ITALY'S BEL CANTO FESTIVAL REVIVES GIOVANNI PACINI'S LONG SILENT *AMAZILIA*

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Almost exactly two hundred years ago, on 6 July, 1825, Giovanni Pacini's opera *Amazilia* went on the boards of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples with a truly remarkable cast. Now, on 23 August, 2025, the opera was revived for its first full modern performance at the Teatro della Fortuna in Fano, Italy, as part of the annual festival Il Bel Canto Ritrovato (IBR). IBR seeks to explore the vast patrimony of Italian opera written in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when even the smallest village in the Italian peninsula was likely to have an opera house, and the opera business operated at its greatest and most feverish pitch.

Amazilia, with a libretto by Giovanni Schmidt, has an interesting and convoluted history as I have written elsewhere and was obviously close to Pacini's heart since it was written during the composer's honeymoon with his first wife, and since he named his second child after its heroine. Pacini, who wrote close to 80 operas during his long career was 29 when he wrote *Amazilia;* it was his 28th opera.

The amazing first cast for the opera when it opened in Naples in 1825 as part of the birthday celebration for the Bourbon Queen, Maria Isabella, included the tenor Giovanni David as Zadir, the bass Luigi Lablache as Cabana, and the soprano Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle as Amazilla herself. Their virtuosity makes revival of the opera today difficult as not many singers can manage the music Pacini gave them to sing. Originally a one act piece, in 1827 the opera was presented in Vienna in an enlarged format with a newly composed overture and two new vocal numbers, and divided into two acts. It was this version which was presented in Fano by Il Bel Canto Ritrovato in a new critical edition by Gianmarco Rossi.

The simple story, set in Florida, concerns the rivalry of two tribal leaders, Cabana and Zadir, for the hand of Amazilia, an Indian maiden belonging to Cabana's tribe. The Spanish conquistadores hover in the background and provide a *deus ex machina* to settle the rivalry and bring about a happy ending after Zadir loses a fight to Cabana and is set to be burned at the stake. Since the work was written for the birthday celebration of a Queen with Spanish heritage, praise of Spanish wisdom and peacemaking among the conquistadors, however unjustified, served as a none-too-subtle way to compliment the Queen and also a way to slip the story through the notorious Neapolitan censors who had banned a similarly named pastiche months earlier.

In many ways Pacini is the most intriguing of the lesser known opera composers of nineteenth century Italy because he was so popular in his day and because he wrote so much; with Pacini there is a lot of music to be explored by musicologists and opera companies brave enough to try something besides recycling the same few titles time after time. The music of *Amazilia* as a case in point offers several wonderful moments, and even the more formulaic passages are melodious.

One might begin with the completely unknown Sinfonia which Pacini wrote for Vienna because the Viennese expected an opera to have a full, formal overture. (Donizetti had to follow the same tradition.) The Sinfonia in this case is intentionally rough and noisy and full of snare drums, perhaps foreshadowing the world of the Indian tribes whose conflicts form the basis of the story, but it is well built, undoubtedly a bow to the symphonic, "Germanic" musical tastes of the Austrians. Some of the slow numbers are well wrought and memorable

too, such as Zadie's opening Cavatina "Come mai calmar le pene" and Amazilia's beautiful "Ah! Non fia mai ver."

Pacini became known as the "Maestro delle Cabalette" because of his inventiveness and facility with the form, and the cabalettas in *Amazilia* are always catchy with interesting development, starting with Cabana's "Paventi il perfido." Zadir's "Io ti vidi, t'adorai" was so popular that Mauro Giuliani composed a Theme and Variations on it for guitar. And while we normally think of cabalettas as fast pieces which contrast to the slow cantabiles of a cavatina or an aria, Pacini was years ahead of his fellow composers by writing the double-time cabaletta "Parmi vederlo," a decade before Donizetti wrote a slow cabaletta for the end of his *Lucrezia Borgia.* "Parmi vederlo" begins with a mournful adagio followed by a fiendishly difficult burst of fast coloratura which effectively demonstrates Amazilla's torment when she thinks that Zadir will go to the stake. The piece was so popular (and unusual) that it served as an "aria di baule" for sopranos like Giuditta Pasta and Giulia Grisi, who inserted it into various operas. Even in our era, Beverly Sills introduced it into her performances of Rossini's *Assedio di Corinto;* it survives in the Sills recording of the opera, but Pacini's parentage is unacknowledged.

There are no great ensembles in *Amazilia* such as Rossini was writing in the 1810s and 1820s, but the trio for the three principals which serves as the Act One finale in the two act version is exciting and appropriately climactic. The little Finaletto which ends the opera is a bit of a disappointment, however, as is the whole *lieto fine* with its absurd praise of the Spanish conquistadors. In fact *Amazilia* never quite escapes from its original purpose as a birthday offering for Queen Maria Isabella. There is a feeling at the end that the composer and his librettist reached an arbitrary time limit for their piece and quickly ended the drama so that the Royals could get on with their eating and drinking, causing the opera to end quite unexpectedly and abruptly.

