvy world have we strayed?...

The opening scene involved a team of 'back stage' characters planning to put on an opera seria called Oranzeb; the Impresario Fallito (Pietro Spagnoli), the librettist Delirio (Klaus Häger) and the composer Sospiro (Jeremy Ovenden). The assembled characters become increasingly enraged with each other over cuts in Oranzeb and depart. When the prima donna arrives and finds no reception party to greet her exalted personage she sings of her inquietudine to Gluckian harmonies of Elysian charm before bursting out into a diva storm at her lack of an audience. Ah-ah! Now I see it! This is the topsy-turvy world of real people, not the distilled and bottled variety that opera seria often portrays. In other words here perhaps lies the seedbed from which *Le Nozze di Figaro* will eventually spring.

Once the key is found it doesn't take long for all the doors to fly open. The principles on which the production worked can perhaps best be described in the context of the part played by the cast member most loyal to the production, Dominique Visse. He plays the mother of one of the leading female singers in the imminent opera seria, the seconda donna, Smorfiosa played and sung delightfully by Miah Persson. All three mothers (the other two being the mother (Stephen Wallace) of the prima donna, Stonatrilla-Alexandrina Pendatchanska, and the mother (Curtis Rayam, large and black from Miami) of secondo uomo, Porporino-a trouser role played by Janet Williams) were played en travesti by men singing in a various kinds of 'feminine' voice. Visse entered as a bent and wiry old woman all in black looking as though she could be blown over in a trice. But in her belligerent self-centredness she goes on to knit her way through Act 2 with rapier-like speed and precision repelling all that approach her. But when an opening is offered she moves with greased lightening, leaping four feet into the air with Nureyev-like agility, or being accidentally thrown prone with teeth-loosening ferocity, or falling like a pole-axed wrestler, or darting after a loose ball of wool with feline speed and stealth. In all respects Visse was like a hyperactive Charles Hawtrey; deeds of finta-daring clothed under the protection of an improbable sanctity. It certainly looked as though this production was more in keeping with the style of Schickaneder in the Theater auf der Wieden than that of the Burgtheater where it was first performed in 1769.

The scene in Act 2 was the same theatrically-reverse view as Act 1 and

the stage action continued to be interrupted by mute supernumeraries who, like the tradesmen in Flanders and Swann's song contributed an epidemic of remorseless debilitation to the resources needed for Oranzeb. The main players in the coming opera seria having been brought together in Act 1 undertook in Act 2 a long disorganised rehearsal of the main arias with considerable laughter at the stupidity of some of the pieces that would have dangerous consequences for the performance itself. Some of the wordplay survived the knockabout production at least as a source of humour among the rehearsalists on stage. One such involved the substitution of Sicilia for Scilla. The primo uomo Ritornello (the tenor Mario Zeffiri) was required to sing a metaphor aria that involved reprieve from Chabydris being nullified by shipwreck on Scylla (something like 'devil and deep blue sea'). Ritornello (like many tenors, disdaining the intellectual approach) considered the risk of shipwreck on a mythical menace ridiculous and wanted to sing instead of landing unannounced on an island full of wine, beautiful women and wild habits (Sicilia)-indeed 'a naufrage devoutly to be wished'! The writers had the unenviable task of restraining him.

When the curtain finally rises on Act 3 and on the doomed performance of Oranzeb itself at least one element of the topsy-turvy world has been corrected. The view of the stage is conventionally frontal and we have been re-appointed as the audience (albeit with a sprinkling of a noisy claque in corners of the auditorium primed to bring the coming proceedings to a halt). The scene is a Hindu temple under a night sky in which a shooting star appears, and then stalls as the man holding the stick snags his swing. The stage crew is desperately trying to correct its mistake. The night sky is replaced by an evening one that reveals-well maybe it was intended to be a Himalayan mountain, but it looked like the Matterhorn to me. The sculpted rock gods and elephants look strangely hot under the cold mountain and to one side a sacred cow sits with its back resolutely to the audience. Matters deteriorate quickly in a riot of stiff acting, questionable singing and a few extras trying to appear like a de Mille crowd. The curtain falls under the mounting appeals from the claque and the orchestra fills the gap with an interlude before the curtain rises again, revealing a stage bereft of most scenery and the shipwrecked cast (and mothers) facing the need to allocate blame for the failure. Only when the Impresario's disappearance with the takings comes to light does the squabbling turn to focus on a common enemy. In an act of unscripted irony the final cadences are accompanied by the appearance bursting through the back wall of the stage (so recently the vantage point from which we had viewed the action) of a team of (modern) hard-hatted demolition men in the process of tearing the doomed theatre apart. (Think of the end of the spoof *Don Giovanni* in the film Amadeus and you will get the idea.)

I have not said much about the music until now. Gassmann may be no Mozart, but he was a skilled devotee of the Classical Style. By that I mean that his music works on the principles of harmonious balance in melodic phrasing and carries an urge to modulate towards the dominant key. Melodic ideas are contrasted, compared, merged and there is a feeling at the end of arriving at a destination-or at least of having resolved some of the obstacles to that arrival. But, like everything else in *L'Opera seria* there is a contradiction of the norm that to ears dulled by the romantic onslaught is

less noticeable than it would have been in 1769. But in spite of being short of the sophistication of musical construction that underpins Figaro the final roulade (which had already been heard briefly in the Act 1 and Act 2 finales, thus giving a hint of the cyclical inevitability of the outcome of this opera) is built from a set of balancing phrases of irregular length and limited range with an in-built tendency to modulate. As such it forms an ideal basis for a potentially unending sequence of stanzas that roll round the assembled mixed group of singers. It also has an annoying habit of sticking in the memory to be hummed whilst leaving the theatre and for a few days after.

On the other hand, looking at the contribution of that unreformed reprobate Calzabigi-and delving beyond the surface glitter of the word-play and the poetics-reveals that the most original thing about *L'Opera seria* is the structure of the drama. So far as I know no one since has hit on another good format for an evening-long show that so neatly encapsulates the whole process of opera production from concept to performance (good or bad). This format casts us, the audience, as witnesses to performances, private and public, within a theatre just as we are. One might even be tempted to see in Calzabigi's solution the same neat merging of form and content as in Flanders and Swann's song The Gasman Cometh, which uses a 'La Ronde' cyclical form to make a point about life repeating itself-part of a long tradition of rondo-like humorous cabaret songs retelling tales of 'what goes around comes around'.

One of the disadvantages of an early evening/matinée performance is the enthusiastic but intrusive contribution of the younger element in the audience. But in this case the spontaneity was welcome. Act 1 raised no more than muted laughter. Act 2 brought a few guffaws held back with less and less restraint. By Act 3 the audience was, if anything, ahead of the action with each new affront to the vainglory of opera seria being welcomed in anticipation. It is that steady crescendo of reaction that must bear testimony to Calzabigi's sure sense of theatre and the wonderful work of the production team, led by Jean-Louis Martinoty and René Jacobs (who even let the Composer from within the opera take over his orchestra at one point). To judge from the happy people I have met who have experienced this production either in the theatre or from radio broadcast there is a growing army of aficionados across Europe (which I have now happily joined) that has enjoyed this 'buffa opera seria'. If the opportunity presents itself for any of you readers (perhaps there will be a DVD?) then I recommend that you join too. In the meanwhile dig out your Flanders and Swann LPs (or CDs?) and dream of innocent times when reality still left some space in which satire could flourish.

(p9 'Ritornello' (Mario Zeffiri) a rose between two thorns. Photo Courtesy: Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris)