TEATRO NUOVO REVIVES BEL CANTO MASTERPIECES

Charles Jernigan, July 2023

(Charles saw the July 19 *Poliuto* & July 20, *Crispino* performances.
There were also performances July 15 & 16)

Teatro Nuovo is Will Crutchfield's program to revive rare bel canto operas and to perform them in a manner resembling as closely as possible what might have been heard in the first half of the nineteenth century (the primo ottocento). The extensive training program which culminates in the live performances of two works each year trains singers and players who perform on period instruments to use techniques which were common at the time of the opera's composition and thus to produce a 'sound' close to what Crutchfield and his colleagues believe the operas would have sounded like when new. To the theatre-goer this is most immediately obvious in the arrangement of the orchestra, with players at audience level rather than in a pit, divided strings and principal violins facing the other players (who would follow their lead as they often were the teachers of the other string players). There is no 'conductor' in the modern sense, but rather the principal violinist is also the *Direttore d'orchestra* who would lead the orchestra and set the tempi as well as play the violin while the *Maestro al cembalo* (Keyboard maestro) was responsible for the overall performance. As opera approached the middle of the century, these roles were usually combined into one or the other as the arrangement came closer and closer to performing under a conductor.

Both of the operas performed this year fall into the mid-century category, so Jakob Lehmann was "primo violin e direttore dell'opera" for Donizetti's *Poliuto* (1838/48) and Jonathan Brandini was maestro *al cembalo e direttore* for the Ricci brothers' *Crispino e la Comare* (1850).

POLIUTO

Poliuto is surely one of Donizetti's strongest operas and one can only speculate that it has not gained purchase in the modern repertory (like *Roberto Devereux* or *Maria Stuarda* for instance) because of the overt Christian theme of the martyrdom of St. Poleuktos, which seems to embarrass modern stage directors and make it difficult to successfully update. As befits the classical time frame (it takes place in Roman Armenia in 259 AD) and the source of the libretto, Corneille's 1647 tragedy *Polyeucte*, Donizetti and his librettist Salvatore Cammarano follow classical symmetry by dividing the story into three acts, each of which has three musical parts.

In the story itself Paulina, daughter of the Roman governor of Armenia, has married Poliuto, a Roman nobleman, because she believes that her true love, Severo, a general, has been killed in battle. Poliuto has become a secret convert to nascent Christianity, a sect persecuted by the Romans (and particularly by Callistene, the High Priest of Jupiter). When Severo returns from battle, not dead at all, Paolina is torn and Poliuto is goaded into jealous fury by Callistene. When the Romans arrest the Christian leader Nearco and threaten him with torture if he won't reveal the name of the new convert, Poliuto reveals himself to be that convert and shows contempt for Roman religion by pulling down a statue of Jupiter. He is arrested and condemned to die in the arena, and when Paolina visits him in prison, she is so convinced by his humility and forgiveness that she asked to be baptized and joins her husband in martyrdom, much to the despair of Severo.

Thus the opera exalts the Christian ideals of love and forgiveness, which overcome Poliuto's jealousy and anger and Paolina's misgivings about the new religion.
Donizetti fans will know that *Poliuto* was written for the tenor Adolph Nourrit to premiere at Naples' San Carlo theatre in 1838, but that the censors forbade the performance at the last minute—they would not allow the representation of a saint who was also a jealous husband on stage—and the premiere was canceled. Donizetti, furious, left Naples and traveled to Paris where a considerably revised *Poliuto* was performed as the French grand opera Les Martyrs in 1840. *Poliuto* itself received its premiere at the San Carlo, ten years after it had been canceled, on November 30, 1848, and a little over six months after Donizetti's death in April, 1848. Poor Nourrit, who had traveled to Italy to study the new singing methods which produced powerful high notes sung from the chest after a long career in Paris and who collaborated with Donizetti on the libretto for *Poliuto*, ended by losing the chance to premiere the new opera and damaging his voice as he tried to transition to the new, more robust manner. He died by suicide, leaping from his hotel window not long after.

