

Carlo Coccia *Caterina di Guisa* melodramma in due atti, libretto by Felice Romani, Teatro dell'opera giocosa, Teatro Chiabrera, Savona 1 November 1990

Reversing the tide of history is not easy. Disentangling Coccia from his rivals was the big problem before audiences at Savona. The Neapolitan composer Carlo Coccia (1782-1873), a contemporary of Rossini but no emulator of that great talent, was formative enough an innovator to have his musical discoveries vanish into the pockets of his grateful contemporaries, his plots reworked by others. Thus, *Caterina di Guisa* (1833), a pivotal score in its day, has simply volatilised into lyrical ether, invisible to the naked eye but, like the celebrated Purloined Letter, under everyone's nose in the *Lucrezia's*, *Beatrica's* and *Parisina's* of more fortunate maestri. How much they owed to Coccia's truly remarkable orchestral resource, his sustained romantic slancio, and to his infinitely various rhythmic bass can only be deduced, on hearing this opera plucked from the void, with ears of informed imagination. People say, as people will: "*Sounds like Bellini*", or like "*Donizetti stroke Mercadante*", blithely indifferent to the fact that the operas they have in mind were written later. Musical renown needs something more than sheer merit to cheat oblivion. Unless the composer cultivates self-consciously weirdo gimmicks (like Berlioz), or a hypermarket display of goods (like Meyerbeer), no one will make the effort to revive him. Bold contours are needed to survive both death and resurrection.

Caterina di Guisa has them, from the first this generous score forges ahead with such a dazzling range of theatrical devices that all barriers fall. I defy anyone to find more beautiful melodies, more compelling arie, more confident music-making, than in this opera, simply awaiting an untainted ear. The indomitable Teatro dell'Opera Giocosa, in the Savona gem of a theatre, has made an emphatic case for its revival, with a traditional production and sumptuous costumes, with a well-rehearsed orchestra and coro, two conductors (Massimo De Bernart conducted in the performance under review, Luca Ferrara on 3 November), as well as an interesting double cast of young singers. It is this aspect which is the rub: even if it didn't get them at the time, a serious opera written for La Scala in 1833 would have been composed, not just for the four voices Coccia stipulated, but for the four greatest voices in the world; he had pared-down his cast to the bones, he wanted the best, a superb dramatic soprano *d'agilità*, a vaulting travesty mezzo, a seductive tenor with great expressive range, and a resonant bass-baritone. (In the earliest version of this opera - the 1836 revision was sung at Savona - his role was that of a *baritenor*). These roles left nothing to chance, they permitted no weaknesses, all are vital; perhaps the most radical feature of *Caterina di Guisa* is that it is an operatic rubric cube of interlocking vocal merits subsisting upon a most accomplished orchestral score.

Savona - eschewing such stars - tested the water with a really gifted trio. Carmela Apollonio was a moving *Caterina*, opulent (indeed over-opulent), musical, with breath and notes and more; Stefano Antonucci confirmed the meritorious impression he has made in previous operas, his finely-tuned *Duca di Guisa* villainous in everything except voice; Nicoletta Ciliento has a large soft mezzo, perfectly formed but without the ardent acerbity of the male adolescent she purported to be, her gawky stage presence at odds with her fine singing. She was at her best in the *Arturo/Duca* duet '*Guisa dira la terra*' with its brilliant fioriture, the *acuti* full and generous. It was the fourth side which gave the trouble, though well-intentioned, Mario Leonardi's unsteady emission and faulty intonation vitiated all his efforts, he fell flat on all those moments when Coccia was at his most impressive, notably at the very start in his delicious duet with the frightened Duchess, and in his great aria - written for Donzelli '*Torna a lei: tremante è forse*' - surely a vocal *tour de force*, but in which his strangled rendering was mercifully cut.

A word of praise for the *Maestro del coro* who got his charges to act as well as sing, and sing with understanding. Coccia's fine mind, his expert professionalism, his bold design (aided and abetted by one of Romani's best libretti) took his contemporaries aback. Perhaps he astonished himself,

we shall never know. Certainly he astonished Savona. I hope this astonishment survives on to CD, whatever the hazards of Live Recording, so that the tragic *Caterina* may be the fortunate harbinger of many other forgotten lost sheep rediscovered in the musical fold.

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