MASANIELLO, ou Le pêcheur napolitain

A MODERN WORLD PREMIERE

THE OTHER *MASANIELLO*

Charles Jernigan, August, 2024

Daniel-François-Esprit's opera *La muette de Portici* (1828), with a libretto by Eugène Scribe, may not be well known to opera audiences these days, but it is familiar to scholars for a number of reasons, primary among them because it was the first of the French grand operas--those spectacular five-act monsters with a full ballet, usually on a historical subject, which the Paris Opèra staged starting with *La muette* and lasting through most of the 19th century. Auber's *La muette* is also remembered because the title role is completely mute--a girl who never sings and whose role was usually enacted by a dancer. The opera has also enjoyed enduring fame (and not a little ridicule) because in the finale the mute girl, Fenena, kills herself by jumping off a balcony in Naples and into the erupting crater of Vesuvius, some ten kilometers away. Move over Tosca!! And finally, *La muette de Portici* is well remembered in the annals of opera because a performance of it lit the flame of a revolution. The story goes that the crowd became so aroused by a performance in Brussels that they rushed into the streets, beginning the revolution which freed Belgium from the Netherlands.

The revolutionary character of the story was particularly apposite in the early nineteenth century when revolutionary fervor was in the air. A book by Raymond Moirmoiron on Tommaso Aniello (called Masaniello by eliding his first and last names) had come out a year earlier in France, and it was likely the inspiration for Scribe's libretto. Aniello (1620-47) was a fisherman and fishmonger who led a short-lived revolt in 1647 against the Spanish Hapsburgs who ruled Naples at the time, forcing them to back down from a tax which they wanted to impose on daily staples like flour--and fish. Masaniello's wife Bernardina was actually imprisoned for protesting the tax, and Masaniello, still in his twenties, led the revolt which cowed the authorities and threatened their rule. In the end, he was shot by men in the pay of the Spanish, who justified the execution by claiming that Masaniello was "mad." Not long after his death some of his followers came to worship him, almost as a saint, and in subsequent centuries he was seen as a patriot fighting for the rights of the people against an oppressive aristocracy and a harbinger of the revolutionary movements which would lead to the overthrow of monarchies all over Europe.

Auber's 1828 opera undoubtedly rode the wave of anti-aristocratic feeling; in Italy (and elsewhere outside of France) it was usually entitled *Masaniello*, but there was another *Masaniello* opera too, and it had debuted in Paris almost exactly two months before the Auber/Scribe blockbuster. This was Michele Carafa's three-act French opera-comique, which lacked the importance to musical history of the Auber work, but which was nonetheless successful and probably was more historically accurate.

Michele Carafa had his own particular reasons to be interested in Masaniello. He was born in Naples in 1787 to an aristocratic family. He was attracted to music and operatic composition as a young man, but his father pushed him towards a military career, and indeed Carafa did fight for Napolean's surrogates in Sicily and Russia. Their ultimate defeat freed Carafa to

devote himself to music. Living in Naples the 1810s (his first opera was produced there in 1808), he became a close friend of Rossini, who asked him write an aria for his opera *Mosè in Egitto.* Carafa's own *Gabriella di Vergy*, produced at the Teatro del Fondo in Naples in 1818, like Rossini's *Otello,* rivaled Rossini's work in popularity. Carafa, who had spent several years in Paris, eventually settled there definitively in the 1820s and wrote operas to both Italian and French texts. Eventually he became a professor at the Conservatory. Rossini had definitively settled in Paris too in the 1830s, and had given up opera composition. He and Carafa remained close, and in 1860 Carafa convinced his old friend to let him produce *Semiramide,* which had practically fallen out of the repertory, to a French text with ballet music by Carafa himself. Carafa died in 1872, a few years after Rossini.