IBR assembled a group of talented young singers for their single performance. Amazilia herself was sung by Paola Leoci, whose technical prowess and dedicated involvement in the role made her stand out. Leoci had in fact just performed the principal female role of Fanni in *La cambiale di matrimonio* in the Rossini Festival. She successfully adapted the soubrettish voice she used for Fanni in the light comedy to the more dramatic demands and greater agility required for Amazilia. Her breathtaking account of the fiendishly difficult coloratura in "Parmi vederlo" stood up well to Sills' recorded version—and this time we knew it was by Pacini.

If the role of Amazilia would be challenging for any singer, the tenor role of Zadir, written for Giovanni David, might be even more difficult. As Zadir IBR gave us Manuel Amati, who sang the extreme high notes and navigated the difficult coloratura for which David was famous, although Amati's voice is small. Bass Giorgio Caoduro completed the trio of principal singers as Cabana. His role is also extremely difficult; the original Cabana, Luigi Lablache, was the most famous bass of the first half of the nineteenth century. Caoduro started out somewhat tentatively as he immediately faced a major aria with a technically imposing cabaletta, but he grew stronger and more secure as the performance continued; he was quite good in his 'Vienna' duet with Amazilia,"Tu sprezzar gli affetti miei". Minor roles were taken by Mariano Orozco (Orozimbo), Naomi Umani (Mila) and Michele Albiati (Alvaro). The Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini and the Chorus of the Teatro Fortuna in Fano were led by Enrico Lombardi. Lombardi infused Pacini's forgotten music with new life, showing us a composer who knew how to write interestingly for the orchestra in spite of his reputation as one who lacked "science."

The production was lightly semi-staged, meaning that it was more than a strict concert with singers lined up at the front of the stage, but it was less than a staged performance without

scenery or costumes. Tomasso Casadei provided appropriate background projections of the settings described in the libretto, including Florida's "mountainous" terrain, a description which might make anyone who has been to Florida chuckle.

It is unlikely that *Amazilia* will become an opera staged outside of a festival setting because of its nature as a birthday present for a long forgotten monarch, its abrupt end and the difficulty of finding singers who can sing the music. Still, it has many musical jewels and the performance helped to increase our understanding of a composer who has been in the shadows too long. Chronologically, in Pacini's career the opera falls between *Alessandro nelle Indie* (which played more performances in Naples than any of the operas Rossini wrote for that city) and his *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei,* an even greater hit. As such, it is part of a trio which crowns the first part of Pacini's very fertile career.

The performance was recorded by Bongiovanni and a CD set should be forthcoming in about a year. For the first time IBR produced a critical edition of its principal opera, undertaken in this case by the fine young musicologist Gianmarco Rossi—a real contribution to musical scholarship.

The IBR festival was not only *Amazilia.* There were numerous concerts and lectures around Pacini, but the concerts also included intriguing music by other composers who are even more obscure today than Pacini. There was a concert with orchestra of excerpts from operas premiered at La Scala but written by Sicilian-born composers; several of these were works were by Pacini—*Il barone di Dolsheim* (1818), *La vestale* (1823) and *I cavalieri di Valenza* (1828). Giulia's aria with harp "Io son rea, né imploro" from *La Vestale* was extremely beautiful, the best of these. But there were also pieces from Mario Aspa's *I due Savoiardi* (1838), Pietro Coppola's *La festa della Rosa* (1836) and Placido Mandanici's *Il Buontempone di Porta Ticinese* (1841). Coppola is a composer who merits much more exploration; another of his works, *Nina pazza per amore,* was a great international success and a greater money-maker in its time than any of Rossini's operas, while Mandanici's irresistible *Il Buontempone* is full of toe-tapping music and uniquely celebrates Milan, just as many other operas are inextricably linked to Rome or Venice or Naples. This concert was ably accompanied by the Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini, directed by Daniele Agiman. Agiman was so excited by the trio from *Il Buontempone di Porta Ticinese* which ended the concert that he himself called for a *bis* (encore) of the whole piece before the audience could, and the three talented singers from the La Scala Accademia (Fan Zhou, Aldo Sartori and Sung Hwan Park) sang it again. The audience loved it.

An outdoor concert in the courtyard overlooked by Nicolai Vaccai's house celebrated works by four composers from Pesaro—Rossini obviously, but also Vaccai and the almost totally unknown Gioacchino Albertini and Vincenzo Federici. Other Pacini works were heard in a concert which linked his operas to passages from his artistic Memoir. In other words, IBR gave us a full menu from its Main Composer, Pacini, but also tastes of other once popular opera composers of the first half on the nineteenth century who have fallen into obscurity, thus fulfilling its mission of opening up this rich patrimony for the pleasure of today audiences. IBR, in its fourth successful year, is once again a learning experience for even the most jaded opera lover. CDs of last year's offerings, Luigi Rossi's *La casa disabitata* and a concert of excerpts by Vaccai are now available on the Bongiovanni label.

Aside from the character in the opera (and the name of Pacini's daughter), "Amazilia" is the name of a genus of hummingbird, drawn from the same source character as the opera's heroine. IBR, with its multitude of scholarly and performing initiatives, is helping these rare and colorful creatures to fly again.