WEXFORD 2003
An air of uncertain Direction

In a mood of optimism I rewrote the schedule of a busy autumn (*Les Troyens in Paris* and the Opera Rara *Emma d'Antiochia* in London) in order to accommodate a short visit to Wexford, the capital of obscure operas, so that my wife and I could sample the penultimate festival of Luigi Ferrari. He was offering what had looked at first like a meal without a main course-Weber/Mahler *Die Drei Pintos*, Granados *Maria del Carmen* and Weinberger's old war-horse, *Schwanda the Bagpiper*, but in the original Czech (billed as *Svanda Dudák*). The initial reluctance to make the trip had eventually been overpowered by a fascination to see how the Mahler worked on stage and to find out what Spanish verismo looked like. And there was always the *Schwanda* for fun-a commodity that often seems to bring out the best in Wexford.

With Wexford's usual success rate I felt that I could rely on a hit, a fascinating 'could-be' and have to tolerate only one 'turkey' If there was little meat and too much vegetarian purée on offer we would at very least have healthy fare!

In the event the effort proved somewhat self-defeating, in spite of there being plenty of meat to eat. With only three nights it was necessary to devote all of them to opera. That meant attending the opera immediately after two days of continuous travel. It is difficult to concentrate when there is a real danger that complete slumber threatens, so some of the following comments have to be taken with a pinch of soporific salt.

The schedule put *Die Drei Pintos* in pole position. The treatment was typically ebullient with a false perspective set that increased depth without creating much room in which the large cast could move. The knockabout farce should have been appropriate for a komisch oper but had the unwelcome effect of further defocussing the thin narrative. Finally the best singer on the stage seemed to be the maid (played by Sophie Marilley) rather than any of the principals (her recital 2 days later confirmed that a very attractive mezzo actress is emerging). Amidst all the confusion and with Somnus weighing down my eyelids it was difficult to decide whether the fault lay in the Italianate buffo that sank under the weight of all the counterpoint and marching bass lines or that the creative team had just misjudged the material. From a piece of indiscreet local gossip shared on the QT I know that some German-speaking critics didn't stay after the interval. This may indicate dissatisfaction with the German enunciation, or reflect on the uncertain genre of the production that came across as an ill-conceived pastiche.

But the music of *Die Drei Pintos* sounded good both in the commercial recording and on the night. The following performance, which was broadcast by the BBC, reinforced the strength of the individual numbers and that the singing was improving. Mahler's Intermezzo sounded wonderful as prelude to part 2 (Acts 2 & 3). It is more Mahler than Weber and shows clear hints of the symphonic interludes he would soon pen, but its injection into this work as an exquisite nachtmusik just reinforced the sense of muddle.

The whisper around the town in connection with the next night's opera, Granados' *Maria del Carmen*, was that it smelt like a turkey and looked like a turkey. The implication of the comment being that perhaps it was, by God, a turkey. The limited samples available via the otherwise invaluable 'Discover the Repertoire' CD didn't help much. Tuneful though it sounded in a post-Wagnerian way, it had more of the hallmarks of being another of these earnest verismo pieces that Signor Ferrari seems to favour. In the event the prognosis proved exaggerated in spite of some ominously empty seats in the audience after the mid-point interval. The music is accessible, spirited and endowed with character. Had the production shared the same virtues it would have been a hit.

Costumes of stunning unmanliness neutralised the bragadoccio so important to the Latin temperament. The set designer had coated the stage with a thick uneven layer of earth-like material to depict the arid dryness that is the trigger for the bucolic plot. It looked as though the resulting moonscape may have had the effect of inhibiting all movements by the cast. Certainly they seemed frozen in space but I suspect that the direction given to the actors was at the heart of the problem. I hope that later audiences experienced a more confident portrayal of what seemed a musically likeable opera. The flamenco episode in Act 2 may be somewhat weak musically when compared with the rest, but its injection of colour and movement was essential to give the drama some variety. Perching the dancer precariously on top of the small table in order to get some authentic foot-tapping had the effect of increasing audience unease. (The 'earth' was understandably unresponsive-I nearly wrote that it 'dampened' the sound, but that would have been wrong in this 'dramatic' situation!)

In the absence of much pleasure in the singing characters the main musical interest came from the orchestra which played well throughout under the baton of Max Bragado-Darman who had contrived the edition on which the production had been built. His love of the music, which was further reinforced by the broadcast of the next performance, shone through. And so the conclusion has to be that Wexford upheld its tradition of saving an obscure opera from extinction without quite having breathed life into it.

