

Il pirata - triumph and portent

Now coming up for quite frequent revival despite a dearth of the heroic voices required, Bellini's *Il pirata* (no unique title, as Donizetti's earlier *Chiara e Serafina* was also subtitled *Il pirata* and not "*I pirati*" as the dictionaries often insist) was unmistakably the opera which broke abruptly with the Rossinian past. To what extent it was a calculated rupture is not easy to determine, Bellini was no light touch with a variety of musical modes at his disposal, his compositional methods were laborious and his theatrical roots relatively shallow. He had no upbringing on the stage, unlike - say - his first rival and *nemico* Giovanni Pacini (who made the sad but understandable error of treating his sulky concitadino as a country bumpkin at their initial meeting, an injustice Bellini never forgot nor forgave). Nor did his education in Naples under Zingarelli provide him with much in the way of radical thought, for Zingarelli even Rossini was a renegade and not a few of the professors at the Conservatorio di San Sebastiano were octogenarians. Whence, then, the huge operatic stride represented by this splendid opera?

It is improbable that Bellini was much exercised by the hyper-romantic literary sources from which Romani derived the text, he was no great reader as far as is known; on the other hand he certainly paid significant attention to operas beyond the Rossinian canon, as if, single-minded in his tastes, he was looking for an endorsement of an elegaic vision already fully formed. It is conjectural that it was his limitations - both as a person and as a composer - which proved a major asset, a need to focus his art unlike almost any of his musical forbears in Italy, to mount a search for the *precise* contours of his muse, an urge to strip away irrelevant *fioriture*, and the necessity to create a one-mood score, consistent in its emotional drive from beginning to end.

As far as the elegaic vision was concerned, if the dates given to some of his songs are correct, he had it from a very early age indeed. His listening patterns during his education are more elusive and no very specific information has come down to us, he played his cards very close to his chest. We know he enthused about Michele Carafa's *Gabriella di Vergi* (1816) with its sustained mood of despair, that he admired Donizetti's *La zingara* (1822) - or at least its grave septet. More significantly, where *Il pirata* is at issue, we can conclude that he paid a notable attention to Pacini's affecting *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (1825) which had been running to packed houses at the time Bellini was writing his opera with much the same cast he himself proposed to employ (Pacini's 'Su questa man concedi' is an admirably 'Bellinian' arietta whose effect he cannot fail to have taken on board). It is sad that we do not have a completely detailed list of the printed scores and manuscripts which he left behind in Naples and which had been in his rooms. We know that they included several Rossini operas, but also a portion of Spontini's *La Vestale* (which he heard on the stage of the S. Carlo) and "three separate vocal pieces by Mayr". These last provide at least a hint into the nature of his personal studies, it seems to have been Mayr (the great antidote to Rossini in the eyes of his contemporaries, as well as the master of Donizetti - then the ascendent star in the opera house) to whom he turned for a mood contrary to the famed Rossinian *brío*. Whether he was as aware as he should have been of tragic masterpieces like the fabulous but unpopular *Ermione* or *Maometto II* of the great pesarese we don't know, but he certainly knew about Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* (given at the S. Carlo both in 1823 with Teresa Belloc, and 1826 with Pasta), and heard Mayr's *dramma sacro Atalia* which featured in the quaresima season of 1822. I myself suspect that a major factor in the development of the sustained drama of *Il pirata* came from the experience of hearing Mayr's *Ginevra di Scozia* which was revived at the S. Carlo in 1824 when Bellini was almost ready to take the stage himself. It is this opera (composed in 1802), and *Adelasia ed Aleramo* (of 1807) which first propose a consistent mood from the opening notes until the *finale ultimo*, the latter opera ending in absolute tragedy. If these were Bellini's exemplars

then there is perhaps a closer link between the catanese genius and his Bergamasc contemporary than has yet been acknowledged, and which puts the precise sequence - from *Il pirata* to *Anna Bolena* - those two operas which opened the doors wide to a new era in the opera houses of Italy - into its correct perspective.

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BELLINI