Orazi e Curiazi
an anti-war *capolavoro* for St. Paul

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Mercadante's *Orazi e Curiazi* received its premiere in 1846 at the San Carlo in Naples; the estimable quartet of Erminia Frezzolini, Gaetano Fraschini, Pietro Balzar and Marco Arati were heaped with laurels, and the opera praised to the skies. It quickly made the rounds of the Italian theaters, sometimes whipping up nationalistic fervor in its audiences. But within twenty years it had largely disappeared from the stage. When it finally returned to the San Carlo in 1882, tastes had changed greatly. Despite an apparently excellent performance, the 'Gazzetta Musicale di Milano' concluded that Orazi's initial popularity must have been due to the quality of the original singers, and called for it to be returned to the shelf: "*Orazi e Curiazi can continue to sleep that long sleep to which it had been condemned for more than 35 years.*" [1] This wish proved to be history's command: the opera's profound slumber was broken only by the kiss of Opera Rara, which performed it in concert in 1975 and then recorded it in the studio some twenty years later.

By then it hardly mattered whether the work had been unfashionable in 1882, and the reception was more positive. William Mann called *Orazi* "*.a masterfully made opera which I would love to see on the stage, so telling are the confrontations.*" [2] The 1995 Opera Rara recording with Nelly Miricioiu was also reviewed positively, but did not immediately inspire further performances. A proposed revival in Metz in 2004 never came to fruition, being replaced with yet another production of Tosca. Thus the present production by the Minnesota Opera marked *Orazi e Curiazi's* first actual staging since the San Carlo revival, and its premiere on North American soil.[3]

This was my first visit to St. Paul, Minnesota, but I hope it is not my last. I was favorably impressed with the beauty and friendliness of this city. The Ordway Center for the Arts - the venue used by the Minnesota Opera - is a beautifully designed modern brick structure with a glass facade; I was greeted warmly at the door by a dapper gentleman in a top-hat and tails. The mezzanine, where the pre-performance lecture was held, is an airy enclosure with a panoramic views of Rice Park and a picturesque square.

St. Paul is a seemingly unlikely place for an unlikely opera. Mixed with the excitement there was trepidation among many of the audience members with whom I spoke before the performance. One couple was quite surprised to learn that this was *Orazi's* first staged revival in 124 years. In light of this, they wondered if it could be any good. However, the Minnesota Opera's audiences have faith in its judgment, and with good reason. The company has an excellent track record presenting bel canto works, and gradually has become more adventurous. Its gambles have paid off. Last season's rarity - *Maria Padilla* - was a hit, but its composer was a known entity as the company had presented Donizetti works before. Few knew anything about Mercadante at all, so it was not surprising that a very large crowd showed up early to hear artistic Director Dale Johnson discuss the composer and the opera. Seats filled quickly, and standees crowded into the mezzanine and the balcony above.

Johnson's talk showed his enthusiasm for the work and he did an excellent job of demystifying Mercadante and his opera.[4] A grand piano had been brought into the atrium, and Johnson played through various highlights from the score, pointing out some of the more interesting and distinctive features of the composer's style. In one of the more interesting points in the lecture, he played through the Act I chorus 'La spada formidabile' and then the drinking chorus from *Ernani,* showing that - although the two were similar - the accusations leveled against Mercadante for plagiarising this piece were ill-founded. A promising young soprano, Alison Bates - who served as cover for the prima donna, Brenda Harris - was warmly applauded after singing Camilla's Act II aria, 'La mia prece' and its cabaletta 'Arde già l'atroce guerra.' She is a talented vocalist gifted with a beautiful voice and good looks; with continued coaching and experience I predict we will be

hearing much more of her. When the whole presentation was complete, the uninitiated certainly came away with their fears allayed.

To turn to the production itself, almost every aspect - the singing, the acting, the staging - was exemplary. The result showed what opera can be when lavished with the appropriate care and attention to detail. Much larger and more hallowed opera companies could learn from the example set by the Minnesota Opera's high standards of artistic quality. But a few disappointments do deserve mention. A company intrepid enough to present a Mercadante opera shouldn't be embarrassed about it. Yet all but two of the cabalettas were shorn of their repeats, and the banda music was simply taken by the orchestra. Driven mercilessly by conductor Francesco Maria Colombo's hurried tempi, the orchestra sometimes became a runaway freight train, and in more than one instance the singers and instrumentalists (particularly the solo trumpet) deserve added respect for keeping their heads and averting arrant disaster. Moreover, Colombo's inexplicable rush to get through the score squandered opportunities to tease out subtle variations in mood and color, as David Parry did in his capable handling of the same opera on Opera Rara's recording.

But one simply can't have everything, and on the whole the evening exceeded my wildest expectations. From the coordination of the movements of the principals, chorus, and supernumeraries to the the sets and costumes -the production integrated with the libretto tastefully and thoughtfully, and served the needs of the text and music rather than overshadowing them as is all too often the case. The costumes by Kärin Kopischke and sets by Neil Patel were inspired by costumes and architecture from the American Civil War. Transporting the action of an opera to another place or time period is always a calculated risk, but here that risk paid off. The theme of the libretto - family pitted against family in wartime - was equally well suited to ancient Rome and 1860's America. The sets, too, were evocative of both time periods. The most ubiquitous pieces of scenery were a columned portico with a broken fragment of brick wall behind it, and a clapboard house with an open back. The former suggested a Roman temple, a church, a plantation home, or a building in a public square - depending on the specific needs of the situation. The clapboard house represented the house of the Horatii - and could be rotated to reveal the inside, or the front door of the house as needed. In the final scene - and with obvious symbolism, the house split in half; the two portion were then moved to opposite sides of the stage, where they acted as risers for the chorus members. The other major set - which did not integrate as comfortably with the Civil War theme - represented the wall of the oracle's cavern in Act II. The "Oath" scene had Curiazio and Orazio signing a document while seated at a small folding table, as if to duplicate the treaty signing at Appomatox Courthouse. Yet immediately afterwards, the Orazi and Curiazi brothers crossed swords, suggesting the more traditional depiction in "The Oath of the Horatii" by Jacques-Louis David. The "Sacri Penati" referred to by Orazio were framed photos on the wall of the dining room. During the

