

Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* at Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo

Charles Jernigan, August 15, 2018

Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo gave us the chance to hear some rare operatic repertory performed by virtuoso singers and a virtuoso period orchestra, as I outlined in my review of "The Two *Tancredi's*." Sandwiched between the two *Tancredi* performances, we saw an even less well known work, Giovanni Simone Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*. The son of a village organist, Mayr was born in Bavaria in 1763 and received his earliest musical training there. After an aborted attempt to study canon law in Ingolstadt, he was drawn by his first love, music, to travel to Italy, where he studied mostly in Venice. Once his studies were completed, he settled down in Bergamo, a few miles northeast of Milan, in the foothills of the Alps, where he became the chief musician in the cathedral, Santa Maria Maggiore, and he began his career as an opera composer. Over a career which spanned three decades (1794-1823) he wrote almost 70 operatic works, most of which premiered in the theaters of northern Italy. He spent the rest of his long life in Bergamo, where he started a charitable organization which offered music lessons to the children of poor parents; one of his first students (and certainly his most famous) was Gaetano Donizetti. Mayr and Donizetti became lifelong friends until the much older Mayr died in 1845, just in time to avoid seeing his star pupil descend into madness and death at an early age from the effects of syphilis.

By 1813, when Donizetti was still a student and Rossini's star had just started rising in the north, Mayr was well known enough to be invited to Naples, which boasted the best opera house in Italy, with the best singers, the best orchestra and the best stagecraft. The commission was to write a work 'in the French manner' (Naples was a French dominated court, ruled by Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law), which meant that it should have accompanied recitatives and could have a tragic ending, something almost unheard of in the rest of Italy at the time. The libretto was by Felice Romani, who would soon become the most celebrated (and best) librettist in Italy, penning works for Rossini, Donizetti and especially Bellini and even the young Verdi. The subject was mythological--Medea, Princess of Colchis--and the ultimate source was Euripides' famous Greek tragedy. Romani, writing his second libretto, was a classicist living at the dawn of the Romantic era, and the subject no doubt appealed to him more than that of his first libretto which was on the war of the roses (*La rosa bianca e la rosa rossa*, also for Mayr).

The backstory of *Medea in Corinto* is that she has aided Giasone (Jason) in taking the famous golden fleece and has fled Colchis with him. To stop her pursuing father, she has killed her brother and butchered his body, throwing the pieces into the sea so that her father, the king, will stop to pick up the pieces and bury him. Medea and Giasone have had two sons, but they are chased from place to place as outcasts and murders until they come to Corinth. There, the king, Creonte, agrees to marry Giasone, famous as the hero of the Argonauts, to his daughter, called Creusa in the opera. Creusa falls for Giasone, but she was already betrothed to Egeo (Aegeus), King of Athens. Needless to say, Medea is not happy with this turn of events and after trying to win Giasone back, she plots a terrible revenge with the equally enraged Egeo. She pretends to accept the exile imposed on her by Creonte, but she sends Creusa a

poisoned garment as a wedding gift which causes the poor girl's skin to burn off and kills her. Medea then slays her own children to punish Giasone and escapes at the end on a chariot pulled by two dragons. (In the Greek myth, in superb irony, Jason, the triumphal hero of the Argonauts, dies when a timber from his rotting, beached ship the Argo falls on his head as he sits contemplating his ruined life.)

Medea is a powerful opera and the role is a tour-de-force. In its way, it is more revolutionary than Rossini's *Tancredi*, premiered the same year in Venice. Mayr was well known for bringing German symphonic complexity to his orchestration and allying it with Italianate song. Rossini would certainly benefit from Mayr's example when he came to Naples himself in 1815 to begin an extraordinary run of stupendous serious operas along with well-known comedies. Partially taking his cue from Mayr, Rossini came to be called "il tedesco" -- 'the little German'.