In 1827, Carafa, by then living in Paris, had struggled for success in the French theaters, but it was elusive. *Masaniello* changed that; its premiere on 27 December, 1827, at the Opéra Comique was a triumph, which extended to other French cities. It continued to be played until the 1850s, but it was always overshadowed by Auber's blockbuster. In fact, Carafa's work being eclipsed by works of other composers on similar subjects seems to have been his fate on more than one occasion: *Le nozze di Lammermoor* (1829) was eclipsed by Donizetti's masterpiece on the same Walter Scott novel and *La grande duchesse* (1835) was overshadowed by Offenbach's 1867 *`La grande duchesse de Gérolstein.* And so it was for *Masaniello*-- if not exactly eclipsed, definitely overshadowed by Auber's ground breaking work only two months later.

This summer the Rossini in Wildbad Bel Canto Festival gave Carafa's opera its modern premiere, although in a concert version. They had previous experience with a Carafa opera, *I due Figaro,* in 2006, and for this year they first considered Carafa's 1860 French version of *Semiramide,* but eventually settled on his *Masaniello*. Carafa called his work a "Drame historique en quartre actes"; it is an opéra-comique, with spoken dialogue between the musical numbers, but it is by no means comic. The twenty musical numbers begin with a fine overture in the style of Rossini, but oddly, almost all of the solos are in the first act--an aria for Ruffino, a Barcarolle for Masaniello and the cavatine "Si d'un pêcheur napolitain," also for him. A Romance for Masaniello's wife Léona falls in Act 2, but the other numbers are ensemble pieces. Carafa's libretto, by Moreau and Lafortelle, gives the history of Masaniello's revolt against the Spanish its necessary romantic plot thread, but an unusual one. Mansaniello's wife Léona is loved by a Spanish aristocrat, Torrelas, whose life she has saved, but she does not love him in return. Nevertheless, Masaniello is tormented by jealousy and suspicion, which drives him mad, leading to the tragic conclusion. There is also a villain named Ruffino, who has been rejected by the Spanish and now is intriguing against them, using Masaniello as his tool. Lèona is the only major female role: she is alone in a sea of men, most of them tenors! In fact there are five tenor roles in this opera, along with one baritone and one bass.

In the Wildbad reading the lead role was sung by tenor Mert Süngü, while several of the other roles were doubled: Francesco Bossi doubled the baritone roles of the Governor of Naples and Giacomo, a Gardner of Pozzuoli; Luis Magellanes doubled the tenor roles of the Count of Torellas, who wants to be Lèona's lover and Calatravo, the tax collector; and Massimo Frigato doubled the tenor roles of Pedro and a Carnival barker. Bass Nathanaël Tavernier played the important part of Ruffino, while Catherine Trottmann was Lèona and Camilla Carol Farias was Masaniello's sister Thérésia. Juan Jose Medina was Masaniello's brother/confidante Matteo. Of these singers, Tavernier stood out, bringing a fine bass voice to the music and authentic French diction to the spoken parts. Nicola Pascoli led the Szymanowski-Philharmonie Krakau and there was a large mixed chorus.

Although I cannot claim familiarity with the score, the performance as a whole seemed vastly underrehearsed. All of the singers and chorus members had their noses buried in scores with which they did not seem so familiar. There was no interaction among the singers, no spark of recognition that they were in a drama at all. The musical performance seemed geared towards the CD recording which will result so that the in-house audience was more or less ignored. This was a study in how not to handle a concert performance of an opera, and was in vivid contrast to the vital, dynamic performance of Uccelli's *Anna di Resburgo* which we had recently seen in New Jersey. The spoken dialogue presented a real problem; except for Tavernier, everyone seemed very uncomfortable with the French, and it was often spoken in low, hesitant tones that did not carry in the hall; much of the drama is driven forward in the spoken parts, and here they were the anthesis of the dramatic.

Carafa's *Masaniello* could certainly be an engaging dramatic work and the music struck me as worthwhile (we shall have to await for another listen via CD to know for sure). But the performance did Carafa's forgotten opera no great service in the house. Nonetheless, Michele Carafa is a composer worth exploring for modern audiences. I, for one, would love to hear his *Gabriella di Vergy*, which rivaled Rossini's *Otello* or his *Nozze di Lammermoor*, the precursor to *Lucia.*