Fedra

"Gelosia, dispetto, affanno, rio velen, rimorsi, amore..."

In the decade of 1815-1825 viable plots were selected on the basis of prudence. Especially in Milan. Certain arguments were hazardous. Rescue plots (*pièces-à-sauvetage*) were courting disaster (the Austrians hoped no one would mention *prisons*); anyone hairy or unkempt (outsider, hermit or recluse) was treated as a dissident; priests were unfrocked, exaggeratedly heroic gestures of defiance were supressed. The *Restaurazione* encouraged abasement and remorse for the excesses of the Napoleonic era, thus, if only by default, giving substance to the one inevitable feature of the neo-nata *melodramma romantico*: the *Vittima*.

It was political discretion that took operas far away in time and space (to the limits of Sanquirico's imagination). Anything resembling present-day existence was frowned-upon, no need for Schiller or Goethe, romantic colouring came on the hoof, real-life was out, decor was in, nature was permitted to revolt (earthquakes, floods, and volcanic lava), man was not.

A composer like Mayr steered a cautious path: the author of a Te Deum in honour of the Imperial castaway cut his coat according to his cloth. Whereas his *Cora* (1815, based on Marmontel via Berdadoni and Francesco Berio di Salsa) at the end of Murat in Naples encouraged humanitarian rather than mythological exaltation, *Fedra* in Milan, five years on, like the *Danao* and *Demetrio* which framed it, was retro. This was prudent. Her utter irrelevance was probably her attraction. No toes to tread on. He could deal musically with threats, injustice, could conjure-up abstract force without reference to anything or anyone in that city, past, present or future. Backwards was forwards. Rossini knew this too. It was politic to keep on the side of the Gods and leave polemics to the music.

The libretto he chose for *Fedra* - unusually for an old-fogy like Luigi Romanelli - has a distinct concentration. Hardly any nineteenth century operatic libretto ever lived up to the play or novel on which it was based, but Romanelli's *Fedra* is something of an exception. Racine's famous play (1677) is one of the most freezing experiences imaginable, reading Phèdre's torment the pages drop from your hand. Even more frightful than that of Lady Macbeth, the occult destiny of Phèdre turns the reader to stone. Under the aegis of Mayr's music, the opera reaches heights not unworthy of Racine, especially at its climax. For a moment *Fedra* achieves that kind of breathless suspension, that utter psychic isolation which is the icy accolade of genuine lyric tragedy. Teresa Belloc, who was at the very end of her career and the height of her powers, reached a

nearly unbelievable apex in this opera. [1]

A shamed and shameful mezzo-soprano Fedra is bound by an impure flame to a soprano (Adelaide Tosi, as her stepson Ippolito) which not everyone will consider to be an improvement on the Ippolito of Paisiello who was a castrato.[2] Can this be described as Romantic? But *Fedra* rises above the limitations of its day. Is Mayr a Romantic? Almost all his operas go overboard, not only on local colour but on a tangible excess of behaviour. Donizetti certainly listened attentively to this trait. If Mayr could be said to have had a recurrent theme it would be that his heroines are dwarfed by events beyond their control, occult in *Medea* and *Fedra*, volcanic in *Cora*, dubiously romantic on the surface - seldom admitting of the compulsion to break the chains and all-too compliant with the political climate of his day, but Fedra's sheer extremity of emotion qualifies her to an outsize place on the Romantic podium.

Nothing especially innovative is indicated by the structure of the opera: Act I has eight items including the sinfonia, Act II is slightly shorter with seven items (but the autograph score includes an instrumental interlude which creates a balance) if somewhat deceptively.

