Mayr - a Key Revival

Atalia - *azione sacra* in two acts by Johann Simon Mayr, libretto by Felice Romani after Racine's *Athalie* (1690). First performed: Teatro di San Carlo, 10 March, Lent, 1822. [Original cast: Giuseppina Fabbré, Girolama Dardanelli, Domenico Donzelli, Michele Benedetti, Giuseppe Ciccimarra, Giovanni Orlandini.]

Guild GMCD 7268/70. Recording of the Ingolstadt revival in the Asam Church of S. Maria de Victoria, 20 September 2003. Cast: Atalia - Rebecca Martin; Gioas – Marie Jette; Gioada – Thomas Cooley; Matan – James Taylor; Abner – Jacek Janiszewski. Neue Düsseldorfer Hofmusik, Simon Mayr chorus, conducted by Franz Hauk.

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There is far too much to relate concerning a work like *Atalia* for a brief review such as this; it is frankly a problem for me to decide what to select, and even then it is difficult to be brief. All Donizettians know that no one less than Rossini rehearsed the singers at Naples and hereby hangs a tale exemplifying how Mayr suffered from cabals of different degrees. Donizetti wrote to his master on 4/3/1822:

I have travelled expressly to Naples [from Rome] before the end of the month as we agreed in order to assist with the success of the Oratorio [*Atalia*] but now realise it has been a useless journey. One has had to wait until now [to hear the work] three years since it was composed... [and it is] a time that could not be less favourable. It is enough to know Donzelli is singing instead of David, that the role of Matan is being sung by [Giuseppe] Ciccimarra, and that of Atalia by [Giuseppina] Fabbré who has not sung for two years, and that is not all; she has [now] a very dark, dull voice for which Sig. Rossini has lowered her vocal line. The fellow complains like a jesuit during the rehearsals [complaining] that they are not performing well, and then during the orchestral rehearsals stands there chatting up the women instead of conducting... I would have thought that [all this] would have been enough, but this is not all, I tell you Dardanelli will not sing her first act aria, that they have cut recitatives, choruses, the brief finale in the second act after Atalia's aria, etc, etc.

Donizetti goes on to say that they are all 'dogs who should be kicked away and not be allowed to perform the music'. He was so disgusted that the next letter written on 26 March shows that he took Mayr's *Atalia* to Rome where he most likely conducted the work and that a tale had been put around that he had composed a new overture. Donizetti is at pains in his letter to deny the rumour, for Mayr's overture had not even been performed in Naples.

Let's start with the overture. It will come as a surprise to the listener. Yes, *Atalia* is a long work lasting three hours. But the reason why Rossini cut the

overture was most likely because it is so good. It is as if 'Papa' Mayr had composed a 'sinfonia' to show up the Rossini formula. Remember that Mayr preceded Rossini and it was he who was known as the composer of overtures. Rossini had taken adopted ideas and made them into his own unforgettable style. Mayr here displays the art of instrumentation as never before and gives a lesson on how to treat the famous so-called 'Rossini crescendo' which, of course, the Pesarese had learnt from the older composer. The overture starts from virtual silence and gradually builds up its delightful introduction that leads to the substance of the piece. No wonder audiences thought that Donizetti had written the music; indeed, there is much here for him to learn from in the future years.

The overture hides another surprise; it is from *Lanassa* (La Fenice, Venice, December 1817), the opera that was so badly treated that even the manuscript is lost. Mayr noted that after this occasion he composed for the stage with 'malincuore'.

To know the late works is to recognise that he was pointing away from the Rossini fad to new directions for the younger generation to take up and to develop. Listen for example to the chorus that opens Act Two; it is a sound we associate more readily with a Verdi chorus, that is, until Mayr develops his tune in his own idiosyncratic way.

Let's again refer to Donizetti and *Atalia*. He copied 'appositamente pel Pio Istituto musicale in Bergamo' Atalia's great concluding scena *Ah! fra questi orrendi spettri*. Listen to it carefully. Yes, if you know your *Fedra*, you will hear Fedra's memorable, *Se fiero, Ippolito*. But on reflection you will soon recognise that it is precisely this gift for great concluding scenas that Donizetti had to reconcile with the challenge of Bellini in order to produce Anna Bolena's masterful conclusion. It is well known that when Mayr heard *Anna Bolena*, he began addressing his pupil as 'Maestro'.

