

Performances

Two Wexford Festival Operas 1993

In chronological order we begin with the "Barber of Seville", libretto by Giuseppe Patrosellini, music by Giovanni Paisiello. This dates from 1782 and was written for the Royal Court Theatre at St. Petersburg of Catherine II, "The Great", Empress of the all the Russias. Catherine was an 18th century feminist before her time – German-born, an intellectual and a *doer* determined to bring her Empire up to the liberal standards expected in this era of the Enlightenment. To that end she drew to her Court the artistic élite of Europe, of whom Paisiello was very much a leading light. For this "Svan of Taranto" had risen from the humblest of origins to become the welcome guest of most European Courts and to enjoy the very highest esteem of his contemporaries of all nationalities, to be in sum the doyen of European musicians of his epoch.

His *Barbiere di Siviglia* is the second piece of that name to be set to music – Caron de Beaumarchais' original work was an *Opéra Comique* with spoken dialogue and music specially composed therefor. In terms of its plot, it sets down guidelines which are later to be very closely followed by Sterbini in his book for Rossini, but it is a *dramma giocoso*, that is to say, it is at heart a serious work. There is the "drama" of a Spanish nobleman seeking a consort, a consort of very high social class as befits his status, and the "play" as he goes about that search as expressed in all the disguises to which he resorts in the process, e.g. the drunken soldier, or the corrupt cleric. The *dramma giocoso* is ever delicately poised in dramaturgical terms, not least in this Paisiello version, a refined gentle comedy of manners destined for an audience composed of Russian High Society. By the time Rossini's "Barber" will reach its bourgeois Roman audience the world will have undergone the twin upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, by which time the powdered wig (and much else) will have been consigned to their place in social history.

This delicate dramatic interplay is reflected in Paisiello's score, free of recitatives in deference to a non-Italian speaking audience, wherein there coexists music both containing brio – as it narrates the comic happenings – and a serious content in mainstream 18th century belcanto style used to delineate the noble traits of the count and Rosina – future Countess. Over-familiarity with Rossini's score *can* blunt the impact of Paisiello's paler colours, it is true, but listened-to with sympathy the reader will grow to love this graceful score for the cultured gem it is.

A culture, which, I fear found not one iota of reflection on the Wexford Festival stage. Instead, there was thrust upon us a production (*sic*) by one Lucy Bailey which reached depths of bad taste without precedent in this writer's sixteen years' attendance at this Festival. The refinement of the work – be it as to plot or music – was a closed book to this cloth-eared wretch, the subtlety which distinguishes it from Rossini equally so. What she threw at the hapless victims in her audience was a humourless regurgitation of every ignorant cliché about the Barber of Seville which has ever been seen and never wanted to be seen again, with such innovations as two characters performing on stage endowed with cloth imitation genitals. Costuming was an incoherent mish-mash of historical periods in some notably horrible pastel colours.

In this context, it seems unjust to make observations of a too critical nature, for no artist could be expected to give of his or her best in such a milieu. The National Symphony Orchestra under Carla Delfrate seemed somewhat subdued in its attack upon Paisiello's score, one felt, and with what good reason. Nonetheless, two names are worthy of note. The Rosina was Frances Lucey, Irish-born, now based in Munich. Heard in the context of the exposed belcanto called for here, one felt that here was an instrument which was fundamentally sound, but still requiring development so as to extract full value from her top notes. Gabriele Monici's Don Basilio was very fine as to voice production, diction and interpretation. His achievement the more praiseworthy in view of the (in)artistic context in which it was played out.

Ferdinand Herold (not *Hérold*) was known to this writer only as the author of the greater part of that exquisite ballet *La Fille mal gardée*. This *Zampa*, or the marble *Fiancée*, to a livret by AMJ Mélesville dates from 1831. It is an *Opéra Comique* (with spoken dialogue of course) of that semiseria genre familiar to the Donizettini in *Alina* or *Torquato Tasso*. The opera is very much of its period with Romanticism in full flow and treating, as does Bellini, a pirate in Sicily whom Nemesis escorts to his doom. That Nemesis takes the form of the marble *Fiancée* of the title. This semiseria genre has its roots in the French *comédie larmoyante*, source for example of Paisiello's *Nina*. As operatic modes go, it is one of the most difficult to stage convincingly because it requires a fusion of disparate elements, instead of a disjointed sequence of the comic and tragic.

With the passing of time the semiseria genre faded from the stage as the taste of the public turned to the stronger meat of the new full-blooded Romantic melodrama, in the process discarding these bygone sensibilities.

The *Zampa* tessitura is very characteristically French, pitched decently above its Italian contemporaries and graced with an exquisitely Gallic voice-type - the *haut-contre* tenor (not to be confused with the counter-tenor) of stratospherically high notes. There are no less than four such roles in this opera, a disposition thus not unlike the Golden Age of Rossinian casting in Naples.

A subtle and difficult opera to stage, in fact. Faced with the challenge both producer (Tim Hopkins), and designer (Charles Edwards) ran away. They attempted a sort of ignorant send-up of the piece with a staging after the manner of a comic book and a cast whose costuming and make-up was, at best, tolerable, and at worst, repellently vulgar. The result being that any thread of the plot was lost in a sequence of crudities which polluted the stage, so heavy-handed as to compromise all and every appreciation of the musical and vocal dimension.

It is with no little relief and gratitude that one recognises the quality of the collective of this latter, even so. The National Symphony Orchestra was in a state of grace under the baton of Yves Abel who showed a pleasing sensibility for this demanding specialist repertoire; I was most impressed by the high quality of the outstandingly clean attack of John Daniecki in the title role in a vocal range that was not only "exquisitely French" but indeed excruciatingly so!

Taken together, these were two fine operas both deserving of a realisation, if only to broaden the musical horizon of the hearer. It is disturbing to have to report that the impact of both was painfully compromised by such uncouth stagings. Such *débâcles* cast the gravest doubt on the quality of the artistic management here, both in respect of the selection of incompetents as producers, and in failing the necessary quality control, before and during the staging. For it is as well to recall that this is an Opera *Festival* - in which we are supposed to rejoice in the glory of that art form, and not nights of uncultured "*teatrucolo*" at the hands of ignoramuses.

Philip G.Gormley

