

BELLINI AND BIANCA E GERNANDO/FERNANDO

An Introduction by Alexander Weatherston

Bellini's opera is of course not one but two works. Bianca e Gernando was written for his professional debut at the San Carlo of Naples in 1826 but Bianca e Fernando was something altogether more important - a revision two years later of such magnitude that it counts as a completely new score.

In 1824, after five years of studentship, he wrote Adelson e Salvini, a three act drama semiserio that won him 300 ducats and a commission to write again for the vast theatre attached to the Royal Palace at Naples - a prospect fit to paralyse a less steely individual. At once his operatic metal began to show. Almost disdainfully he turned down Andrea Leone Tottola, the 'Poeta dei Reali Teatro', in favour of a debutant springing from goodness-knows-where, Domenico Gilardoni. Ignoring a restriction to 1 act as had been thought appropriate to a newcomer to operatic glory he forthwith planned a full scale drama which would test all the resources of the management.

To cap this he chose an extraordinary plot. Not, as one might imagine, some exotic drama replete with passion, sentiment, illicit love - suitable for an ambitious student fully attuned to the emerging tastes of the times, but a 'Rescue' plot, 'vecchio come Noe', the sort of anodyne drama that had gained a vogue in the heady days before the French Revolution and since the advent of the Emperor Napoleon had lost all its attractions. There was to be no love interest at all in Bianca.

It is certain that by this choice Bellini meant to succeed (other composers made the same choice at the same time and probably for the same reasons). The plot was a thoroughly artful one: starting life as a play Bianca e Fernando alla tomba di Carlo IV duca di Agrigento by a certain Carlo Roti (1820) his opera was intended to disarm the flinty Neapolitan censura which was beginning to flex its muscles. The story of a usurped dukedom, providentially restored to its rightful ruler by a noble son and erring daughter was exactly the sort of stuff that would melt loyal hearts - especially in view of recent events in the Kingdom.

In fact the title proved to be something of a miscalculation; Bianca was a perfectly unexceptionable name, but Fernando - almost a literal transcript of that of the heir to the throne, Ferdinando duca di Calabria, and therefore too near the bone even for the censura - was changed to an incredible 'Gernando' instead.

Even this did not satisfy the gods. The text chosen and the music written, with the opera already in rehearsal and timetabled for the 12th January 1826 - its difficult Bellinian cantilena tailored to

such singers as Adelaide Tosi, Giovanni David and Luigi Lablache (quite a cast for a beginner), the prima was called off at the last moment when, in an access of conscience King Francesco I decided a Gala performance almost on the anniversary of his father's death was scarcely appropriate and frogmarched his court off to the gloomy palace of Calvi instead. For a composer of Bellini's temperament the delay must have been agonising, and it lasted for five months, Bianca e Gernando only seeing the light of day on the 30th May 1826 and with a different cast.

If the Sicilian prodigy had feared an anticlimax however, there was to be nothing of the sort. The 'second' cast was even more brilliant than the first, Bianca was the highlight of the season, its serene melodic span was a revelation. The packed house which included Donizetti, Pacini, Zingarelli, the Ricci brothers and a cheering throng was hardly restrained by the presence of the Queen and was not at all concerned about the etiquette that should have applied on such occasion. Afterwards Donizetti went backstage and embraced Bellini who tried to kiss his hand (a sad preliminary to the relations between the two in later years).

Bianca was created by the superb Henriette Méric-Lalande, then at the peak of an all-too-short career, trembling, impassioned, betrayed, she was the archetype of the Bellinian vittima and would star in Il pirata (1827) and La straniera (1829) at their prime and also in so many other operas by Coccia, Pacini, Carlo Conti and Donizetti (her role in Lucrezia Borgia has been the subject of much nonsensical comment). Filippo - as originally intended - was sung by Lablache with all the resources of a basso cantante voice that was the brazen triumph of the Victorian stage, the effect of his singing was such that Bellini later found himself unable to alter the florid line that he had made his own and which sticks out like a sore thumb in the 1828 revision of Bianca. Together with these two stellar voices came the most sensational tenor of all, no less than Giovan Battista Rubini whose breathtaking lyricism as Gernando - the key role in the opera - filled Bellini's stratospheric lines with an almost unbearable beauty.

The opera brought him celebrity and more, it brought him the championship of the great impresario Barbaja and a further commission - for the ultimate stage in Italy, for La Scala at Milano: Il pirata sung there the following year with Méric-Lalande and Rubini would make Bellini world famous.

