Odd Pages from a Notebook

The Donizetti Society's hundredth newsletter!

Il tempo fugge e purtroppo la vita si distrugge ... I remember writing the first newsletter and asking myself what had I led myself in for. My interest was not societies but bringing Simon Mayr back to the light of day as well as Donizetti's lesser known works. Those early years of the Society were not happy ones for me and I was eventually glad to leave other people to argue amongst themselves. Relief finally came when Alexander Weatherson took the helm. By then, thanks to Ian Caddy, I had helped to get more Mayr and early Donizetti onto the BBC. The Mayr-Donizetti Collaboration had also published carefully edited scores of the works of both composers, together with promoting concerts reviving rare pieces. Even books were seeing the light of day. I had not betrayed the two composers that meant so much to me.

It is important to record that the Society and Opera Viva's performances during the '70s were nothing short of miraculous. When I record that the concert performances were done on a shoestring, half a shoestring would be nearer the truth. Monumenta Bergomensia had asked me to revive Mayr's *L'amor coniugale* and thanks to Leslie Head, his orchestra and singers like Lois McDonall and John Tomlinson, this was done on March 1st 1973. The floodgates had been opened. It is now truly exciting for me that these concert performances, ancient tapes, stored for over thirty years in my garage, have suddenly found enthusiasts. These, I recorded off the radio on the cheapest of Phillips reel to reel and cassette recorders. A tape of Mayr's*La Passione* transcribed onto CD sounds as fresh as yesterday. The performance is, in my opinion, more authentic than the Ingolstadt performance that is on Guild. Something of the English oratorio tradition crept into Mayr's music to draw unique music-making from the soloists. Wendy Eathorne's singing of Mary's Lament at the foot of the Cross is one of the profoundest musical experiences that I know, equivalent to Kathleen Ferrier singing in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. I have always regretted that the BBC did not broadcast the 1976 concert of religious works by Mayr, Donizetti and the hitherto unheard Mozart *Missa Solemnis.* Leslie Head told me that at the conclusion of Mayr's *Te Deum* Wendy Eathorne had said to him *" That was truly great music! "* It is good to know that across the Channel the work is having frequent airings. Sooner or later it will be on CD.

But the most amazing thing to happen is that a dusty reel to reel tape of *Les Martyrs* (1975) of mine has been transcribed onto CD and has won enthusiastic admirers with the intention to have it marketed professionally. For both Leslie and myself this fact is a vindication and a healing. We used to refer to ourselves as the 'martyrs'. Everything that could have gone wrong did so. From the start the far from perfect parts discovered in Lemoine's cellars in Paris did not correspond to the full score and the vocal score represented a much fuller version of the opera. Hard work achieved a sort of harmony between the three sources to hand. Some music was restored from the vocal score, such as Polyeucte's prayer, a high point in Corneille's play and which certainly should never be left out during a performance of the

opera. I am now told that 'our' *Les Martyrs* is the fullest and certainly the best available

Let me fill in a little of the background to that memorable performance. The January evening was bitterly cold, the acoustics of Imperial College Great Hall were an abomination, dear Lois Mcdonal was a full half an hour late in arriving, both audience and orchestra were on the point of leaving the theatre. Chris De Souza of the BBC lambasted me with criticisms (here is the reason why the 1976 concert was not broadcast), and members of the Society were saying that they were not interested in hearing a 'religious' opera! (By the way, St Polyeuctus is commemorated on February 13th according to the Western Rite!) In those days I never heard a good word said for our efforts, merely criticisms, some even ferocious. I could never bring myself to listen to the tape that is now on CD. Every time I saw it lying around only bad memories would float back into the mind. Now that I have heard the performance on four CDs after so many years, I assure you, sometime after the overture the performance settles down. It is important to remember that the orchestra consisted of amateurs spiced by only a very small handful of professionals! It will not be long before the listener realises that at last we have on disc the finest interpretation of the opera's first act, the pathos of which leaves one inspired and with heightened sensibility! And so the performance continues to the opera's memorable conclusion, the music ever gaining in strength.

