Cagnoni and his first masterpiece

Don Bucefalo

an Italian musical comedy of a new era

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How often is the mantra repeated by opera scholars that operatic comedy in Italy ended with *Don Pasquale*? The masterpiece of Donizetti - at the same time at the height of his creative powers and simultaneously at the beginning of the end of his life - is of course a completely different comedy from that opera audiences were used to hear by a Rossini or a Cimarosa. *Pasquale* opens up new dramaturgical paths for opera and even if comedy was not high on the agenda for late 19th century opera composers its influence is possible to perceive. But for the next generation of composers - like Antonio Cagnoni, Jacopo Foroni, Nicola De Giosa, Bartolomeo Secchi and even Verdi – comedy was not at all dead. Even if comic plots did not dominate the choice of operas, it still held its audiences. And comedy was obviously supported at the Milano Conservatorio. The young Antonio Cagnoni who had entered the Conservatorio in 1842 could choose an old comedy by Giuseppe Palomba (first set by Valentino Fioravanti in1799) *Le cantatrice villane* as his examination piece. (The old Fioravanti piece had held the stage, for quite a long time since its first performance in Naples and its libretto had been frequently revised during the early 19th century)

Cagnoni was born in Godiasco, near Voghera in 1828. He showed an early talent and he could enter the Milan Conservatorio at the age of fourteen. He was placed in the violin class as the school had not yet a composing class. But from 1844 he took lessons from Felice Frasi and from now on he showed real gift for the theatre. Two operas were written in 1845 and 1846: *Rosalia di S. Miniato* and *I due savoiardi* both to much acclaim in the Milan press. Both operas were performed in the little theatre of the Conservatorio with fellow students in the singing roles.

On June 28 1847 the first 'real' opera by Cagnoni took the stage: *Don Bucefalo* to a libretto by Calisto Bassi. It was an immediate success and Ricordi did not loose any time and gave the young composer a contract. During the autumn of 1847 the opera made a circuit of the most important opera houses in Italy, everywhere *con notevole successo*. Cagnoni followed his opera not only in Italy but also outside: in May 1849 he travelled to Marseille where he also stayed for a short time as *maestro concertatore*. His opera held a place in France for a time but when it was performed at the Théâtre Italien in 1865 (with Alessandro Bottero as Bucefalo) it was coolly recieved. Nevertheless Escudier published a Parisian vocal score (in Italian) more or less a reprint of the Ricordi edition of 1848. This light comedy by Cagnoni, *Don Bucefalo*, owes of course a lot to the masterpiece of the much admired Donizetti of 1843. And in its way, *Bucefalo* is a kind of swan song to the Italian *dramma giocoso* as we know it from a Cimarosa,

Paisiello and a Rossini. Already in *Don Pasquale* Donizetti impresses us with a slightly different tone, his characters are not portrayed in a mocking and satirical way, with very little sympathy, but with care, humanity and indulgence. Of course we can see all their weaknesses and short-comings but we can smile at them and say: "we know how it is" and in the end embrace them.

That is a starting point for Cagnoni and his librettist. The composer uses all the musico-dramatic forms of the day from arias, ensembles, *rectativi semplice* and *accompagnati*, *mèlodrame*, to spoken dialogue, but even if the opera is composed in numbers, the continuity of the drama erases the final bar line for each number and we have a feeling of a through-composed piece. There is a completely bewildering and crazy number where the orchestra insists upon tuning its instruments: *L'accordatura*; all the instrumental *preludi* are written-out in a mix that does not take any care of harmony or rhythm; a sort of aleatoric counterpoint from the mid 19th century! When Bucefalo's students in the opera refuse to sing the *arie antiche* he wants them to sing and instead intonate a whirling and elegant *sestetto* of a more modern kind, Bucefalo leaves his post and cries to the audience "**Cagnoni! Cagnoni!**" - in vain it must be added. Cagnoni also puts a focus on his own time. When Bucefalo sets an old metastasian text *Che delirar mi fa, che mi dividi il cor* in the modern style with a cascade of triplets, he excuses himself with "Forgive, ye classics, these triplets are not mine". Indeed, they are not, they belong to Verdi of which the audience no doubt was perfectly aware. And the three act opera in rehearsal gives us a feeling of another opera that recently had had its *prima*: Verdi's *Attila* in Venice 1846 but in a twisted way... It is genuine theatre piece we listen to. The work to be heard is reflected in the autograph that now is preserved in the Archivo Ricordi. Like the scores of Cagnoni's idol, Donizetti, the autograph of *Don Bucefalo* is true battle-field, cuts, rewritings, additions and second-thoughts abound. All the revisions are by the composer but who initiated them we can only guess. As a result there are inconsistencies between the secondary sources and the libretti. A manuscript copy in Conservatorio Milano and the two printed libretto all give us slightly different versions when confronted with the autograph. The present edition has used the autograph as the primary source supplying us with a new duetto that is lacking elsewhere, this is the duetto Rosa-Conte *Non fuggiarmi, mio ben* from the beginning of the third act. But you can also find in the autograph enigmatic information like *"segue Recitativo e Terzetto a 3. donne col Coro"* after the Agata Romanza at the beginning of act three. Nothing can be found of that music or text in any of the sources.

To sum up: working with this manuscript and creating this edition has been pure delight. No one can resist Cagnoni's overwhelming youthful energy and inspiration and we are swept along with this glittering and elegant music that gives us a true inkling of opera comedy of a new era.