Antigona at Schloss Rheinsberg

22 and 23 July, 2006

Until Magdalena Kozená' s 2001 CD album 'Le belle immagini', which included three of his operatic arias, drew Josef Myslivecek (1737-81) to the attention of a wider public, he was a composer known mainly to enthusiasts of eighteenth-century Czech music and those with some interest in Mozart's early years. With an almost equally short life span, brought to an untimely end by exhuberant but injudicious delight in the female sex, Myslivecek was gifted with a melodic inventiveness thought by many to have been the equal of Mozart's. He was a friend of Leopold Mozart - Wolfgang was twenty years his junior - but appears to have influenced the boy composer to the extent that he consciously modelled some compositions on those of the older man. It is no accident, therefore, that several of Myslivecek's compositions were long regarded as works by Mozart, and several were even erroneously included in Köchel's catalogue, such as the cantata *Abramo e Isacco* (originally as K.241a). Although prolific in composing music of all genres, he was especially prominent as an opera composer - certainly the most important Czech opera composer before Smetana - and he produced at least twenty six authenticated opere serie within a period of seventeen years, not to mention several others about which doubts exist. His work was highly rated by Dr Burney, and during this brief span he was amongst the best-known half-dozen opera composers in Europe.

Arguments continue about which was his first opera - a *Medea*, of an alleged performance of which at the Teatro Regio at Parma in 1764 there is (according to the New Grove Dictionary of Opera) no record; or a *Semiramide* (to a text by Metastasio) first given, according to Grove, in Bergamo in 1765. Czech sources, however, appear to concur that it was *Il Parnasso confuso*, also to a text by Metastasio (not, however, listed amongst his compositions by Grove), given to celebrate the marriage of Joseph II in Parma in 1765. The success of this opera immediately led to a commission from the Neapolitan Ambassador for another to celebrate the birthday of the Spanish King Carlos III which resulted in *Il Bellerofonte* (to a text by Giuseppe Bonecchi). This, probably only his second or third opera, had such a success at its prima at the San Carlo in Naples, in January 1767, that he soon received further commissions which he often executed with a speed and facility that matched many more famous Italian composers of the nineteenth century: *Romolo ed Ersilia*, for example, was apparently written within a week. *Il Bellerofonte* established Myslivecek's reputation throughout Europe and led to a fruitful connection with the Portuguese court, which regularly had copies of his operatic scores sent back from Italy for performance in Lisbon. The Ajuda library, in consequence, contains a collection of eighteen of them - the largest anywhere.

Myslivecek saw productions of two further operas in 1767, five between 1768 and 1771, nine between 1773 and 1775, and eight between 1776 and 1781. They continued to have considerable, and occasionally rapturous, success until 1779. By this time his health was broken - Mozart describes (in

a letter) visiting him in hospital in 1777, where he was horrified to find that his friend's nose had been burnt off as part of the medical treatment - and, having squandered his considerable earnings on a profligate life-style, he died a pauper in Rome two years later.

Happily, quite a lot of Myslivecek's music is now available to us on mainly Czech-label CDs, but these heavily favour his instrumental music and, apart from a complete recording on Supraphon of Il Bellerofonte, the only other CD opera recordings are of a few overtures and arias. Live performances of his chamber works are not uncommon in his native land, but his operas have been almost completely neglected. The only modern staged performances I know of have been *Medonte* in Opava in 1961, and *Il gran Tamerlano* in Brno in 1967 and in Prague in 1977. Sung in Czech, a recording made at one of the Brno performances was broadcast in USA, from which a set of LP records (marred, alas, by static) was later issued.*Il gran Tamerlano* (written to a libretto by Agostin Piovene) received its prima at the Teatro Regio Ducal in Milan in December, 1771, with enormous success, and it was at this time that Wolfgang Mozart and Myslivecek, who had first met the previous year, had their second encounter. So, in view of the very infrequent opportunities to experience and assess a staged production of one of his operas, it was a moment of joy for all ardent Myslivecekians when it was announced that a co-production of *Antigona* (to a text by Gaetano Roccaforte, and first mounted at the Teatro Regio in Turin in 1774) was to be given in July by the Kammeroper of Schloss Rheinsberg in Germany, and in September at the Estates Theatre - a satellite of the National Theatre - in Prague. I am happy to be able to report on the first two (of six) of the performances given in the Schloss Theater in Rheinsberg, where an annual summer opera festival offers opportunities to singers of all nationalities under the age of 32, chosen by audition.