1. Sinfonia Largo/allegro molto agitato Act I

2. Aria con coro Teramene Recit. 'Cari amici' Cantabile. 'Se breve oltraggio'

3. Coro delle damigelle 'Dagli occhi piove /Di Fedra il pianto'

4. Entrata Fedra
Recit: 'Dilette ancelle'
Cavatina: 'Che mai non fece'
Cabaletta. 'Per quell'Adon, che amasti'

5. Coro de'seguacci d'Ippolito ed entrata Ippolito
Coro. 'Nè ancor qui giunge Ippolito'
Recit. 'Compagni, amici, addio'
Primo tempo.. 'Nò nò da voi non mi divide'
Cantabile. 'D'Aricia, il mio bene'
Cabaletta. 'Che son figlio io sol rammento'
(this was the moment that obliged La Scala to suspend the rest of the first performance (see below))

6. Duetto Ippolito/Fedra
Recit. È risolversi mai'
Primo tempo. 'Se orror di te non hai'
Cantabile. 'Ah, che intesi!' (a 2)
Stretta. 'Forse chi sa/Lo stegno appaga'

[1] For a remarkable literary exchange between this famous mezzo-soprano and Mayr see: *La cantante di Mayr* by Vittorio Della Croce [in] Donizetti Society Journal 6, 28-36 :

[2] Paisiello *Fedra*, libretto by Abate Mario Salvioni after Racine (S.Carlo, Naples 1788). Its text was parodied from Traetta's *Ippolito ed Aricia*, libretto by Carlo Innocente Frugoni (Ducale, Parma 1759)

7. Coro di popolo /entrata Teseo
Coro. 'Delle trombe al suon festivo'
Cavatina. 'Spiagge amene, ove io già vidi'
Cabaletta. 'Gli affani, le pene, con gioja rammento'

8. Finale Io
Quartetto. 'Cento rimorsi' Fedra/Ippolito/Teseo/Teramene
'Ah! qual fragor' (Tutti)
Concertato. 'Qual tu sia, fiero nume inclemente' (Tutti)

Act II

1. Introduzione (Coro) 'Ai patri lari'

2. Terzetto.
'Dal tuo duolo o Prence' Stretta. 'Senta numi, a cui d'ogni alma' (a 3)
Ippolito/Fedra/Teramene
(Mayr intended an aria for Atide to follow this ('Sorridendo, più ritrosi') but it is not present in the autograph score and may have been supressed after the prima?)

3. Duetto Fedra/Teseo
Primo tempo. 'Io conosco, e ciò ti basti'
Cantabile. 'Fra due rivali affetti'
Tempo di mezzo. 'Ebben Teseo'
Stretta. 'Di Giove il fulmine' (a 2)

4. Aria Ippolito
Recit (stromentato) 'Fatal sentenza!'
Cantabile. 'Soffrirei senza lagnarmi'
Cabaletta. (a Teseo) 'Troppa da me costanza/In tanta di pene'
(Mayr wrote a second version of this duet with the cantabile amended and with a cabaletta 'Deh rammenta, rammenta' (con coro)

5. Aria Teseo con coro
Recit. 'Che feci mai! Qual nebbia si dirada miei sguardi!'
Aria. 'Mesto incerto, confuso, dall'onde agitato'
Coro. 'Un toro dall'onde'
Cabaletta. 'Ma il brando, ch'io stringo'
[Instrumental interlude allegro/allegro con moto]

6. Finale ultimo
Coro. Per qual ci guidi' (Donne)
Recit. 'Il mio pensiero? è già compito, io morte'
Cantabile. 'Qual suon funereo...' (Fedra)
Duettino. 'Teramene...che fu?...ti piangi?' (Fedra/Teramene)
Cantabile. 'Gelosia, dispetto, affanno, Rio velen, rimorsi, amore' (Fedra)
Aria finale. Fedra 'Se fiero, Ippolito' 'Fide ancelle...ecco il momento'
(a Teseo) Spaventevole la morte/Mi sarebbe, ove tu sei/Disperata i giorni miei/
Vado altrove a terminar'
Cori. (a Fedra) 'Vanne pur con quelle sorte' (Uomini)

