

Alexander Weatherston

LA ROMANZIERA E L'UOMO NERO AND ITS ORIGINS

Opera buffa in one act.

Prima: 18th June 1831

Teatro del Fondo, Napoli (2 performances only)

Libretto: Domenico Gilardoni

La romanziera is an opera buffa with one joke. It is not really surprising that Neapolitan audiences soon stopped laughing. Its heroine is a petulant young woman who, not getting her own way at home, decides to become a Rousseauesque hermit, a role she promptly abandons within the space of one duetto and two terzetti.

.... e l'uomo nero? No racism is involved, the reference is an obscure one that even in 1831 must have eluded most of the listeners. The opera in fact is an ancestor of Patience, a parody, that may have made sense at the time but one whose barbs require special knowledge for today's audiences: the 'black man' in question most probably was L'Homme Noir, the title (and title-role) of an énigme en un acte (melee de vaudevilles) given in Paris at the Théâtre du Vaudeville on the 18th November 1820 and written by Jean-Henri Dupin (1791-1887) and 'Felix' (which was a pseudonym of Eugène Scribe). Now this vaudeville - a wordy and elliptical curtain-raiser - too was a parody, an ill focussed twin barrelled pop-gun affair aimed at Byron and a more urgent target - that of the 'Prince des Romantiques', no less than Charles-Victor Prévost vicomte d'Arlincourt, whose Le Solitaire would be all the rage very soon (to their annoyance).\*1

Arlincourt has a place in opera, not only was his Le Solitaire (1821) set by Carafa (Lib. Planard. Opéra Comique Paris 1822) and a huge success but he was later to be the source of Romani's libretto for La straniera set by a well-known popular idol in Naples. He specialised in anguished and ultra-mysterious outcasts from society, hermits and reclusive exiles; 'L'Homme Noir', the absurdly melodramatic mystery-man of the vaudeville (for the record L'Homme en Noir - he simply wears black clothes) is even described in words that uncannily presage Le Solitaire 'Il sait tout, il connaît tout' and must have made expert in-joke humour at d'Arlincourt's expense. (Le Solitaire indeed would turn

out to be a 'man-in-brown!'). Now Gilardoni's libretto\*2 for Donizetti reflects little of this, his story is not slavishly based either on Dupin or Scribe, or for that matter on Byron or d'Arlincourt; it merely ridicules the genre. Donizetti's target was Romanticism in general - and, via d'Arlincourt, making perhaps a feint at Bellini\*3 - not in any malicious spirit but just making fun of operatic conventions in the way he had often enjoyed in the past (with Il fortunato inganno (1823) and Le convenienze teatrali (1827)). Gilardoni's text could have been no help at all, it is at once terse, vapid, and repetitive. The opera starts out well, but nothing in fact ever transpires and the Bergamasco maestro's delicious music is expended on a handful of setpieces, all well-written, all static and all of them - in the absence of a viable plot, forgettable. We are glad in fact that they are not forgotten and that they will reappear (no doubt this time accompanying a hilarious text) but in English, at the Collegiate Theatre, Gordon Square, London from the 17th to the 20th March 1982 (together with Francesca di Foix) at 7.30pm.

La romanziera e l'uomo nero, which ironically enough, followed fast on the heels of Donizetti's mature romantic score Anna Bolena (1830), missed its own limited target completely, it was an absolute failure - but with Francesca di Foix (1831) however it marked a turn in his fortunes, from henceforth his opere serie would make him famous (Bellini must have found little to crow about in this failure).

---

\*1 Even Rossini can be included within their range as the 'black man's' song at the end of the vaudeville was set to the music of La gazza ladra, then thought a perfectly romantic score.

\*2 Gilardoni's libretto is the subject of a startling ultimatum on the part of the management of the theatre. On the 17th June a letter was written to Barbaja saying that if the libretto was not in print by midday the following day (ie the day of the prima) the performance would be forbidden. Was a libretto printed? There seems to be none in existence, not even in Naples. The performance went ahead even so. I am indebted to Dr. John Black for this fascinating information as well as for the correct date of the prima and for a lively discussion on this obscure work.

\*3 Needless to say making even gentle fun of Bellini would have been asking for trouble in Naples, especially for a

Continued/ 'foreigner' like Donizetti. Needless to say too, Florino would have had a hot line to his catanese friend. Could this have been an added reason for the opera's failure?

