Cantata in morte di M.F. Malibran

Teatro Sperimentale, Pesaro, 14 August, 2023

Charles Jernigan, August 2023

Maria Malibran (1808-36) was perhaps the first great diva—an opera star whose fame leapt far beyond the opera stage and entered the popular imagination. She was evidently a singer with a beautiful voice and exquisite technique (taught by her father, Manuel Garcia, the first Count Almaviva in Rossini's *Barbiere*), fine acting ability and physical beauty. She inspired not only composers, but painters, poets and novelists. Even today, 187 years after her death she continues to exert a hold on lovers of the lyric muse with recorded tributes by Sutherland and Bartoli, movies (at least five), and biographies in several languages. It is sometimes forgotten, but Malibran was also responsible for introducing Italian opera to America when her father brought a family troupe to New York in 1825-26 to perform, for the first time, Italian opera, mostly Rossini, in the New World. New York went wild for the eighteen year old Maria Garcia, who carried on a secret romance with a business man named François Malibran and soon married him against her father's wishes. The marriage did not last long, but Maria kept the Malibran name even when she married the Belgian violinist Charles de Bériot. She made her name in the operas of Rossini, but she sang many works including ones especially written for her by Vaccaj, Halevy and Pacini. Bellini rewrote his recent *Puritani* for her.

In July, 1836, Malibran fell from her horse while she was in England. She refused to see a physician and continued to perform until in September she collapsed on stage in Manchester, England, while singing encores. The next morning she performed in a church against all advice; she died a week later in agony. She was 28. Such a charismatic figure and beautiful young woman, dying so young, ensured her immortality, and tributes and encomia soon began. One of those was this Cantata, first performed at La Scala, Milan, on March 7, 1837, less than a year after Malibran's death and on the occasion of the inauguration of a monument to the singer in Milan. The Cantata is in five parts, with words by Antonio Piazza and music by Donizetti, Giovanni Pacini, Saverio Mercadante, Pietro Antonio Coppola and Nicola Vaccaj. Soloists from La Scala and the chorus and orchestra participated in what was evidently a scenic cantata as it included some stage directions. Among the soloists were Marietta and Teresa Brambilla. Marietta had sung the first Eduardo in Rossini's *Eduardo e Cristina* as well as the first Orsini and Pierotto in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Linda di Chamounix.* Teresa is most noted as the first Gilda in *Rigoletto.*

The opening number is a Sinfonia by Donizetti, then at the height of his powers. The 15 minute overture begins solemnly with drum rolls and a funereal march appropriate to the occasion; this yields to a beautiful plangent andante featuring the oboe; as the tempo picks up we recognize two themes which Donizetti will use the following year (1838) in his overture to *Poliuto.* The piece builds to a crescendo and goes through repeats of the themes before returning to muted tympani and silence. It is an amazingly affective piece, beautifully constructed and full of beautiful melody, a sort of orchestral depiction of the sorrow, seriousness and drama of the event.

Part II, by Pacini, is entitled "Il Cippo di Manchester." A stage direction specifies a sarcophagus covered by a black veil with grieving people gathered round, some carrying laurel and oak branches and others, garlands of flowers. The chorus opens the section and soon three soloists' voices join in the general mourning. Then one of the voices launches into

an aria “Dal lagrimato tumulo” followed by a rousing cabaletta which eventually everyone joins (“E, dalla vaga immagine”), so appropriate for Pacini’s fame as the “Maestro delle cabalette” and for the kind of music which Malibran sang and which made her famous. This too is top-flight Pacini, a wonderful piece.

Part III, “L’inaugurazione,” is by Mercadante. Mercadante’s section opens with the harp and a sad, slow andante, appropriate to the words, “Come suon d’arpa dolente.” The stage direction tells us that the black veil is lifted from the sarcophagus, revealing the words “A Maria Felicita Malibran.” Mercadante’s movement builds like one of the long concertati from one of his reform operas. It is absolutely stunning.

