

Rare Early Mercadante in Innsbruck: The Last Setting of Metastasio's *Didone*.

Charles Jernigan, August 18, 2018

Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870) is one of those composers who is almost forgotten, but not quite. Born in indigence in Altamura, Puglia, he attended the Naples Conservatory and staged his first opera in 1819 at the San Carlo. Over his long life, he wrote almost 60 operas, many of them quite successful, spanning the years from Rossini's apex through Verdi's middle period. His last staged opera, in 1866, was *Virginia*, although it had been written around 1850; by that time Mercadante was almost totally blind--he died four years later. He was a reformer, instituting changes in form and style which marked the end of the bel canto period and ushered in the more dramatic style of Verdi. He was also a great instrumentalist and today some of his best known work is chamber music and works for flute and orchestra. His *Il reggente* uses the same story as *Un ballo in maschera* and his wonderful *Il giuramento* is based on the same story as *La gioconda*. Every now and then one of his operas pops up. A couple of summers ago there was *Francesca da Rimini* at the festival in Martina Franca, in Puglia near his birthplace; it was a world premiere since it was never given in Mercadante's lifetime. Next fall the Wexford Festival will be performing his 1839 work *Il bravo*, based ultimately on a novel by James Fenimore Cooper. In his lifetime, Mercadante was a worthy rival of Donizetti, Bellini and even Verdi; today, except among bel canto addicts such as myself, his name is scarcely known.



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This summer the Innsbruck Early Music Festival (Innsbrucker Festwochen del Alten Musik) under its director, Alessandro De Marchi, decided to make *Didone abbandonata*, an early Mercadante opera, the centerpiece of its summer season because this work, according to De

Marchi, is among those which reflect the end of the long baroque period and the end of the Neapolitan School, a center of operatic creativity which is of particular interest to De Marchi. Normally, one would not associate a nineteenth century bel canto work with "early music," but De Marchi used his period orchestra, "Accademia Montis Regalis" to play the work, and it sounded right at home in Innsbruck's Landestheater along with the more usual baroque works of Cesti, Handel and Vivaldi. It was interesting for me, just having visited the "Teatro Nuovo" Festival in Purchase, NY, which was dedicated to "The Dawn of Romantic Opera" and played operas from 1813 on period instruments, to come to Innsbruck and hear a work which De Marchi said represented 'the dusk of baroque opera' played by a period band with the same kind of instruments.

Didone abbandonata dates from 1823, and was Mercadante's twelfth operatic work. Thus it comes from the composer's early period when every Italian opera composer who wanted to succeed hitched his wagon to Rossini. It should be noted that *Didone* dates from the same year as *Semiramide*, the work which crowned Rossini's Italian career and which is often called the last 'baroque' opera seria. If Mercadante's music and formal structure in this opera are Rossinian, the libretto has strong roots in the eighteenth century, for it is based on Metastasio's *Didone abbandonata*. In fact, *Didone* had been Metastasio's first completely new libretto, set to music by Domenico Sarro in 1724. Metastasio became known as the greatest librettist of the eighteenth century, although at the time he was a young man and the lover of Marianna Bulgarelli, the prima donna who was the first Dido; he fashioned the libretto to allow her to show her singing and acting skills. Over the ensuing years, it was set more than 50 times by composers like Porpora, Vinci, Galuppi, Hasse and Jomelli. Bulgarelli and her Aeneas, Nicolo Grimaldi, also sang in the premieres of versions set to music by Albinoni and Porpora.

In other words, by the time the libretto got to Mercadante, almost 100 years after its premiere, it had been around the block a few times. The story is the familiar one from Vergil's *Aeneid*, with complications. As the opera opens, Aeneas is already planning to leave Dido in Carthage to sail off to found Rome, as the gods and his ancestors have ordered him to do, but he cannot yet bring himself to tell the Carthaginian queen. Jarbas, King of the Moors, shows up disguised as his own messenger Araspe, to press his suit for Dido. She has no interest in marrying Jarbas, who is outraged that she prefers some sailor-refugee from Troy to a king. In the end, after various complications, Enea (Aeneas) leaves for Italy, Jarbas sets fire to Carthage, Dido's sister Selene and her trusty companion Osmindo abandon her--she becomes "Didone abbandonata"--and she goes to die in the flames of Carthage after a long solo finale. It was one of the few Metastasio opera seria libretti that did not include a happy ending, and the tragic finale persists in Mercadante's setting.

The typical Metastasio libretto consisted of long passages of secco recitative which forwarded the plot of the drama, interspersed with arias through which the characters gave vent to their feelings. There were few choruses and no ensembles. By 1823 that structure was quite outdated, replaced by a new form which had been fixed by Rossini's serious opera triumphs from the previous decade. Now there were many ensembles--duets, trios, grand act finales and a big scena--a rondo with cabaletta for the prima donna to finish off the work in a showy fashion. Clearly, the Metastasian structure would not do, and thus Andrea Leone Tottola, one of Rossini's major Neapolitan collaborators, was enlisted to "modernize" the libretto. The result is a text which retains the Metastasian story and as many of his words as possible, but

shortens the recitative and adds new text for more involved aria and ensemble singing and for a male chorus. Tottola uses words in Metastasio's recitatives to create "numbers" in the sense of an early nineteenth century work--arias, cavatinas, duets, a trio and a big concertato finale to end Act 1. In other words, Tottola turns a baroque libretto into a bel canto one, and Mercadante applies the norms of bel canto music making to a neo-classical text. It is clear that Mercadante was educated in the neo-classical tradition in Naples: thirteen of his first twenty-six operas were on classical sources or stories and at least two of them were composed directly on librettos by Metastasio. *Nitocri* even used recitatives by Apostolo Zeno, Mercadante's predecessor at the Viennese court. Even Mercadante's final opera, *Virginia*, was on a subject from Roman legend. Clearly, he is a composer who falls at the nexus between the neo-classical world of the eighteenth century and the Romantic era of the nineteenth.

