LUIGI RICCI: *IL BIRRAIO DI PRESTON*

Il Bel Canto Ritrovato Festival
Teatro Sperimentale, Pesaro, Italy, 25 August, 2023

Charles Jernigan, August, 2023

(The origins and aims of the new *Il Bel Canto Ritrovato Festival* in Pesaro, which follows the main Rossini Festival, are described in Reto Muller's article **here**).

In 1997 Andrea Camilleri, the Sicilian novelist and author of the immensely popular series of detective novels featuring Inspector Montalbano, published a novel called *Il birraio di Preston*, which centers on an event in Camilleri's fictional Vigàta in the 1870s, following the unification of Italy. The local populace is disgruntled because the new national government has sent a Prefect to govern the town, one Eugenio Bortuzzi, a Florentine. Bortuzzi has had a new opera house constructed and has chosen an opera, *Il birraio di Preston* by Luigi Ricci to inaugurate the house—an opera which premiered in Florence in 1847. The conservative populace, angry that a 'foreigner', a Florentine, would impose *Florentine music* on Sicilians, boos the performers and burns the house down during the performance. The incident really did occur in the town of Caltanisetta in Sicily, and it provides the fulcrum for Camilleri's fascinating, comically sardonic novel.

In the process we get a lot about opera in Italy in the 1870s, including controversy about Wagner's music vs. native Italian opera. Luigi Ricci's opera becomes a symbol of everything the Sicilians did not like about the new national government imposing itself on their traditions. The fact that the novel borrows Ricci's title seems part of the irony which is omnipresent in Camilleri since the novel is not really about *Il birraio di Preston*, but about Sicilian attitudes and resentment of a distant, centralized government. There is no reason that the Sicilians should have disdained Ricci's opera even if it was premiered in Florence since Luigi Ricci, like his brother Federico, was a Neapolitan born and bred, from the same Kingdom of the Two Sicilies which had reigned over most of Southern Italy including Sicily, and Ricci's music brims with Neapolitan melody.

Until now, it has seemed that we opera lovers would never know whether Luigi Ricci's opera was as "mediocre" as the description on the novel jacket claims. Although the Ricci brothers wrote around sixty operas separately and together and although many of them were once immensely popular, it is difficult to find one performed today. So it was indeed fortuitous that the new national festival Il Bel Canto Ritrovato (Rediscovered Bel Canto) decided to perform *Il birraio di Preston* at its second edition in Pesaro and surrounding towns in August. Was it "mediocre"? Well, the plot was a little shop-worn, but the opera brimmed with wonderful melody, lively rhythms and clever orchestration. It is not a complex and 'serious' comedy like Verdi's *Falstaff* or even Camilleri's novel, but it provided a thoroughly delightful evening of good fun and the discovery of worthy lost works which the Festival promises.

The plot of *Il birraio di Preston* (the opera) revolves around identical twins and the confusion which ensues when they are mistaken for each other. Daniele Robinson, the brewer of Preston (a city north of Liverpool and Manchester in Lancashire, England) is engaged to a clever young woman named Effy. Daniele has a twin brother named Giorgio, who is a soldier, but Giorgio seems to have run off and deserted, having previously seduced Anna, whose brother, Sir Oliviero Jenkins, insists that Giorgio marry her or fight a duel with him. Giorgio's friend and fellow soldier Tobia comes to look for him at Daniele and Effy's wedding festivities, but Giorgio is not to be found, so Tobia recruits Daniele to go to the military encampment pretending to be his twin brother in order to prevent Giorgio's

condemnation for desertion. In Act 2 Daniele arrives at the camp and problems ensue when Oliviero and Anna both mistake him for Giorgio. The soldiers think he is Giorgio too, and disarm him at first, only to rearm him so that he can lead the soldiers into battle with the Irish. Daniele is no soldier, and has to be "trained" by Tobia and Effy, who has come with him dressed as a soldier herself. All poor Daniele wants to do is make beer—and make love to his bride, but he is forced to lead the troops to fight. In Act 3 he has triumphed thanks to the clever maneuvering of Giorgio's horse. Eventually Giorgio, who has been captured by the enemy and held prisoner, escapes and returns so that everyone can marry their proper spouse: Anna and Giorgio, Daniele and Effy. The libretto by Francesco Guidi, based on Adolphe Adam's 1838 opera *Le brasseur de Preston*, is pretty predictable, but fun, with clever situations for comic duets, trios and ensembles—and even a few arias.



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A comedy of mistaken identity involving identical twins must have been particularly meaningful for Luigi Ricci, who spent the better part of twenty years cohabiting with twin sisters. Ricci met the seventeen year old Stolz sisters, Franziska and Ludmilla, when they were his vocal students. They lived together openly in Trieste until scandal forced Ricci to take a job in Odessa, administering the Italian opera there. The sisters came too, and Ricci wrote an opera (*La solitaria delle Asturie*) for them. Back in Trieste, Luigi married Ludmila, but did not give up Franziska, whom he called Fanny. In order to avoid scandal, they moved into a house where each sister occupied half. But according to the astute chronicler of nineteenth century Italian opera, Bellini's friend Francisco Florimo, Luigi had a secret door built behind a cabinet which allowed them—and him—to move easily back and forth. It worked until one day when a prima donna was visiting Luigi with her husband. Fanny, hearing an unknown female voice, burst through the cabinet in a fit of jealousy, to universal shock. Ludmilla soon gave Luigi a daughter named Adelaide, who became a singer, and a year later Fanny gave him a son, Luigino, who became a composer like his father.

