Mercadante's *Il bravo* from the Wexford Festival

Charles Jernigan, October 21 & 24, 2018



Doge's Procession with Tourists

Saverio Mercadante's *Il bravo* (1839) premiered at La Scala a few months before Verdi's first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio.* Mercadante, born in 1795, three years after Rossini, would live until 1870, with a career spanning five decades and almost 60 operas, as well as many religious works and pieces of chamber music. *Il bravo*, perhaps his masterpiece, comes in the middle of his career and is one of five operas with which he tried to "reform" the well worn, traditional conventions of bel canto opera which had been fixed since Rossini's earliest works. *Il bravo* shows the results of his reforms—a banishment of crescendos, reduction of cabalettas, more ensemble writing, enriched orchestration and more attention to the way the music expresses the drama. In fact, the music of *Il bravo* is wonderfully inventive—melodic, expressive and varied, but the libretto is awful: it is impossible to understand what is going on without carefully reading a plot summary, and even then it is difficult to see why the characters behave as they do. They seem to be motivated by an unnatural loyalty to their parents and an odd concept of 'honor'. In this they are not so far removed from some of the more inscrutable motivations of Verdian heroes— especially those of Manrico, Carlo (*I masnadieri*) and *Ernani*.

The ultimate source for the libretto is long novel by James Fennimore Cooper, *The Bravo*. Cooper's multi-plotted work tried to contrast the corruption of the Venetian Republic, in reality an oligarchy ruled by money and pleasure ("Oro e vino" is an opening chorus of the

opera) with his hopes for the nascent republic of his native America. The story of the Bravo is only one of several threads in Cooper's work; that thread was then turned into a French play entitled *La Vénétienne* by August Anicet-Bourgeois, from which the libretto derives. The original librettist failed to deliver his work on time, so Mercadante turned to Gaetano Rossi, the well-known author of hundreds of libretti for Rossini, Donizetti and others. But Rossi fell ill and turned his incomplete work over to one Marco Marcellino Marcello. The result is a disastrous mishmash of a plot with poetry which is beneath that of even opera texts. Knowing this, Mercadante turned to Felice Romani, the greatest librettist of the period, for help, but Romani would not touch it.

So what we have is an opera with wonderful music and a libretto which makes *Il trovatore* look like the very model of rational logic. One can understand why opera companies are reluctant to take it on. A "bravo" is a hired assassin in this context, and this one, whose real name is Carlo Ansaldi, has been forced into his role working as an assassin for the corrupt Venetian state because they imprisoned his father long ago, and to save him from execution Carlo is forced to kill for the State, to become "il bravo." Also, long before the opera opens, he has seemingly killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. Otherwise, the plot revolves around a beautiful young woman named Violetta, recently come to Venice from Genoa. She is desired by a Venetian patrician, Foscari, and loved by Pisani, a young man who met her in Genoa. Pisani, for reasons which are never clear to me, switches roles with the Bravo, and wears his distinctive mask. Since no one knows who the Bravo actually is, this ruse works and causes all manner of plot complications. In Act II, another woman, Teodora, a wealthy Venetian party-giver, discovers that Violetta is actually her daughter, and in Act III, the characters discover that Carlo, the Bravo, is her husband—who believed that he had killed her. Violetta is their daughter. To make matters thoroughly confusing, Teodora's real name is Violetta too, so this opera boast two Violettas compared to the single Violetta in *La traviata.* In the end, Violetta the Younger and Pisani escape and presumably will marry while Violetta/Teodora kills herself so that the Bravo won't have to follow orders he has received from the State to kill her. Word comes too late that his father has died in prison, and his ties to the State are broken. Don't ask….

The reference to Verdi's Violetta is not incidental because we hear all kinds of premonitions of Verdi in Mercadante's score, mostly the Verdi of *Nabucco* and other early operas, but also of *La Traviata, Rigoletto* and *Il trovatore.* There are even specific melodies which show that Verdi knew this opera well, but Mercadante has his own voice as a composer, a certain twist to the melodies, a certain harmony, which sets him apart as one of the great opera composers of nineteenth century Italy, worthy of a place beside Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi. The Wexford Festival has recognized his excellence and has produced six of his operas, beginning in 1988.

