Luigi Ricci's *Chi Dura Vince*

Neuburg am Donau

Charles Jernigan, August, 2024



Foto: Theatermeister Mario Liesler

The Neuburger Kammeroper in Neuburg am Donau, a picture-perfect town nestled on the banks of the Danube, may not be well known beyond the confines of Bavaria, but every summer it performs for a couple of weekends in the exquisite and tiny Stadttheater, built in 1869. One two-act opera or sometimes two one-act operas are presented and they are always comic. They are also always given in German, no matter what the original language, and done with spoken dialogue. They are also always very unusual 18th and 19th century works which you are unlikely to have heard anywhere else. In 2019, Peggy and I saw two one-acters by Ferdinand Hérold, *L'Auteur Mort et Vivant* and *Le muletier.* This year the opera was by Luigi Ricci, an Italian two-act comedy called *Chi Dura Vince* in the original, or *Eine Rosskur* in the modern German translation by Annette and Horst Vlader. This was the 56th production of the Festival, which began in 1969.

Chi Dura Vince means "He Who Endures Wins" and the German title is literally "A Horsecure," which signifies a drastic cure, a single word expression of the English idea, 'it will make you well if it doesn't kill you first'. The libretto, by Jacopo Ferretti, is a version of the tale used by Shakespeare in *The Taming of the Shrew*, with the addition of a couple of buffo basses who lighten the story about a shrewish wife who undergoes the "horse cure." The Count Sanviti has married a young, but impoverished, noblewoman named Fiorina, whom he discovers to be haughty, capricious and downright mean. He has left her in the lurch during the honeymoon to pursue his plan for a "cure," first by disguising himself as a peasant who gets a job at a castle he himself has just bought. The castle estate is managed by a couple of bumblers, Gennaro, the Overseer and Giovanni, who manages a hat making workshop on the estate (a winery in our production). When Fiorina arrives, lording it over all of the locals (which includes Biagio, head of the local police brigade), she is shocked to find out that she hasn't married a Count, but someone who works on the Count's estates. Anger and disgust turn to horror and jealousy in Act Two, when she is led to believe that her husband wants to dump her in favor of a new love, none other than the Baroness Galeotti (who is really Count Sanviti's sister). Jjealousy makes her realize that she really does love her husband, who is conveniently revealed as the real Count after all, and the story ends with a happy waltz song.

Most of the fun in the opera comes not from the story of mistaken identities and misunderstandings, but from the buffo antics of Gennaro and Giovanni, and their encounters

with Countess Fiorina. They soon get over their astonishment at her haughty treatment of them and give back as good as they get. One of the score's best numbers is the second act buffo duet "Ser Gennaro…Ser Giovanni/Quante pene, quanti affanni." Also a delight is Gennaro's opening buffo number "Ehi plebe! Volgo! Sudditi!" wherein he lords it over the peasants while they mock him. The Baroness, who first appears in Act Two, is also in on the fun, but she is the "seconda donna," and as such she does not get an aria of her own in the original score Thus the Neuburger folks interpolated music to enrich her part, from (I am told) Ricci's *Il birraio di Preston,* which was performed last year at the festival Il Bel Canto Ritrovato in Pesaro.

Luigi Ricci had studied at the Naples Conservatory along with his brother Federico, under the tutelage of Vincenzo Bellini, who, as a senior student acted as a kind of graduate assistant. Luigi began his career there too with *L'impresario in angustie* (1823), the first of around thirty operas he would write, several of them collaborations with his brother. His most successful works seem to have been comic. Eight of them were collaborations with Jacopo Ferretti, a Roman businessman in the tobacco industry who wrote libretti on the side, including the one for Rossini's *La Cenerentola.* Ferretti had a classical education and understood the uses of misunderstanding and mistaken identity from the farces of Plautus. He would use that knowledge in *Chi Dura Vince,* the subtitle of which is *La Luna di Miele—The Honeymoon,* surely an ironic title since the honeymoon of the Sanvitis is anything but.

Chi Dura Vince had its premiere in Rome in 1834. It had a lively history of productions and was revised by Luigi Ricci's brother Federico long after Luigi's death (in 1859) and re-presented in Paris as *La petite comtesse* in 1876. The music is always tuneful and voluble and sometimes memorable. The more we hear of the Ricci brothers (and especially Luigi) the more we understand how their work is a bridge to the light opera and operetta of the later nineteenth century. There is an operetta quality to the light orchestration and most of the roles are not so difficult technically as the operatic roles of the first half of the century. The Ricci brothers seem like a link to Franz von Suppé and to the Strausses. The final waltz number, "Ah! Che al brillar dell'iride" is not only joyous and memorable, it replaces the ornate cabaletta or rondo finale which once would have had this place of honor.

These were operas made to play well in small, provincial theaters as well as the occasional major house. It is perfect for the intimate confines of the Neuburg Stadttheater and the community feeling of the presentations, aided by local citizens who have been singing in the chorus or building the sets or sewing the costumes or even taking on some of the principal roles—or directing the whole enterprise. There is a family feeling about the whole undertaking: chorus members in costume mingle with the audience and sell programs before the performance and cast members mingle with the public during the intermission. Many of them are neighbors entertaining neighbors.

Even the lead soprano, the Countess Fiorina (called Elisa in the original Italian), Da-yung Cho was born and bred in Vienna although the family hails from Korea. Her light soprano would be appropriate for either operetta or opera and her technique was secure. It all worked perfectly in the small hall, and her acting was spot-on. Ms. Da-yung Cho has worked before at Neuburg, and is part of the family. Patrick Ruyters was also spot-on and an able farceur as Gennaro. His baritone voice complemented the Giovanni of Michael Hoffmann, a local veteran of many years with Neuburger Kammeroper. Horst Vlader (Biagio) is one of the

founding fathers of the Neuburg company, and he has lent his many talents to the company's success for decades, including playing *comprimario* parts. Polish tenor Karol Bettley played the role of the Count. His voice would perhaps be better suited to musical comedy or operetta, but no matter, he was splendid on stage. Likewise Martha Harreiter as the Baroness; her charm on stage overcame a small voice.

Alois Rottenaicher led the 28 person orchestra; Horst Vlader directed with a sure hand and Michele Lorenzini designed simple, functional sets.

In short, one could criticize the performance or the singers, but why? It's best not to criticize members of the family. And besides, opera companies that perform works by Luigi Ricci are rare, and works which give such unalloyed delight are much more worthwhile than yet another *regie* version of *Tosca.* Neuburg Chamber Opera follows the libretto and there is no *konzept* which has nothing to do with the work. The Ricci brothers were part of a large cohort of composers, librettists and performers who kept the public entertained at a time when opera was a principal mode of entertainment. The sold out audience in 2024, largely local, left happy and entertained, with that final waltz song running through their heads, just as they did in Rome in 1834. What's wrong with that?

(Charles saw the performances on July 27 and 28, 2024)