Death by belcanto

The La Scala cast at the prima was at the highest level, *Fedra* was sung by Teresa Belloc, *Teseo* by Nicolò Tacchinardi, *Ippolito* by Adelaide Tosi, *Teramene* by Pio Botticelli, with the small roles of *Atide* by Marietta Castiglioni and *Filocle* by Pietro Gentili in a setting (of course) by Alessandro Sanquirico. But the *prima* was one of the most extraordinary ever experienced even in that theatre. Given on S.Stefano, that is 26 December 1820, it was a tumultuous milestone even for that stage the roccoco reputation of which survives effortlessly to our day (as we all know) The opera opened smoothly, the fine overture and the aria of Teramene were received warmly, as too was the *sortita* of Teresa Belloc (even though she had come directly from London where she had been singing Angelina in *Cenerentola* - not perhaps the best preparation for this drama). The music got as far as Scene V and the florid cabaletta of Adelaide Tosi in a flue-brush helmet and mini-skirt as Ippolito. This local aspirant for fame, her début in fact, sung before an ominously silent throng, got to end of the reprise of her 'Che son figlio io sol rammento' when the entire auditorium exploded, cheers, counter-cheers, deafening cries, stamping, more stamping, more cheers, a pandemonium. Cries for bis. More cries. The stage froze and the management appeared at the footlights to appeal for the opera to continue, but the speaker was drowned and ignored. Attempt after attempt to restore order went for nothing, the cheering continued. Another appeal, useless. The curtain was lowered, then raised again but the shouting was unbroken. After more than an hour of (now) hoarse cries, determined disruption, frenzied enthusiasm, adulation, and fruitless appeals for calm, the performance was abandoned, the lights extinguished and the cheering fanatics pushed out (not without difficulty) into the street. Thus the first performance of Mayr's *Fedra* consisted of one quarter or so of Act I. Happily for the composer, on the next night the rest of his music was permitted to make an appearance.

Although not an especially florid score there were tremedous vocal obstacles in this *Fedra*, the first act duetto between Ippolito and Fedra has an incredible leaping vocal line, Fedra drops nearly two octaves on 'barbaro', echoed, if less wildly, by Ippolito. Tosi's cabaletta (which literally brought the house down) asks for belcantistic gymnastics of the most testing kind which this débutante carried off with such nerve that the spectators themselves were unnerved it would appear... The *finale primo* is elaborately canonic, in the form of a sextuple canon leading to a fugal concertato against a raging orchestra whose colouring alone was enough to bring audiences to their feet. Act II is full of attractive music as if trying to offset the increasing despair of the protagonists, but its andamento is relentless leading to a fantastically extended *gran'scena finale* in which the dying Fedra appears like a rock in a stormy sea of abuse, with one burst of fioritura to herald her famous *aria finale* 'Se fiero Ippolito.'

e Braunschweig?

The highly competent cast at the Staatstheater on 30 March 2008 consisted of Capucine Chiaudani as *Fedra*, Tomasz Zagorski as *Teseo*, Rebecca Nelsen as *Ippolito*, Dae Bum Lee as *Teramene* and with Siegfried Pokern as *Filocle* (*Atide* virtually supressed as Mayr seems to have intended.) Though most of the individual pieces of this important score were respected (Teseo's aria in Act II replaced?) there were horrendous cuts, with Mayr's wonderful double-cori utterly decimated. But this was mostly at the expense of Racine. It was an exciting performance this notwithstanding. The first-act finale could only be described as shattering, and on several counts, most especially its incredible orchestration, but also its novelty with such an imposing choral, orchestral and soloistic integration: vehement, violent, scabrous, this is not music of the Rossinian era, it has no date. Shades of Berg, the opera uncovers a Mayr who is not merely a predecessor of Donizetti but a dramatic activist of his own engendering. [When Pacini refers to " *il sommo Mayr*" at last we know why]. All the ensembles were very well sustained. True, the Braunsweig edition was missing the devastating legato of the day (which, together with the inevitable fabulous belcantistic gymnastics current at the time explains the extraordinary reception of Adelaide Tosi, indeed, the precise point at which the La Scala audience exploded at that memorable prima was cut in this first modern revival, it was the *reprise* of her cabaletta which she had embellished with fantastic cadenzas which brought the whole to a halt!) The main problem was the plot, without the recitatives - most of which simply did not appear - the impact of the terrible story is utterly truncated. Romanelli showed in these recitatives that he had taken Racine to his heart and his language is at times as bitter as the revenge the Gods imposed on his heroine. These cuts even pruned the spectacular *gran 'scena* which ends the opera even though their impact was offset by some impressive acting. I can quote here only one of these missing recitatives, not one that is at all significant except that it encapsulates the opera's focal point for Mayr: (Atto II, Sc IV)

