

ITALIAN OPERA AT THE COURT OPERA 1842-50 OF  
COPENHAGEN by Borre Qvamme

On November 18th 1841 a company of Italian singers started an opera season at Vesterbros Theatre in Copenhagen with Donizetti's Gemma di Vergy. They were organised by Negri, who directed an Italian company in Berlin and included the tenor Pietro Rossi, the baritone Giuseppe Paltrinieri, the bass Giuseppe Torre and the mezzo-soprano Felicita Forconi. The bass singer Savio was to act as the director in Copenhagen. Besides Gemma di Vergy the company was to present L'Elisir d'Amore, Norma and Il Barbiere di Siviglia. Maestro di capella was Paolo Sperati.

The performances were such an outstanding success that the company was called upon to perform at the 18th century theatre built into the Royal Palace and inaugurated in 1767. In this theatre the mad king Christian VII had appeared on the stage in Voltaire's Zaide, and in the 1770s and 80s it had been used by Italian opera companies, among others by Sarti. The season was guaranteed privately by the King, Christian VIII, and opened on January 3rd with a performance of Lucia di Lammermoor, which had not been heard in Copenhagen before. It was so well received that it was given 14 times. Before the season concluded on May 1st, the following operas had been presented: Gemma di Vergy, Lucrezia Borgia, L'Elisir d'Amore, Roberto Devereux, Norma, Nina pazza per amore by Coppola and Le Prigioni d'Edimburgh by Federigo Ricci. Another buffo bass, Rocca, and two additional tenors arrived late in the season (Ciaffei and Montresor), and with these Rossini's Otello could be given.

The Italian operas were sourly received by the Danish musical establishment, which was very German in its tastes and ridiculed the French and Italian opera music. Still worse was to come when Niels Gade and other young musicians were to return from Leipzig imbued with Mendelssohn's and Schumann's attitudes. But the public was wildly enthusiastic and applauded deliriously. The opera performances at the Royal

Theatre had lately been very shabby, and the Danish public were delighted to hear good Italian voices. The tenor Pietro Rossi rapidly became a favourite, and Madame Forconi was praised for her unsurpassable execution of the arias in Lucia. She was later honoured by the title of Royal Opera singer.

A review in the periodical Faedrelandet is characteristic: "The opera is rather incoherent and consists of several quite effectful situations. The music has some very beautiful moments and is on the whole dramatic and effective, but is on the other hand spoiled by the most awful trivialities. There are a couple of choral themes which are without equal in tastelessness. There is no doubt that the execution had its very evident faults. The musical education is not sufficient. Madame Forconi sang some of her numbers very well and with a grace which is peculiar to her, but her weakness is that she is often below pitch and her voice is forced in the high notes, that her cadences bear evidence of faulty training and imperfection.

Rossi's high notes go into falsetto, due to lack of voice or technique? He sings too much through his teeth. Paltrinieri has a thick and dragging voice, Torre is a monster of a bass both in voice and circumference and lacks culture to a high degree, is not much more than a natural talent."

The reviewer later had to retract his opinions on Madame Forconi's technique, and as for Rossi and Torre, he later praised them very highly, attributing their progress to inspiration from the Danish public. His review of Lucrezia Borgia is considerably more positive. "The music for Lucrezia is generally held to be among the most successful products of Donizetti, and we cannot deny that it has some beautiful melodies and a few numbers which are of real musical value. Especially it must be admitted that it has a life and a fire which give the subject its due and the singer an opportunity to produce dramatic effect. The second act (or the first, as the

first is called a prologue) is musically the best, but as an especially beautiful melody we must cite the ballad in the third act. The decor deserves the highest praise.

Madame Forconi pleased us very much. There is life and glowing colours in her singing and acting, a lucid and forceful expression of passions and moods. Rossi sings with a captivating softness and grace, Torre surpassed himself in every respect as the Duke of Ferrara. We must also praise Mademoiselle Aloardi, who acts in men's clothes with a freedom which she has not shown earlier and sings with a sureness which we have not earlier been entitled to credit her with."

At the final performance of Lucrezia Borgia Madame Forconi was showered with bouquets and the applause threatened to continue for ever. The trio was repeated after frenetic applause, and the various singers gave extra numbers from Il Barbiere, Norma, etc. At the Royal Theatre all such interruptions were forbidden. Characteristically the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen still displays the motto: Not only for pleasure.

For the next season King Christian VIII had had the theatre redorated in red, white and gold, and the chandelier could be raised so as not to obstruct the view from the second balcony. (The theatre is now used as a theatrical museum.) The 1842-43 season opened on November 4th with L'Elisir d'Amore followed by Lucrezia Borgia, La Sonnambula and Lucia di Lammermoor. A new Donizetti opera was presented on November 25th, Marino Faliero. Before the public opening, the company had given a closed performance for the King and his court with La Sonnambula on November 2nd. Forconi and Rossi were better than ever, and a new singer, Giusepina Sori, was applauded for her drinking song in Lucrezia Borgia. Another new singer was Carmela Marziali, who as Adina in L'Elisir d'Amore is praised for a pure voice of great compass and well trained. Ferrari Stella as Nemorino had a strong and pure voice and sang with great expression, though he was very small of stature. The duet Nemorino-Belcore had to be repeated, and Una Furtiva Lagrima was

received with an applause the equal of which had never been heard in Copenhagen. Stella was a pupil of Rubini and was also a pianist and composer, sometimes performing his own songs as extras.