Anyone who enjoys the music of Rossini would probably also enjoy *Didone abbandonata*, which premiered in Turin on 18 January, 1823. There is a long and very fine overture. Immediately after the opening chords, a sentimental andante passage begins on the French horn and is taken up by other winds; it is reminiscent of some of Donizetti's more introspective passages. After that, it is Rossini all the way with little figures which seem identical to passages from the *Barbiere* overture and a repeated crescendo very much like the one in the *Ermione* overture. Each of the two acts has seven numbers; each protagonist (Enea, Dido, Jarba) has an aria/cabaletta combination in each act and each small role (Osmida, Araspe, Selene) has an "aria di sorbetto" (the one for the tenor role of Araspe is quiet difficult). There is a duet in each act and a very fine trio (perhaps the best music in the opera) in Act 2: "No, non credo a Troian fallace."

In the original version of the opera by Sarro, Enea was an alto castrato and Jarba was a mezzo pants role. In Mercadante's version, Enea is sung by a mezzo-soprano and Jarba is a tenor. In Innsbruck, the role of Enea was sung by Katrin Wundsam, probably the best of the singers. Although she sometimes sounded a little underpowered, her coloratura was fluid and accurate and she looked boyish in her blue sailor's outfit. Viktorija Miskunaite was a tall, attractive Dido with a voice which sometimes sounded sharp and became shrill in the final scene when everyone has abandoned her, Carthage is afloat and she plans to die in the ashes (although it is hard to blame her for her vocal problems given the production at that point). Carlo Vincenzo Allemano (Jarba), a stalwart in Innsbruck and in baroque repertory, has a very unusual voice. I had to look him up in the program to be sure he was a tenor because his voice is so baritone. Some of the higher notes gave him some trouble. Diego Godoy in the minor role of Araspe managed some very fine high notes by contrast. His light tenor was a nice contrast to Allemano's low and dusky sound. Emilie Renard was a flirtatious Selene (Dido's sister) and Pietro Di Bianco as Osmida did not impress vocally.

The best music making was in the orchestra where De Marchi's Academia Montis Regalis sounded great in this music; De Marchi's beat was firm, his desire to bring out each nuance in the score well realized. The men of Coro Maghini were also very good. The chorus does a lot of work in this opera, interacting with the soloists in their arias and acting at times as a commenting Greek chorus.

The production by Jürgen Flimm, Grand Old Man of Eurotrash, was ugly but not offensive for most of the opera. He set it, of course, in our time, on a building site with protruding rebar, an

ugly two story grey building and a red cement mixer. The set included a small refrigerator, beers for the workers and some easy chairs. Innsbruck has a revolving staged which kept turning like a carousel. In mythology, Dido was famous for constructing Carthage, and this was obviously the take-off point for the production. But Flimm also had smoke pouring onto the stage from the beginning, suggesting the coming destruction of the city. The set (by Magdalena Gut) was as ugly as most construction sites. The chorus marched in and out wearing French Foreign Legion outfits (if Carthaginian soldiers) and put ersatz turbans on their heads if they represented Jarba's troupes. Dido wore a filmy white frock with a crown of flowers in the first scene and an imperious red dress thereafter. Kristina Bell designed the costumes.



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Things deteriorated towards the end of the opera when Jarba has been rejected by Dido again and again. Enea sailed off in canoes (no kidding) to found Rome and Jarba started dancing around like a comic in old time vaudeville. He set Carthage alight with a Bic lighter and proceeded to rape and stab everybody in sight. Fortunately for Enea, he had paddled off by that time, but Selene was raped and stabbed and Osmida was shot by Dido, who wore a bullet-proof vest over her elegant red gown. In the end Jarba and Dido stab each other and lie side by side. Thus Flimm's merely ugly production eventually descended into the eurotrash he is famous for. At the opening night performance he seemed to receive far more jeers than cheers; the chorus of boos drowned out the applause. The 76 year old Flimm seemed to be delighted with the negative reception; he is certainly used to it. Often in Europe, it seems to me that popular failure is deemed more successful than popular success; it is certainly easier to design an awful production than one which enhances the dramatic and the musical experience. The critics who applaud this stuff don't seem to realized they are being Flimm-flammed.

Bottom line: interesting opera, good, Rossini-style music, strongly presented on the musical level, undercut by a trashy, cliché-ridden production. I saw the performance twice: on 10 and 12, August. There will be a CD and a DVD on Naxos. I will buy the CD.