Pietro Antonio Coppola is probably the least well known of these composers. He was born in 1793 in Castrogiovanni (today Enna), Sicily and died in Catania in 1876. Like so many other Italian composers of this period, he studied at the Naples Conservatory and launched his career as an opera composer there with *Il figlio del bandito* in 1816. Perhaps his most popular work was *Nina, pazza per amore* which debuted at the Teatro Valle in Rome in 1835 and made the rounds of all the major Italian theaters as well as opera houses in Vienna, Paris, Lisbon and in Mexico. Like Mercadante, Coppola spent part of his career in the Iberian peninsula, in Lisbon where he wrote operas to Portuguese; as an international composer he also composed an opera to a French text, as well as many in Italian. Part IV of the Cantata, called “La Corona,” begins with a recitative by “Una Voce,” a woman who represents Genius, who places the laurel crown on the sarcophagus. The section recalls the monument which the British erected to Malibran after her death in Manchester. The orchestra quotes brief sections from operas associated with Malibran as the recitative progresses, including the passage from *Sonnambula* which is so appropriate for the Diva’s early death: “Ah! Non credea mirarti si presto estinto, o fiore.” Then follows an aria, “Questo alloro, che tu stesso” followed by a cabaletta like movement which promises that Malibran will not be forgotten. If Coppola’s section is any indication of the quality of his music, then one may hope that in the future we might hear some of his operas.

Part V. “Il monumento di Milano.” The final section was composed by Nicola Vaccaj, a composer particularly associated with Malibran. The section opens with “celestial harmonies,” and part of the chorus wonders if they come from heaven itself. No! It turns out these harmonies come from across the Alps, from the “madre dell’armonia,” or Italy. A “Pilgrim” tells us that the Lombards, not wishing to be outdone, have erected their own monument to Malibran. The “Pilgrim” sheds her garments, revealing herself as the Genius or Muse of Music; she heralds the monument itself, sculpted figures representing Graces, the Arts and “a hundred Geniuses” and with the sculpted titles of roles associated with Malibran: *Norma, Desdemona, Romeo, Giovanna, Maria, Rosina, Amina, Adina*. The musical center of the section is a very beautiful solo for the Muse in several sections with choral responses: “Salve, o Donna.”

It is astonishing to think that this truly beautiful music has not been heard since the single performance in 1837. The manuscript, which has languished in the Ricordi archives, has been revised by Valeer De Vlam in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Flemish Music in Antwerp. The Filarmonica Gioachino Rossini and the Chorus of the Teatro Della Fortuna was conducted by Diego Ceretta. The young soloists included Giuliano Gianfaldoni, Laila Alamanova, Sachar Lavi, Dave Monaco, Michael Mofidian and Giorgi Manoshvili. The enthusiastic applause and *bravi* resounded long, until the ensemble agreed to repeat part of Vaccaj’s section. On the way out, one heard over and over versions of “What a find. What beautiful music.” Can we have a recording, please!

Cantata in onore del Somme Pontefice Pio IX

Teatro Sperimentale, Pesaro, 15 August, 2023

Charles Jernigan, August 2023

The cantata which Rossini composed to honor newly elected Pope Pius IX, performed on January 1,1847, has been recorded, and thus was not such a surprise as the music for the Malibran cantata.. This work is also in five parts, poetry by Giovanni Marchetti, and lasts about 45 minutes. Aside from the Chorus, soloists represent Speranza (Hope), Amor Pubblico, a Corifeo and Genio Cristiano. Rossini did not use any new music for this Cantata, but perhaps out of deference to the Pope, he drew on existing music from three operas with Christian themes: *Ricciardo e Zoraida*, *Armida* and *The Siege of Corinth.* As such, the cantata is perhaps the least interesting of Rossini's many such works, but, given the quality of the music, it is an exhilarating and rousing hour.

The performance had Christopher Franklin conducting the Filarmonica Gioachino Rossini and the Coro del Teatro Ventidio Basso (Giovanni Farina, Chorus master). L'Amor Pubblico was Pietro Adaini; Marina Monzo sang La Speranza, while Michael Mofidian was Il Genio Cristiano and the Corifeo was Antonio Gares. Franklin led a compelling performance and the audience demanded (and got) a repeat of the Finale, "Sul provido Naviglio."