Opera lovers may not know much about the Ricci brothers today, but they probably know the famous tarantella from Luigi's *La festa di Piedigrotta* even if they don't know that it comes from a Ricci opera. That ubiquitous tune, so synonymous with Italian (and especially Neapolitan) music is typical of Luigi's ability to spin out ear worm music. The music of *Il*

birraio is in that vein—unfailing tuneful, a cascade of Italianate melody. In Act 1, Effy's entrance aria, "La vecchia Magge" stands out. Old Maggie taught pretty young Effy how to entrance men and to find a husband. She hasn't been too successful with the last part until Daniele came along, but he is rich with a good job and he has a good heart, even if he is a bit boring. The best music is in Act 2, with a catchy cavatina for Oliviero, a tenor, complete with rollicking cabaletta ("Al furor d'un cor ardente"); Tobia's unusual brindisi, "Era Tom un dragone valente," about a soldier who gives up "wisky" for beer ; the wonderful trio ("Or conviene d'un soldato") between Daniele, Tobia and Effy when they both 'teach' Daniele how to be a proper soldier; and a terrific finale with a wonderful, long *pezzo concertato*, "Per secondar l'intrepido," which cycles through numerous melodic themes, each one better than the last. I, for one, didn't want it to end. Act 3 also has a "pezzo concertato" and a comic duet ("La vederemo...la vedremo") when Effy and Anna size each other up as potential brides to Daniele/Giorgio, whom they think is the same person. Effy has a big aria at the end in semi-serious vein ("Deh! ch'ei non sia la vittima") followed by her delicious waltz-final cabaletta. In other words, every number is a delight.

Donizetti's benevolent spirit hovers over the Ricci score, particularly the Donizetti of *La fille du règiment* (1840) and maybe *Betly* (1836). *La fille du règiment* is the prime example of a fashion in operas of the period for a woman who dresses in a soldier's costume and marches around to martial music. Effy, who is more daring than the timorous Daniele, dons a soldier's coat over her dress, and in Act 2, Tobia teaches her how to march, hold a sword and otherwise appear 'soldierly'—and she teaches Daniele, all in the delicious trio "In un momento," replete with "rataplans" such as Marie sings in *La fille du règiment.* Verdi was using the trope as late as 1862 in *La forza del destino* when Preziosilla has two martial pieces with her own "rataplans."



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Rat-a-plan!! (Tobia, Daniele, Effy)

The comic martial atmosphere of the story also gives the trumpet a prominent role in the orchestration along with drums. There are two trumpet parts, and the trumpeters are almost always on duty, underlining melodies, offering a bit of counterpoint or actually performing trumpet calls. Unlike earlier operas by Rossini and Donizetti, there are no plangent obbligato parts for flute, clarinet or oboe to offer counter melodies to the singer. Not even a French horn. All of this gives the orchestration a band-like quality and makes the score a sort of bridge between comic opera and operetta. There is not much of a leap from Ricci to von Suppé or even Johann Strauss.

Luigi and Federico Ricci did continue the trend begun by Donizetti of bringing a sentimental element into opera buffa like Nemorino's "Una furtiva lagrima." Also, as Will Crutchfield has noted, the waltz enters Italian opera as an important element after about 1845 and the Ricci brothers certainly took advantage of the new dance. *Il birraio di Preston* (1847) has several waltzes, including the final aria. Although invented in Vienna as a dance, according to Crutchfield, the waltz first entered opera in Italian works of the mid century before recrossing the Alps and becoming the dominant feature of Viennese operetta.



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Daniele (Gianni Giuga) and Effy (Inés Lorans)

Il Bel Canto Ritrovato found an excellent young cast among singers in the Rossini Academy associated with the ROF. Inés Lorans as Effy displayed easy coloratura, a pleasing soprano timbre, and she was very lively on stage, acting with perfect comic timing. Gianni Giuga as Daniele was appropriately shy and a bit dim-witted, but his bass voice was big and appealing. Baritone Francesco Samuel Venturi sang Tobia, and he stood out in various ensemble numbers. Tenor Antonio Garés was the outraged Sir Oliviero Jenkins. He gets a formal aria with cabaletta at the start of Act 2 ("Anna si stempra in lacrime"), where he seemed somewhat stressed and had trouble with the high notes, but for the rest of the opera he settled down and sang well in a duet with Daniele and in ensembles. Aloisa Aisemberg was a perky Miss Anna—a good comedian with a fine voice. Alessandro Abis, Nicola Di Filippo and

Simone Nicoletto rounded out the cast. Daniele Agiman conducted the Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini and the Chorus of the Teatro della Fortuna with brio and verve and seeming love for the music.

The production, by Daniele Piscopo (another Daniele!) was simple, straightforward and followed the story: there was no "konzept," no disdain for realism, no eurotrash. Bravo! He used several projections, many of them cartoonishly comic to provide backdrops and some ironic comment on the story. It all worked perfectly. It was hardly a serious evening at the Teatro Sperimentale in Pesaro, but the audience had a great time and rewarded the young singers with long applause. There was added delight at the end: the Festival made arrangements with a local Pesaro brewery to provide free beer to anyone who had an opera ticket once the show was over. As Tobia sings in his unusual beery brindisi:

Il prode garzone	The brave boy
Aveva ragione:	Had it right:
È quello un liquore	That's the drink
Che ispira valor!	That inspires courage!