The production of *Il bravo* was by the team of Renaud Doucet (stage direction) and André Barbe (sets and costumes). For the most part they set the story as it is in the libretto, in Renaissance Venice. However, Doucet and Barbe actually live in Venice, and they wanted to make a statement about Venice's current problem with excessive tourism, especially from the enormous cruise ships which have turned Venice into a kind of Disneyland on the water and

driven long-time residents out. Their Renaissance stage Venice is occasionally invaded by contemporary camera-toting tourists and locals protesting the accommodation of huge cruise ships. The scrim which one sees on entering the theater is a Canaletto painting of St. Mark's Square (complete with cracks attesting to the painting's age), but with an enormous ship named "M.S. Calamità" dwarfing San Marco and the Doge's Palace. The ship's name refers to the calamities facing the opera protagonists as well as the existential crisis facing Venice from climate change and the tourist invasion. The trouble is that Venice's contemporary problems have nothing to do with the story of *Il bravo*, however admirable the protest of Messers Doucet and Barbe may be, so the intrusion of tattily dressed tourists ogling the procession of a Renaissance Doge is just odd and distracting. However, for the most part, Doucet and Barbe leave the story alone, creating spectacular painterly tableaux for the big ensemble scenes. Doucet's direction of the principals is reasonably good, although there is nothing they can do to clarify the story.

Barbe's fixed set has a Venetian church (the Church of the Holy Apostles of the libretto?) turned on its side, perhaps to suggest the distorted vision of the corrupt Republic. A rough wall was dropped for the Bravo's dwelling and a rich curtain was drawn across the stage to make a more intimate playing area in Teodora's palace. It worked well enough, but it was odd that the set for Bolcom's *Dinner at Eight* the previous night used a satellite view of Manhattan turned on its side. I suppose the idea, whether arrived at separately or in collaboration, was of skewed societies.

One oddity of Mercadante's score is that among the five principal singers there are two tenors and two sopranos (and a baritone). The Bravo himself and Pisani are tenors and Violetta, mother and daughter, are sopranos, which gives us unusual voice combinations for the various duets and quartets. The men, Rubens Pelizzari (Bravo) and Alessandro Luciano (Pisani) were adequate, forceful tenors who, however, brought little vocal subtlety to their singing—almost everything was at fever pitch and loud, although given that, Pelizzari sang rather well. The women were better, especially Violetta (Ekaterina Bakanova). She sang with clear and pure high notes and a real trill, and she was able to vary the dynamics of her role so that her fairly unbelievably innocent character became almost believable; Yasko Sato as Teodora/Violetta was fine, especially at the performance of Oct. 24, and her voice blended mellifluously with Bakanova in the wonderful, harp-accompanied duet in the final act. I also like Gustavo Castillo as Foscari. Among the principals, his character alone made sense, and he acted and sang well.

Lighting by Paul Hackenmueller was atmospheric and Jonathan Brandini led an impassioned and fast reading of the score. I saw this opera many years ago at the Festival della Valle d'Itria in Martina Franca, Italy, and I recall more lyricism, but the excitement in Brandini's reading was undeniable. As far as I could tell, Brandini eliminated only one cabaletta (to Teodora's entrance aria), and the show lasted three hours and fifteen minutes with two intermissions. There are a lot of superb ensemble scenes with chorus (concertati) in *Il bravo*, and the Wexford chorus under Errol Girdlestone was very good, sketching individual characters in the big scenes. Minor characters were sung by Simon Mechlinski, José de Eça, Toni Nežić, Richard Shaffrey and Ioana Constatin-Pipelea.



Party at Teodora's Palace



Luciano and Bakanova



Finale, Act II

The Renaissance setting, Venice, the background of the Cooper novel—all of these things make *Il bravo* an interesting opera in spite of its impossible story, but the musically it is one of the best Italian operas of the nineteenth century (and I do not say that lightly). Anyone who can listen (without worrying too much about the plot) will find Mercadante's endless and excellent melodies, with their unusual twists, gorgeous listening. In his day he was celebrated for his fine orchestration and he certainly knew how to write for the voice. There are good arias, but more interesting are the ensemble pieces—the quartets, duets and concertati. They are the work of a composer who knew what he was doing. For those who have heard Verdi's Violetta warble "Sempre libera" one time too many, I suggest Mercadante's Violettas; you get two, a mother and daughter Violetta, and only one dies at the end.