One of the best things about both performances at Teatro Nuovo (on July 19 and 20, 2023) was Will Crutchfield's informative pre-performance lectures. For *Poliuto*, Crutchfield focused on the many ways composers of the bel canto period "modeled" individual numbers on well known previous pieces—quite intentionally (we would call it plagiarism and sue the 'modeler')—whether in rhythm or melody or key structure. Donizetti did it with Rossini and Verdi did it with Donizetti. (Crutchfield offered ample examples at the keyboard and even sang a few to prove his point). It was fascinating to listen to one composer's work morph into another's by recalling (but not copying) a favorite piece from the past. Crutchfield did not mention it, but it has always seemed to me that the triumphal entrance music for Severo and the Romans in *Poliuto*'s second act is the 'model' for the Triumphal March of Verdi's Aida. Verdi did not copy Donizetti, but I suspect that the *Poliuto* march was in the back of his head.

The operas this year were performed semi-staged in the well-filled 1200 seat Rose Theatre, part of the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex in New York. The very effective staging used black and white projections of the original sets for *Les Martyrs* with surtitle translations projected onto the set designs. Singers were clad in formal clothes but acted with each other, mostly in a restrained fashion. No one sang from scores, and the operas were performed without cuts.

Argentine tenor Santiago Ballerini, a long-time collaborator of Mr. Crutchfield, sang the title role. His sound is solid and flawless throughout the extensive range of the role, with a splendid *messa di voce*, one of the great, difficult and underused *bel canto* techniques. He has no problem with high notes, but I was particularly impressed by his lovely pianissimi, especially in the last act. Like all the Teatro Nuovo singers, Ballerini, showed ample use of rubato, more than we are used to these days. In brief, he was very good. I was less impressed with his Paolina, Chelsea Lehnea, who often had an edge to her voice and sometimes (but not always) had unpleasantly piercing high notes. Her chest notes were not always strong, but she did attack them and the stratosphere fearlessly. Best and most promising of the singers was baritone Ricardo Jose Rivera as Severo. With a beautiful, rich sound and a smooth legato, he sang his entrance aria "Di tua beltade immagine" (surely a 'model' for the Count di Luna's "Il balen") with great elan. Some might say he is a promising Verdi baritone, but he is already a very fine Donizetti baritone and it is in Donizetti that we see the baritone range come into its own as a distinctive category. Bass Hans Tashjian, another Crutchfield protege, was quite disappointing as Callistene. I wondered if he was ill. His Act 3 aria with chorus, "Alimento alla fiamma," was so weakly done that it merited dead silence from the otherwise very enthusiastic audience. The hearty Teatro Nuovo chorus and orchestra were led by Jakob Lehmann. Those of us who know the Poliuto score (I

have seen it staged twice and have long loved the score, beginning with a pirated recording of the Callas/Corelli performance at La Scala in the 1960s) might be surprised by some of the tempo choices and the liberal use of retardandos and rests, but I think we can safely assume that the style was informed by historical knowledge. The period brass instruments and lively use of percussion was exciting and the use of gut strings produces a sound which is rougher than a modern orchestra would produce, but perhaps more 'alive'. Lehmann, who among many accolades is the newly appointed President of the German Rossini Society (DRG), drove the tempi in the cabalettas and in the final duet, "Al suon dell'arpa angelica" in a way which made it all very exciting. In brief, wonderful opera well performed.

CRISPINO E LA COMARE

The second opera of the series was Federico and Luigi Ricci's 1850 comedy *Crispino e la comare*. Once enormously popular, it has fallen into near oblivion like almost all Italian comic opera between *Don Pasquale* (1842) and *Falstaff* (1893). Of course, Italian composers were cranking out opera buffa during that sixty year period, even if today they are unknown because of Verdi's total dominance in that era—and that was the interesting subject of Will Crutchfield's talk which preceded this opera performance. He promised that Teatro Nuovo will bring us other examples of these 'lost' works, and given the immense success of his Crispino performance, we can only hope that will be the case.