Roccaforte's three act version of *Antigona*, originally written for Galuppi in 1751, differs from the plays of both Sophocles and Euripedes. Creonte has usurped the Theban throne of the dead Oedipus, whose daughter Antigona, acting as a priestess and interpreter of the oracle of Apollo, goes under the name of Antiope. She opposes the marriage of Ermione to Euristeo, her secret husband and the son of Creonte, and is ordered by Creonte to kill Ermione. Attempting to save her, Antigona instead tries to kill Creonte, but she is unsuccessful and is imprisoned. Alceste, Ermione's foster-mother, then reveals that Ermione is the daughter of Antigona and Euristo, and she is united with her parents. Meanwhile, Leacro, a Theban prince who is in love with Ermione, leads a successful coup against Creonte. Antigona ascends the throne with Euristeo, Creonte is pardoned, Leacro and Ermione can marry, and all ends happily. Roccaforte's libretto proved a popular one and was set by at least ten other composers (including Scarlatti and Gazzaniga) during the next thirty years. Myslivecek's setting dates from 1774, seven years after *Il Bellerofonte*, three years after *Il gran Tamerlano*, and approximately halfway through his operatic output. It had an immediate success. Beyond an increased use of recitativo accompagnato, often dramatically intense and effective, there seems, however, to be little development in Myslivecek's musical style over this period. His instrumentation and treatment of the orchestra remain very much the same, although the overture to *Antigona* is briefer than usual.

The da capo aria is standard for the principal singers, with shorter arias in

simpler forms for the comprimario parts. Arias express feelings about situations but seldom define character. Concerted pieces continue to be largely confined to the ends of acts - here a duet between Antigona and Euristeo to end Act 1, and a sextet to end the opera, although in the last act there is also an affecting trio at the reunion of Ermione with her parents. Myslivecek, it appears, was no reformer or innovator. One has the impression that, having found a winning formula, Myslivecek saw little need or incentive to vary it much or to try to progress further. He was content to exploit the melodic gift he shared with Pascetti, his operatic teacher; to provide his singers with opportunities for vocal display; and to remain within the constraints common to opera seria of the period. It is all a little disappointing, especially as we know, for example, that Myslivecek was familiar with the operas of Gluck from as early as the 1750s (*Ezio* - he composed an opera with the same title in 1777 - and *Issipile*), and himself directed Gluck's *Orfeo* in Naples in November, 1773, the year before he composed *Antigona*.

Schloss Rheinsberg was built by Frederick the Great as a summer rococo palace, and its court theatre (a separate, self-contained building) was built in 1774 - coincidentally the year that gave birth to *Antigona*. Unfortunately the castle was very badly damaged during World War II, and the theatre was gutted. The castle is presently under restoration, but the theatre was rehabilitated in 2000, although in a functional, contemporary style that made no attempt to restore its original interior. There is a sunken pit, but no proscenium arch. It seats about 300 spectators: twelve rows downstairs, and a small gallery of three rows.