After a day's work it is hard work to participate in a four act opera *avec un ballet*. One is drained of energy by the time the lions are released into the arena! Furthermore ' our' performance has something 'French' about it that other recordings that I have heard simply don't. It has that essential rhetorical diction associated with French theatre. This is particularly so with Ian Thompson in the role of Polyeucte. (An example of how French should be sung - listen to Georges Thill's *Werther*!)

Alexander considers *Les Martyrs* to be Donizetti's finest *grand opéra.* For myself the music is profound, totally unique, emotionally disturbing at a deep level. (*Poliuto* is quite another work, usually ruined by attempting to make the music sound like Verdi.) Maybe it is hard for many opera buffs to realise that Mayr and Donizetti were among the first composers of the so-called ' Cecilian Movement'. Mayr, in his treatise on the history of the oratorio, even suggests that the opera is a fulfilment of the staged oratorios that began with Carissimi. There is an absolute need for a responsible critical edition to be made of this fine work, together with a totally dedicated sensitive performance and recording. *Su, forza, svegliatevi, o voi della Fondazione!*

For Bergamo, later, the edition we used in London was 'rewritten' and the performance was not good. This 'new' edition went on to be used at La Fenice. You have to forget that you are Italian in order to sing French opera! Furthermore I was shocked by the standard of the orchestral playing after working with Leslie and his dedicated players.

These notes must record two further facts. Firstly: on the strength of my success in persuading the Bergamo city fathers to hold the first Donizetti conference in 1975, I set out one cold winter's day in 1989 with my friend Dr Hannelore Bauer from Passau to drive to Ingolstadt. There we met Dr Siefried Hoffman and discussed the possibilities of a 'Mayr Conference' and this took place in 1992. There have since been a good number of conferences

dedicated to the composer in both Germany and Italy. Mayr has been duly launched. Secondly: Dr Iris Winkler's hard work has brought about the first Mayr Exhibition in Ingolstadt and in 2007, in Bergamo. This event is equal in historical importance to the first ' Donizetti Exhibition' of 1897. A good catalogue commemorates the Ingolstadt-Bergamo exhibition. It is destined to become a collector's item. The essays convey a substantial portrait of Mayr.

Is there a better time to retire from the Mayr-Donizetti scene? I doubt it. I have done the task that was set me. However it is only right that I thank all those that have and who are working for the Mayr-Donizetti renaissance. Bless you all! But remember there is still a lot of work to be done: especially for *'The Father of nineteenth century Italian music'*.

John Stewart Allitt

Giuseppe Donizetti the Italian maestro of the Ottoman court

Emre Araci

Dr Emre Araci's biography of Giuseppe Donizetti (1788-1856), the elder brother of Gaetano, who served under Sultan Mahmud II, as Instructor-General of the Imperial Ottoman Military Bands, has been published in Turkish by Yapi Kredi Yayinlari in Istanbul. As the first comprehensive biography of Giuseppe, the book includes many references to original and recently-surfaced documents located in the archives in Bergamo, Naples, Paris and Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul. Rossini's letter to Giuseppe Donizetti enquiring after the reception of his military marches by the Sultan and Liszt's letter to his solicitor friend Adolphe Crémieux for advice in securing the release of Gaetano from the French police before his ill-fated return to Bergamo are some of the documents surfacing in Dr Araci's book for the first time. The product of three years research, Giuseppe Donizetti - the Italian maestro of the Ottoman court, brings back the glories of an era when Italian opera was popular in the palaces by the Bosphorus and the sultans proceeded to the mosque to the strains of Donizetti and Rossini marches.

Original title:**Donizetti Pasa, Osmanli Sarayinin Italyan Maestrosu**
YKY, November 2006, 260 pp ISBN: 975-08-1153-4

Stop Press

Announced for publication in Balfe's bicentenary year 2008 is the long-awaited biography for which we shall all find room on our shelves

The Unknown
Michael W. Balfe
Victorian Britain's Unique Composer: A new perspective
Basil Walsh