#### NOTES

LA ROMANZIERA Vocal Score: Schonenberger, Paris c1855

Cast: CHIARINA MS ANTONINA Sop TRAPPOLINA Sop  
CARLINO Tenor FEDELE Tenor CONTE BS FILIDORO BS  
GIAPPONE BS NICOLA BS TOMMASSO BS

There are 7 numbers in this score:

- No.1 Introduzione
- No.2 Scena e Cavatina (Sop) 'Tu di rose inghirlandate'
- No.3 Duetto (Sop and BS) 'Ciel! fia ver mio Filidoro'
- No.4 Terzetto(MSop, tenor and BS)'Cinque sensi appena nato'
- No.5 Duetto(MSop and BS) 'Che paura'
- No.6 Recit e Terzetto (Sop and 2 BSi)'Fuggiam, fuggiam'
- No.7 Rondò finale (Sop) 'Si colpevole son io'

No. 1. After a 7 bar opening:Introduzione (in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time) Gilardoni's text strikes boldly from the first and has an almost laconic economy of means, it soon however becomes well-nigh incomprehensible.

A despairing duetto between Carlino and Giappone, interrupted rudely by the Conte 'E fia poter del mondo..' (which leads to a risible greeting from Carlino to the latter.... 'Suo servo' 'Addio Carlino poltrone'.) After some dialogue this is followed by a ridiculous buffo aria for Tommaso 'Il mondo è un vast'oceano' w. interjections and succeeded by a concertato.

No.2. A short duetto introduces a tongue-in-cheek romanza for Antonina (w. harp accompaniment) 'Tu di rose inghirlandate' in mock-Bellinian cantilena and egged on by Tommaso; this has a derisive post-script, a canzonetta w. tremolando backing (strange but effective and labelled No.2 bis) by Filidoro 'Non v'è maggior dolore'.

No.3.... is a gran'duetto by the languishing Antonina and the naughty Filidoro 'Ciel! fia ver mio Filidoro' (a dig? at his own and Gilardoni's L'esule di Roma?). Antonina, after a rebuff from the Conte her father, threatens to die or possibly enter a cloister. Filidoro is doubtful about death. 'Forse un chiostro?' 'è triviale' 'una fuga occulta?' 'Ah è un idea sentimentale...è un idea gigantesca in verita'.

- a. Identical opening statements musically but mournful for Antonina, indulgently sympathetic for Filidoro.
  - b. Middle section in thirds partially.
  - c. Vocal agreement on 'Ne boschi trovare ogni commodità'
- No.4.Terzetto (Chiarina, Fedele and Tommaso) opening w. Tommaso's cynical philosophy w. fragmented interjections fr. the two others who gradually join in an engaging trio.
- No.5. Duetto (Chiarina and Filidoro) opens allegro moderato - swift exchanges of dialogue 'Che paura - sul le gamber-eggo astendo l'uomo nero' (!)
- No.6. Recit.and terzetto (Antonina, Nicola and Tommaso) Opening recit. mock heroic. Tranquil andante 'Dopo tante e tante pene' from Antonina underneath which Nicola carries on a muttered commentary, joining Antonina as the vocal line becomes more florid. Music changes to allegro as Tommaso joins them.....
- No.7. Rondò finale. A brilliant introduction heralds an infectious aria cantabile 'Si colpevole son io' of the chastened Antonina. The Conte responds 'Ne mai più romanticismo?' 'No mai più'. Filidoro. 'Lascio l'ombra ed i fantasmigli astri...?' Antonina. 'Lascio il salice ed il cipresso, l'urna, il cenere ed il pianto'...'torno al ballo, torno al canto'. 'Lascio il lugubre castello, il ruscello cristallino, torno all'opera'.....all in increasingly vivacious fioriture. 'Romanzieri addio per sempre'. These wild vocalisations are completed by a brief concertato to finish (17 bars).

ANNOUNCING THE PUBLICATION OF AN IMPORTANT  
ADDITION TO THE DONIZETTI LIBRARY

DONIZETTI'S OPERAS IN NAPLES

1822 - 1848

by

JOHN BLACK

Introduction - Statistics - Appendices  
TO BE PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 1982

IN A LIMITED EDITION OF 500 COPIES

£5.00 (\$12) If ordered before 30th June 1982  
(£6.00 on publication)

Postage included

Order your copy Now

published by The Donizetti Society

56 Harbut Road,  
London SW11 2RB

England