In Naples, Mayr had access to the same singers who would star in so many of Rossini's operas: Isabella Colbran (*Medea*) who became Rossini's mistress and eventually his wife; the great tenor Andrea Nozzari was Giasone, and the role of Egeo, who is not in the Greek myth, was introduced because Naples boasted a second great tenor, Manuel Garcia, who would become the first Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville*. A decade after the premiere, the great Giuditta Pasta would take up the title role in Paris and it would become central to her repertory. The music of *Medea in Corinto*, always melodic and eminently singable, reaches climaxes in Act II, first in "Caro albergo," a gorgeous extended aria with chorus and harp accompaniment for Creusa, and then in an extended scena ("Antica notte, Tartaro profondo") for Medea when she summons the furies of hell to her aid in some of the most remarkably "hellish" music composed up to that time. Among the dark instruments summoned up for this music is a "serpent," an ancestor of the tuba with a snake-like shape. Creusa's lovely aria with harp sets a false happy note as she asks the God of Love to "second my desire," and acts as a sharp contrast to Medea's scene, which soon follows. For the Teatro Nuovo performances, the featured harp was put on stage for the former and a chorus of demons along with menacing trumpets and horns moved out through doors in the auditorium to sound appropriately foreboding, as if they came from the bowels of the earth. Romani's libretto contrasts the "dear home" ("caro albergo") invoked by Creusa and her call to the "God of Love" with Medea's invocation to "deepest tartarus" and her call on the furies to kill Creusa with "the poison of Nessus, which killed Hercules." The fine literary parallelism and the frequent references to classical myth are typical of Romani's work as are the lovely verses of much of the poetry. Like Mayr's music, the libretto is far above average for the period. One might point out many other highlights, like the magnificent nine-minute overture; or the Introduction centering on Creusa's "Dolci amiche"; Giasone's entrance aria "Di gloria all'invito," which will form the template for the entrance of so many of Rossini's heroic figures; Medea's first act aria "Te solo invoco, Possente Amore," which makes her, however briefly, a sympathetic character; the great first act finale, which is also a template for coming Rossini operas; all the choral writing; and many of the duets. The music for this opera, unknown as it is to most people, is very fine indeed.

Like Rossini, Mayr straddles the line between the Classical and the Romantic, between the tropes of eighteenth century opera and those of the nineteenth century, the "primo ottocento." The subject of the opera, the classical purity of the vocal line, the careful balance

of parts is typical of the Classical period while the Romantic emotion, whether of Creusa's aria with harp or Medea's furious invocation, lead the way to Romanticism. Creusa was sung by Teresa Castillo, whose purity of line and forward, light silvery voice served as a nice contrast to Medea's much heavier and more forceful vocals. Medea herself was sung by Jennifer Rowley, who is a current stalwart of the Metropolitan as Leonora (*Trovatore*), Roxanne (*Cyrano de Bergerac*), *Tosca* and *Adriana Lecouvreur*. She possesses both the heft and flexibility for the role, although on the dramatic side she did not look or act much like a woman scorned who is brought to kill her own children. Neither she nor Ms. Castillo were dressed in gowns which flattered them or accorded with the dramatic imagery of the story. Tenor Derrek Stark had the thankless role of Giasone, with two arias and two duets. He did a fine job in the long and demanding role. Baritone William Lee Bryan was an imposing Creonte. Mingjie Lei sang Egeo, the role premiered by Manuel Garcia. Minor roles were sung by Christopher Bozeka, Junhan Choi and Elena Snow.

Once again the most impressive part of the performance was the stellar playing of the orchestra on period instruments, arranged in early nineteenth century fashion and without a real "conductor." Leading the performance was Jakob Lehmann as first violin/concertmaster and Jonathan Brandani as *maestro al cembalo*. Also, the large chorus (male and female) were powerful and very well trained. I saw this opera a few seasons ago with a modern orchestra led by the excellent Fabio Luisi, but I have to say that the more rough and ready sound of the period band brought out nuances and allowed us to hear individual instruments in a way that the smooth sound of the modern orchestra hides. I thought it was very exciting.

As for the *Tancredi's* this *Medea in Corinto* was semi-staged, with the singers in evening dress. (Giasone wore a crass, silver tuxedo jacket and looked like a croupier in a sleazy Vegas casino, but maybe that was the point). The principals all acted their roles, at least minimally (no children to slay, no poisoned gown, no chariot with dragons) and the movement and lighting were tasteful. There was no attempt to make a point other than the terrible points made by the myth itself, which are as shocking today as they were in fifth century Athens. By having a semi-staged production, Teatro Nuovo avoided the pitfalls of regietheater, as in Fiona Shaw's deeply flawed production of Cherubini's *Medea* last fall in Wexford.

Will Crutchfield would like to go forward in the future, perhaps with three completely different operas, perhaps eventually with full stagings. He gave us a "wish list" which included several operas by both Mayr and Mercadante which have not been seen in modern times. But we shall have to see how the "convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali" and the ability to raise funds treat him and Teatro Nuovo. The audiences for all three performances we saw in Purchase were sadly small and disappointing. I certainly hope that he will be able to continue his Resident Artist program throughout the year and not just in the summer and that we will find new treasures waiting to be explored next year. Such a fine artistic endeavor deserves as much.