It was not however the end of Bianca. Instant fame brought its own problems, not least of which was how to follow up this triumph. After toying with a new edition of Adelson e Salvini but pressed for time, Bellini agreed to revise Bianca for a really prestigious event - snatched under the noses of most of his eminent contemporaries; the Gala opening of the teatro Carlo Felice at Genoa.

BIANCA E FERNANDO

The 'Grand apertura del teatro Carlo Felice' took place on the 7th April 1828. There was one special commission for the season, Morlacchi's Colombo. there were two Rossini operas and one of Donizetti's, but Bellini had the great satisfaction in taking precedence. He had also the satisfaction of re-naming his opera Bianca e Fernando as there was no objection from the House of Savoy (despite the fact that the duca di Genova was also called Ferdinando). Other changes too were favourable to his original intentions as both Tosi and David were able to take up the roles Bellini had written for them; the greatest change however, was in Bellini himself.

Il pirata had brought him instant fame but it had also brought him instant maturity. His revision of the score is that of a master, indeed the history of Bianca e Fernando starts here.

With the aid of Felice Romani - the librettist of all but one of his remaining operas - Bellini set out to change both the words and the music. The twelve numbers or so of the original score were expanded, not so much numerically as qualitatively; most of the Rossinian canto fiorito of the original was deleted and the romantic pathos, already present in the first version in such arie as Fernando's 'A tanto duol' was allowed to colour much of the surrounding music and radically transform virtually all of that of Bianca and most of the rest. In the first act Bianca's aria di sortita 'Per lui che in sen racc- hiude' with its symmetrical structure and its flaccid cabaletta 'Godra l'alma dolce calma' is completely transformed into an unconventional (and forceful) allegretto 'La mia scelta a voi sia grata' plus an ecstatic cabaletta 'Contenta appien quest' alma' which turns out to be nothing more or less than 'Ah! bello a me ritorna' from Norma (1831) but with different fioriture and an infectious gaiety far from the desperation of his later version.

The simple, almost homophonic finale to act 1 is given a new stretta, longer, infinitely more complex, where, following Fernando's arrival before her (Bianca believes him to be dead but 'Adolfo' causes a great tumult in her mind) there is precipitated a false canon leading an ensemble with an oratorio-

like sonorousness. The declamation of the first version - which was impressive enough, is now monumental and fashioned for vocal giants. Much of the tessitura is lowered (but not for Fernando!) and jaunty cabalette have been restrained - though with some exceptions. In both acts there are important changes, the best of which are however reserved for Act 2 which lacked weight.

This act retains the highlights which had delighted audiences at Naples - Bianca's beautiful romanze 'Sorgi o padre' with more than a whiff of Rossini's earlier 'Assisa a pie d'un salice' (Otello), and the following gran'duetto 'No, mia suora piu non sai - vintage Bellini by any standards, but the new music is grafted on around them, the most notable if which will be the coro 'Tutti siam' which is yet another transplant that will find a place both in the failed Zaira (1829) and, as everybody will immediately recognise, in Norma. But the really remarkable change is at the end. With the 'Rescue' accomplished, everyone on stage wonders what to do next (a problem which Beethoven recognised). In the original version, Filippo intrudes on the happy trio of rescued father and joyful siblings, Bianca cries - 'Ah! vil, t'arresta' which is enough to make him surrender, surprisingly.

In the later version Bellini and Romani have an up-to-date notion, Filippo grabs a hostage - in this case Bianca's child who does not appear at all in the original. The distraught mother pleads with him as only the composer of Il pirata and Norma would know how to do, her largo espressivo 'Deh! non ferir deh! sentimi' violent and pathetic in turns is an early summation of Bellini's art that the paper-thin aria-finale is not able to dissipate.

Bianca e Fernando is far from a beginners work, and it is perhaps surprising that it had such a short career. No doubt its fustion plot sounded oddly antiquated as the romantic melodrama gathered pace after 1830. Its beautiful music certainly deserves a better fate though Bellini clearly considered the opera defunct when he plundered it for other scores. But he never forgot it and fragments appear as late as I puritani (1835) as well as in Zaira, Norma, and Beatrice di Tenda. Revived only twice as far as we know in modern times the version we shall perform is that made for RAI by Agostino Girard with a rare sensitivity to Bellini's innate qualities. The music largely follows the revised (Genoa) version of the score but discards the Sinfonia written for this revival which is, generally speaking, no improvement on the original Introduzione. Unlike the RAI broadcast however, the role of Viscardo will be sung by a mezzo as Bellini originally intended.

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