Fed....

So, che Teseo qui giugerà, nè posso
Ricusar di vederlo. In ogni evento
Questo, che mi lasciò Medea fuggendo,
Letal bevanda, ho meco. Oh! se potessi
Cambiar l'infamia con la morte! Oh quanto
Lieta sarei!

Letal bevanda! For those who cherish this composer we see here how he linked his two masterpieces : *Medea in Corinto* and *Fedra* are a sequence, the first commands the demise of the eighteenth century, the second offers a fatal insemination for the vittima heroines of the century to follow...

Alexander Weatherson

troppo esaudite; poichè, mentre il figlio viaggiava sovra un carro lungo le rive del mare, un mostro marino mandato da Nettuno spaventò in tal guisa i destrieri, che datisi disordinatamente alla fuga, e non sentendo più nè voce, nè freno, fracassarono il cocchio, e strascinarono lo stesso Auriga, che aveva un braccio imprigionato fra le redini, sino a tanto che rimase infranto fra scogli.

È questo il fondamento della presente azione drammatica, che si finge in Trezène. Fu da Racine *introdotto nella famosa sua tragedia, che porta lo stesso titolo, il personaggio d'Aricia, ultimo rampollo della reale antica stirpe de' Pallantidi, distrutta da Tesèo. Se per ciò sia stata fatta una giusta critica a quell' insigne autore, non tocca a me il giudicarne: so bene, che per diverse ragioni in una tragedia per musica il personaggio d'Aricia, che io mi sono contentato di far conoscere per semplice racconto, avrebbe recato imbarazzo, anzi che giovamento, all' azione.*

Lo stesso argomento fu da me trattato in un Melodramma, che si rappresentò in Padova nell'occasione dell'ultima fiera detta del Santo. Ma il presente Melodramma, fuorchè la sostanza del fatto, nulla ha di comune col primo nè per la condotta, nè per la versificazione; imperciocchè la diversità del Teatro, la qualità degli Attori, ed altre circostanze esigevano, che la composizione fosse del tutto nuova.

L. Romanelli.

PERSONAGGI

FEDRA, figlia di Minosse, e moglie di
Signora Teresa Bellon.

TESÈO, padre di
Sig. Nicola Tacchinardi.

IPPOLITO, nato d'Antiope regina delle Amazoni.
Signora Adelaide Tosi.

TERAMENE, amico d'Ippolito.
Sig. Pio Botticelli.

ATIDE, confidente di Fedra.
Signora Marietta Castiglioni.

FILOCLE, seguace di Tesèo.
Sig. Pietro Gentili.

Coro di
- Guerrieri, seguaci di Tesèo.
- Cacciatori, seguaci d'Ippolito.
- Damigelle.
- Popolo.

Comparse
- Guerrieri, seguaci di Tesèo, e guardie.
- Seguaci d'Ippolito.
- Damigelle del seguito di Fedra.
- Popolo.

La Scena si finge in Trezène, e ne' suoi contorni.

Musica nuova del sig. Maestro
Giovanni Simone Mayr.

Le Scene sono tutte nuove, disegnate e dipinte
dal sig. Alessandro Sanquirico.