Crispino himself is a poor Venetian cobbler married to Annetta, who tries to make a little money by selling stories and poems. Meanwhile a couple of snobbish doctors (Fabrizio and Mirabolano) mock Crispino's poverty, and their unpleasant landlord Don Asdrubale insinuates that he would be happy to have Annetta work off their rent in a more intimate way. Crispino decides to kill himself by throwing himself down a well, but out pops the "Comare," a fairy godmother who offers Crispino a way out. She will set him up as a medical doctor and will let him know whether a patient's illness will be fatal by appearing to him as he examines the patient. If she does to appear, the ill person will be cured by whatever 'medicine' Crispino devises (salami, cheese, wine). Soon Crispino puts the real doctors to shame and gets rich—until he gets too big for his britches. Then the Comare takes him (in a dream) to her underworld home and reveals that he is not long for this world; she is in fact Death. Terrified, Crispino begs to return home and promises to reform, leading to a happy ending and Annetta's waltz tune finale. (The waltz in the score was substituted with another, more elaborate one by another composer.)

The super-melodious score is in fact filled with waltzes, indicating that by 1850, the waltz had taken over Italian opera, particularly comedy. Crutchfield argues that although the waltz was Viennese in origin, it entered operatic entertainments first in Italy, and its popularity in Italian comic opera brought it back to Vienna through Viennese operetta. Annetta's most famous waltz song, "Io non sono piu` l'Annetta," was often used by Joan Sutherland as an encore number. The numbers in the opera follow the tried and true formulae of opera buffa, especially those of Donizetti. The hilarious trio of Dr. Crispino and his two confreres, "Di Pandoletti medico" is a direct relative of similar duets and trios going back through Donizetti to Rossini.

Teatro Nuovo's semi-staged production followed the formula of *Poliuto*. Projected set designs, this time in color, formed the backdrops of the scenes; they were original designs by Adam Thompson based on the sets by Pieretto Bianco for the 1919 Metropolitan Opera production, evidently the only time *Crispino* was performed there. Titles were projected on the tops of the set projections. The semi-staging was more thorough than for *Poliuto*, with some of the characters

even wearing costumes. Others and the chorus were in formal-ish attire. Stage action reflected the physical nature of the comedy. This is broad joke comedy with pie-in-the-face physicality. There is even a risqué Carnival song—the Song of the Frittola—sung by Annetta in Venetian dialect, perhaps so as not to offend non-Venetians as the opera traveled outside of Venice, the place of its premiere. Francesco Maria Piave, the librettist (and Verdi's librettist for *La traviata* and other works) had fun with the sexual suggestiveness of the song. A "frittola" is a Venetian fried pastry, but when a now rich and haughty Annetta suggests to her lovers that they come and give her "frittola" a bite, she is not talking about pastry.

Mattia Venni was an excellent Crispino. His music is not especially difficult, but he was very funny, acting with his voice and playing the physical comedy on stage. Annetta has considerably more coloratura in her role and has free rein to show off many of the techniques of bel canto singing. It seems that Teresa Castillo, a long time collaborator of Mr. Crutchfield, has all of those techniques in abundance along with lots of high notes and appropriate verve. Sometimes her singing is pinched, however. Liz Culpepper was the newcomer mezzo soprano as the Comare. She was good and commanding, even without an aria of her own. Dorian McCall and Vincent Grana were both fine and funny as the two doctors as was Scott Hetz Clark as Don Asdrubale. There is a subplot in the opera about the love of a sweet-voiced tenor, the Contino del Fiore, for Lisetta, a ward of Don Asdrubale. He seems to be there so that there can be a melting tenor aria ("Bella siccome un angelo") early in the opera, and Toby Bradford admirably played the lovesick role and sang the melting aria with a dulcet tenor voice.

The *Maestro al cembalo* and director of the proceedings was Jonathan Brandini, another long time associate of Crutchfield's. He led with great brio and drove the ensembles and swayed with the waltzes.

The Ricci brothers, Federico and Luigi, need to be heard more often. *Il birraio di Preston* by Luigi alone will be performed at a new festival in Italy called "Il bel canto ritrovato" this summer. If it is anything like *Crispino*, it will be filled with endless melody and good fun. Teatro Nuovo deserves great thanks for bringing *Crispino* back to New York. The appreciative full house at the Rose Theater thought so too.