It has to be said straight away that, despite the participation of the Prague theatre, this was not a production rich in spectacle and musical virtuosity - the latter being, in my view, an indispensable requirement of the successful exhumation of opera seria. So, the corpse received only half a kiss of life. With direction by Daniel Dvorák, who has been responsible for about thirty productions at the Prague National Theatre since 2002, and with stage designs by Jirí Nekvasil, a former collaborator of Dvorák's with considerable experience of the operatic stage in Prague, one might have hoped for a more stimulating production. They opted to set the piece in the presidential office of a modern totalitarian state. Possibly this could have worked if there had been any ideas to illuminate the action, but the absence of inspiration was typified by the roped walkway across the front of the stage that forced each character to walk (noisily) twice across the breadth of the stage on entering or leaving the action - clearly just a device to use up time during Myslivecek's often lengthy introductions and endings to arias. In truth, human sacrifices staged in front of presidential desks fail to convince. Even dictators care about not having blood spilt on their carpets, and the world of Greek myth does not easily take to a world of TV screens, mobile telephones and airport-type security metal-detector frames. It makes as little sense of the plot as it would to mount a contemporary opera - let us say, Jonathan *Dove's Flight* - using an eighteenth-century opera seria setting.The most impressive of the singers was Steve Wächter, whose high counter-tenor did ample justice to the castrato role of Euristeo. Only he, it seemed, was entirely at ease in the eighteenth century idiom. The killer role of Antigona was undertaken by the young South Korean

soprano Hyun-Ju Park, already experienced in bel canto roles, and recently a cover for Gruberova. She had the stamina required for the long bravura arias, and she found all the notes - itself no mean feat - but had little left over when it came to making them expressive. She also had an extended elegaic aria in Act 3, which opens to find Antigona in chains. It is, perhaps, the most beautiful vocal writing in the entire opera but, sadly, the sustained legato singing it requires eluded Miss Park. Katerina Knezíková, already singing leading roles in Prague, did well with the smaller soprano role of Ermione. The three other singers were, in various ways, unsatisfactory - one to the extent that it was difficult to imagine how he had been allowed on stage at all. The Italian in which the opera was sung was largely incomprehensible. Roger Boggasch conducted a forthright but unsubtle performance, and the Prussian Chamber Orchestra (of twenty players) offered steady, if rough and ready, support. Not an evening of much musical sophistication, but one in which everyone worked hard and gave of their best, and certainly an evening (for me, at any rate) of considerable interest. The printed programme was devoid of any detailed information about *Antigona* - not even a summary of the plot - and was silent about the sources of the musical materials used in the performance, and who had edited them.It appears unlikely that any commercial recording will result from this venture.

All in all, it was worth the effort of going to Rheinsberg (itself a charming venue). Whatever the deficiencies of the performance, it did give a fair idea of the piece - and, on a shoe-string budget and with young aspiring artists, it would have been unrealistic to have hoped for more. To put *Antigona* in a Mozartian perspective: if *Il Bellerofonte* corresponds stylistically very much to *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, then *Antigona* shares much more with *Mitridate* than it does, say, with *La clemenza di Tito*. Having said that, however, as the Kozená disc abundantly shows, vocal music by Myslivecek can easily sit side by side with that of Mozart. The comparison between, to say nothing of the one-time confusion between, the music of the two composers is neither perverse nor stupid. Myslivecek's operatic music is in every way as technically assured, melodic and expressive as that of early to mid-period Mozart - so, if you enjoy Mozart's opere serie, you are almost bound to enjoy those of Myslivecek. It is my view that, if mounted with all the resources of a professional company in terms of spectacle and vocal virtuosity, they must be just as viable on the stage as those of Mozart. They are not, as far as my present knowledge goes, neglected masterpieces, but are competently crafted, invariably pleasing and often exciting. We should count ourselves fortunate that we have so many additional 'Mozart' operas to discover and explore. Will someone please give us more?



Alex Liddell

The miraculous recording of Donizettti's *Les Martyrs* recovered in the dust and *rossore* of John Allitt's garage will appear on commercial disc, as he relates. It is certainly the most complete and fascinating edition of this *grand opéra* at the very apex of the inspiration of the composer. With Lois McDonall as an unforgettable Pauline, Ian Thompson as Polyeucte, Terence Sharp as Félix and John Tomlinson as Sévère under the inspired baton of Leslie Head. The sound will never be optimum, but everything else is...