Luckily the third opera needed no special pleading. The knockabout humour of *Svanda Dudák* rang true from its outset in a gypsy caravan through its rural Czechoslovakian odyssey to Hell and back (via a scenic transformation into a poppy and buttercup strewn field that showed just how inspired use of Wexford's minute stage can take your breath away). Was it buffo, semi-seria or satire? I don't care. After the uncertainties of the first two operas it was unalloyed joy to have one assured hit.

It would be easy to attribute the success of *Svanda Dudák* to the increasing use of performers from Eastern Europe, but that was assuredly not the reason for the success in this case. The creative team was mainly English (conductor Julian Reynolds, and designer Robin Rawstorne) with a dash of Italian (the director Damiano Michieletto). The language and the music may have benefited from falling within the vernacular of the chorus and there may have been some common transylvanian sound world for the cast (mainly Russian). But the obvious pizzaz of the production was an adopted coat of many colours for most rather than being the habitual clobber of some of the performers.

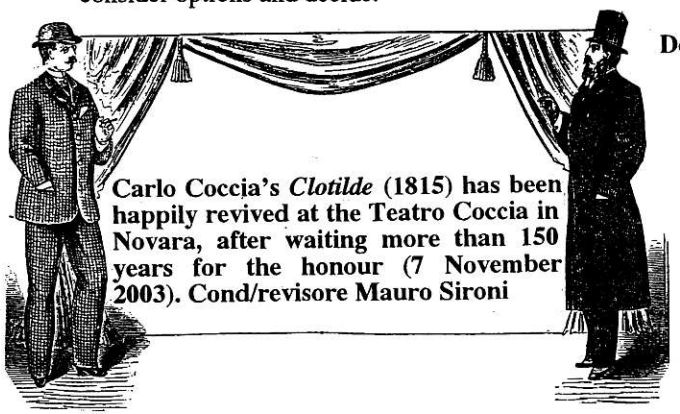
One out of three is well below Wexford's usual hit rate, but it could have been worse. And at this point I would normally end my report-but not this time. Before dawn the following day we started driving from Wexford towards Dublin to catch a flight to London in time to attend the sole concert performance of Mercadante's *Emma d'Antiochia*. Ahead of us we could see the dark clouds of a raging thunderstorm and occasional flashes of lightning that threatened to distract us as we dodged the barriers and road signs for the many road works. As we neared Dublin it got worse culminating in our being stuck in the queue for the road tolls without the necessary change and being saved by the driver behind who gave us 20 cents rather than let us out of the queue. It had taken 4 hours to reach the airport-the longest duration suffered for that journey.

Once there we found a coating of hailstones on the runway that caused the airport to be closed for an hour. It took Aer Lingus a further 6 hours to get us to London during which the mainly Irish passengers, who faced far greater consequential problems than us in making their onward long-distance connections, remained fatalistically good-humoured. As a result the way in which Aer Lingus disguised their questionable management as an 'act of God' went largely unchallenged (our plane having been overtaken in the queue by many scheduled to leave later). We arrived in London just as the concert ended and Emma had gone, at least for us.

The point of telling this story is to show how a tolerant attitude towards something unacceptable can obscure the need for improvement. Wexford is looking forward to increasing its theatre capacity by about a third, but is meanwhile in danger of losing the support of its loyal friends through its uncertain artistic standards. Two of the three shows we saw this year were below par either through muddled intent or (more likely) lack of preparation. As the end of Luigi Ferrari's period as Artistic Director looms our interest is focussed on what the future holds in store. Next year's operas are the usual mixture of the fascinating, the hopeful and the 'why that?' Bellini's *Adelson & Salvini* will attract many; Foerster's *Eva* is unlikely to deter the faithful; but Braunfels' *Prinzessin Brambilla* will raise eyebrows.

It would be tempting to give Wexford a miss for a year in order to let the future pattern emerge, but the last time we did that we missed a very good Gomes (*Fosca*). In the meantime we have a few months in which to consider options and decide.

Douglas M Bennett



Carlo Coccia's *Clotilde* (1815) has been happily revived at the Teatro Coccia in Novara, after waiting more than 150 years for the honour (7 November 2003). Cond/revisore Mauro Sironi