The other operas this season were Beatrice di Tenda, Il Matrimonio Segreto, I Capuleti e i Montecchi and Gnecco's La Prova d'una Opera Seria. Donizetti's Roberto Devereux, which had been given in the preceding season, had not been a success and was never repeated.

The 1843-44 season started again with a Donizetti opera, Lucia di Lammermoor on November 1st, and two new Donizetti operas were presented later, L'Ajo nell'Imbarazzo and Anna Bolena. Lucrezia Borgia and L'Elisir d'Amore were repeated from the last season. Other novelties were Mercadante's Il Giuramento, Fioravanti's Le Cantatrici Villane, Mozart's Don Giovanni (which was not a success with the critics), Fioravanti junior's Columella and Ricci's Chi dura, Vince. With few additions the singers were the same as last season, but at the end of the season trouble broke out with the director, Count Marasini, who was married to Forconi, and for the following season he was replaced by Giuseppe Torre, who brought a completely new set of singers.

This time Pacini's Saffo opened the season on November 3rd 1844, but the company continued with the old successes like L'Elisir d'Amore, Lucia di Lammermoor and Marino Faliero. Later two new Donizetti operas were introduced, Don Pasquale and Belisario. The new members were characterised as good singers, but bad actors, with the exception the contralto Ida Bertrandi. The season was not particularly successful, and the King had to pay a considerable deficit.

Next season opened with Bellini's I Puritani on November 21st, 1845 followed by a large number of new operas, such as Donizetti's Linda di Chamounix and La Figlia del Reggimento (in Italian, of course), Rossini's La Cenerentola, Ricci's Corrado d'Altamura, Otto Nicolai's Il Templario and, interestingly enough, Verdi's Nabucco and Ernani. Nearly all the singers were new, but the season was not a financial success, and again the King had to pay a deficit.



The 1846-47 season was artistically the best that the Copenhagen public had experienced. It started on November 24th and lasted till April 20th. Lucrezia Borgia, Lucia di Lammermoor, Ernani, Norma, Beatrice di Tenda and La Sonnambula were repeated. New were Donizetti's La Favorita, Il Furioso and Torquato Tasso, and Verdi's I Due Foscari, I Lombardi and Attila. The ensemble was the best that had been brought, Giuseppe Torre, Ciaffei, Luigia Tavola, soprano, Cesare Vajro, baritone, and above all an outstanding debutante, Angiolina Bosio, who was favourably compared with Jenny Lind in Lucia di Lammermoor. She was quite young then and had later great success at Covent Garden. The new tenor Adelinde Vietti was also a very good singer.

The 1847-48 season was interesting because it was directed by Egisto Ricci, who had engaged a young musician, Angelo Mariani, to assist Paolo Sperati, who from now on only occupied himself with the harpsichord accompaniments and the training of the choir. Another debutante was presented, Rosina Penco, who later created the part of Leonora in Il Trovatore. The other singers were Madame Favoli, Ciaffei, Vajro, the tenor Ettore Paggiati, the baritone Luigi della Santa, the buffo Vincenzo Galli, the bass Giovanni Casanova and the contralto Liddy Stoltz. The public was very satisfied with the performances, which included Gemma di Vergy and Linda di Chamounix and, as a new opera, Mercadante's Leonore, which did not make a hit. Mariani was especially praised as conductor.

Unfortunately the King died in January 1848, and the Italian season, which had started with Lucia di Lammermoor, Don Pasquale, La Cenerentola, Attila, Ernani and L'Elisir d'Amore, had to break off. Mariani composed a Requiem for the dead king, which was given by the Italian singers. Only in March could the season continue with L'Elisir d'Amore, Gemma di Vergy, Linda di Chamounix and Ernani, but the company had suffered palpable loss by the interruption.

The next season the director Egisto Ricci brought his brother Federico, and two of his operas were

presented: Luigi Rolla and Estella di Murcia. La Sonnambula opened the season on November 22nd, followed by Ernani, L'Elisir d'Amore, Attila and I Puritani. La Figlia del Reggimento was put on so that a Norwegian singer of German origin, Emma Freyse Dahl, could appear on the stage, but the opera was very poorly presented. Lucia di Lammermoor and Linda di Chamounix were taken up again and given several times. The principal singers were Andrea Castellan, tenor, Giuseppe Pavesi, tenor, Giovanni Guicciardi, baritone (who later created the role of Conte di Luna in Il Trovatore), Stefano Scapini, bass, and Giovanna Pecorini, soprano.

The novelty of Italian opera seemed to have worn off and was not greeted as enthusiastically as earlier. The critics were very active in their condemnation of Italian opera, and when three of Donizetti's operas were introduced at the Royal Opera in the 1850s (L'Elisir d'Amore 1856, Lucia di Lammermoor 1857, Lucrezia Borgia 1859), they produced a concerted attack on foreign (or non-German) opera. At that time the Royal Opera really had singers who could take the parts, and the public liked the music. But the Leipzig-influenced musical establishment succeeded in hounding the Donizetti operas off the stage.

There was another Italian opera season in 1853/54, when Lucia di Lammermoor, Don Pasquale, Lucrezia Borgia, Linda di Chamounix, Norma, Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Le Cantatrici Vallane and the new operas Rigoletto and Macbeth were given. The director was Ulisse Brambilla, and the singers were Tancredi Romarini and Vincenzo Tartini, tenors, Giovanni Reni, baritone, Luigi Maggiorotti and Enrico Grozzi, basses, Veronica Gaziello, soprano, and Angiolina Remorini, mezzo. But this was the last Italian season for a long time in Copenhagen.

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