first movement of Old Orazio's aria, Dickerson threw these to the ground, and held aloft a piece of broken glass - apparently contemplating suicide. Orazio's offing of Camilla in the final act worked less well - he used his sword to slit her belly rather than stabbing her. The effect, though awkward, was quickly overshadowed by Harris's moving performance.

Scene changes were handled in an almost cinematic way, and in fact more were introduced than are actually in the libretto. Supernumeraries dressed as soldiers wheeled the sets around, rotating them to change the angle at which they faced the audience or taking them out of the way as needed. For example, the opening scene moved from the outside to the inside of the 'church', then back outside, and from the front of the building to the side; the audience was thus given the impression of constant movement, as if we were following the characters about as they moved from place to place. The only snafu occurred when the lowering cave wall briefly came to rest directly atop a log fence, emitting a faint but disturbing crunch. It was discreetly raised and re-positioned correctly.

But in the end, it's really about the singing, and Brenda Harris's Camilla could hardly have been bettered; this must certainly be one of her finest portrayals. Harris's voice, at its peak volume, has an exciting, steely edge that makes her performance ideal for such a dramatic role. Yet, when called upon, she was able to spin delicate and moving pianissimi. Her coloratura - including some fine trills - was cleanly dispatched. The role lies painfully high and one sometimes had the impression that some of its challenges tested Harris's limits. But she coped beautifully, and I can think of few sopranos who would have done as well. Her huge scene in Act II was sung and acted flawlessly, and she introduced new ornaments into the second verse of the cabaletta 'Arde già l'atroce guerra' The final confrontation with Ashley Holland in Act III was electrifying, and the excitement and tension in the house was palpable as Harris steered it to its thrilling climax. Her pitiful death scene - at least half of which was sung while lying on her stomach on the floor - was deeply moving and garnered her a well-merited standing ovation. Harris's overt histrionics Camilla's extremes of rage, grief, and madness created great excitement; yet it was her subtler gestures, eye movements, and nervous fiddlings that elevated this portrayal to greatness. That Harris was able to maintain her exacting vocal standards and still deliver some of the finest acting I've witnessed on an operatic stage is nothing short of miraculous. Could Frezzolini herself have been any better?

Harris had a most capable partner in the young tenor Scott Piper. Piper's voice has a big, ringing Italianate sound, and indeed his previous triumphs include Verdi and Puccini roles. Like Harris, his acting went far beyond the usual wooden histrionics and singerly gestures one often sees from opera singers. In his parting duet with Ashley Holland, the Orazio, Piper sang the line 'Vedimi....a ciglio asciutto da te mi scioglio' his facial expressions and body language were rife with repressed

emotion. In his first act love duet with Harris, there was touching intimacy between the two when they parted from the chorus and hid behind some scenery, sharing their fears and longings. And Piper's rousing rendition of Curiazio's aria garnered one of the biggest ovations of the evening.

Holland's Orazio was more stoic, as befits the character, and his acting consisted mainly of stolidly scowling. It was only in the final scene - after the murder of Camilla - that he finally sank to his knees and showed real emotion. Holland seemed be holding back a bit vocally, but in all his performance was one any Verdi baritone would be proud of. The smaller roles were sung and acted competently. Bass Christopher Dickerson was most impressive in Old Orazio's dramatically pointless double-aria in Act III. Karin Wolverton, who sang the role of Ines in *Maria Padilla* last year, was seriously underparted as Sabina, but made the most of her few lines nonetheless. As the high priest and the oracle, Theodore Chletsos and Seth Keeton were both quite effective. The chorus sang marvellously and acted not as idle commentators, but as three-dimensional participants in the drama. Stage Director Peter Kozma and Movement Coordinator Heidi Spesard-Noble should be singled out for special praise for their contributions to the smooth and natural stage movements of the whole cast, from the principals to the chorus and supernumeraries.

Audience response was very enthusiastic, and the house appeared full almost to capacity. I had the opportunity to introduce myself to Minnesota Opera President Kevin Smith as he mingled with patrons during the first intermission. I thanked him for giving us the opportunity to hear something so unusual. He smiled and gestured at the audience: "*Well, you've seen their reaction.*" One can only hope that more opera companies follow the Minnesota Opera's example by exploring the forgotten by-ways of this period.

[1] Gazzetta Musicale di Milano, March 26, 1882, p. 115. He referred to Orazi's 36-year absence from the San Carlo, not the overall performance history of the work, which had been quite substantial until the 1860's.

[2] Times (London) April 28, 1975, p.7d.

[3] According to Tom Kaufman's researches, it was however sung twice in South America - in Rio de Janeiro in 1856 and again in 1859. See *Verdi and his major contemporaries : a Selected Chronology of Performances with Casts*, New York, Garland 1990, p. 103.

[4] Frustratingly, however, the program notes and Johnson's lecture both repeated the ubiquitous but long-debunked story of Mercadante's attempting to prevent Verdi operas from being performed in Naples. For a full account, see Tom Kaufman's article *Mercadante and Verdi*, The Opera Quarterly, Summer, 1997 pp. 41-56.