There is quite a bit of *Fedra* here and there in *Atalia*. Mayr was approached to compose an *azione sacra* for the San Carlo in 1818. But Mayr was suffering from the shock of his treatment at La Fenice and excused himself as diplomatically sick. Where Barbaja failed Rossini succeeded, hoping for a work by Lent 1820. However by the time Mayr was satisfied with Romani's libretto, *Atalia*, it is suggested, was ready only by 1822. Donizetti on the other hand in the letter already quoted, clearly says Mayr had composed the work three years earlier. (This could mean 'some time ago' rather than precisely 'three years' and that he had been already at work on various ideas, etc. which Donizetti was invited to see as part of his education.) Delays in Naples seem to make more

sense. And so a score with a vocal line of the protagonist composed for Isabella Colbran was eventually delivered. Listen to Atalia's first cavatina which was cut, for in no way could la Fabbré cope. Furthermore as Donizetti informs us, the poor woman was totally out of voice. Rossini thus set about to shorten and to maul Mayr's score with the insertion of new pieces. The eventual performances were consequently a disaster.

Mayr was treated badly by his contemporaries after the rise of Rossini, no wonder he worked with 'malincuore' and used for *Atalia* touches of his music from *Fedra*, a work that had disappeared from the stage after its few Milan performances in 1820.

We are grateful to Dr Franz Hauk, the Ingolstadt *Simon Mayr Gesellschaft* and *Guild* for the making of a critical edition, its performance, and the recording of a masterpiece that can at last emerge from the dust of history books. Now we are able to hear a work that helps us to understand various ways in which the younger generation learnt from the elderly Mayr. He showed them how they could by-pass the Rossini phenomenon and so develop the course of Italian music. *Atalia* is full of interest from the accompaniment to the recitatives to the big ensembles. Listen with care for Donizetti learnt much from his master!

There is an important dramatic theme to be found in *Danao* (1819), *Fedra* (1820) and *Atalia* (1822). The master no doubt discussed his ideas with Donizetti, who, as we know from the *Zibaldone*, returned from the Bologna Conservatorio, in order 'to perfect himself in Mayr's teachings'. In these three operas Mayr was considering how the mind, through sin and the inability to find forgiveness, becomes unhinged and unbalanced. See for example Atalia's last scene, precisely the scene that Donizetti copied out for Bergamo. Such concepts went deep and were to surface later in his interpretation of stress and imbalance in the tragic operas of the 1830s. This helps to explain the young Donizetti's commitment to the work and why he travelled to Naples to witness its fate.

Atalia is in the flow of inspiration developed from *Medea in Corinto* (1813). In contrast, when Mayr wrote for his own circle of friends in Bergamo he was far more relaxed. This is born out by the memorable Bavarian Radio performance of *San Luigi Gonzaga* (1822), with Arleen Auger in the title role. It is a performance that *Guild* hopes to release and now all depends on Bavarian Radio to make the tape available.

Franz Hauk has an orchestra playing on period instruments; the soloists are mostly young Americans. Sure there is a lack of dramatic declamation here and there, and this together with the acoustics of the Asam church lead to the feel of

a concert performance rather than that 'something' which can only flow from the stage. When listening remember that this was a work written for la Colbran and if she had sung she would have had an equally supporting cast!

The recording is a treasure of the Mayr renaissance. We are gradually fitting together the pieces of a gigantic puzzle. Franz Hauk is a key figure in this work. He not only produces, with his team, critical editions basic for the renaissance, but also conducts the Ingolstadt revivals year by year (*Sisera* is rumoured for next year...). The work of the *Gesellschaft* is, of course, fundamental and Hans Amler, its president, and Iris Winker as its archivist, must also be singled out for praise. Furthermore *Guild* is also essential to the adventure, producing well-recorded and well-presented CDs.

In this context it is sad to note that Rebecca Martin has refused permission for the box set to be sold on the open market. We can but shout in protest 'Spoil sport! Primadonna! etc.!'. Let us hope she soon changes her mind. We who lived through the Donizetti Renaissance with those ghastly pirate records can but say that this perfectly adequate recording is a milestone in the re-establishment of Mayr. We must say to her that her performance is good (after all, who could have competed today with la Colbran!). It is also a recording that is essential that many hear in order to help rewrite the history books. Please Miss Martin, change your mind, quickly.

Eurika! All is not lost. Readers may purchase *Atalia* direct from the *Internationale Simon Mayr Gesellschaft*, Hohe Schul Strasse 4, 85049 Ingolstadt. Telephone 00 49 841 93 15 93 83 (or 00 49 841 305 18 13. Fax 00 49 841 9 31 16 28). Also, www. simon-mayr-gesellschaft.de ; E mail: simon-mayr-gesellschaft@ingolstadt.de

The cost is 35 euros for the 3 CD boxed set. Hurry, supplies are limited, that is until Miss Martin relents with her embargo. I also recommend you to ask if it is possible to purchase the excellent programme sold at the performance. There are ten articles, unfortunately all in German. The substance of these help to indicate how Covent Garden should approach critical editions, etc. Finally, Ingolstadt, thanks to *Guild*, puts to shame that most wretched *Lucia*!

John Stewart Allitt

