

Books

John Stewart Allitt *Giovanni Simone Mayr: vita musica pensiero* Edizioni Villadiseriane, Villa di Serio (BG) 1995 413pp

It is perhaps a measure of the quality of this, John Allitt's second book on Johann Simon Mayr, that the composer comes over absolutely in the round, as a whole man, complete in every detail. This is all the more surprising as prints and portraits of Mayr never show the same man twice; indeed in this well illustrated volume there is Mayr young, Mayr old, and Mayr at almost every age in between – from the streetwise near-adolescent on page 67, via the golden boy on pages 69 and 77, with a glance at the celebrity Mayr on pages 85 and 104, the teacher on pages 121 and 127 – to the mature master of pages 145, 150 and on the front cover in a frame of gold. Many faces, not one of them particularly like any other, except for a certain wary distancing which I find sometimes at odds with his intense commitment to human affairs, to his beloved pupils, his church, and to be sure, to his music.

Could it be, I offer it to the reader, a lack of profile that is at the heart of the composer's wicked neglect? "Profile" nowadays, of course, means something more than facial features, and in Mayr is there not a studied and perfectly deliberate "absence of profile" of the kind which could push home his huge gifts and real achievement? Surely there is no need to repeat his credentials. No composer dominated his age so completely as Mayr in the first decade of the nineteenth century, no one was so looked up to, so novel, or so copied, and indeed no one offered so much in terms of sheer quality in the immediate pre-Romantic era in Italy (not to mention quantity), yet no one vanished so completely from public esteem once the more photogenic profiles of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti *et al* had captured the front pages in the 1820's and 30's.

Thanks to Schiedermaier, to John Allitt and to very few others, we now are getting to know Mayr's musical career: the slow start, the succession of patrons with esoteric interests, the Venetian years in the galleys (gondolas?), the fine series of innovative operas of the early 1800's and the subsequent clash – voluntary or involuntary – with Rossini who snatched the torch of operatic supremacy in Italy from him. It is John Allitt who itemised the moral and spiritual makeup of the Bavarian composer to the irritation of those for whom music is an entertainment, but neither he, nor almost any other composer, and certainly not excluding Rossini, is anywhere near complete without the minutiae of his private world, thus Mayr as philosopher, or mystic, or pedagogue, is as valid a part of his secular theatre as his capacity for amusement or to be uplifted is part of his educational topos and his teeming church music and vivid oratorios. But it may be the absolute integrity of the man, the entire determination not to deviate from a personal discipline, that refused him the ability to muddy himself with public relations, and it may be this personal charisma that caused him to withdraw with dignity from the stage at just that precise point when he needed to assert himself fully.

This new book varies very considerably from the author's earlier monograph (John Stewart Allitt *J.S. Mayr: Father of 19th century Italian Music* Element Books, Shaftesbury 1989 301pp) whose catalogue, especially of sacred works, remains a valuable research instrument, and is more expansive, with a longer biography punctuated by detailed analyses of selective works (largely stage works), an expanded version of the preceding volume no doubt, whose leisurely pacing allows him to picture the composer in his setting with a clarity never before attempted. With a presentation that is impeccable, a vivid Italian text (the English original has been translated by Sergio Pagliaroli), from the *Prefazione* (by Anders Wiklund) to the *Scritti scelti* which ends the volume, it is the definitive work we have been waiting for. A substantial, reflective volume covering the fascinating career of this enigmatic master whose remarkable achievements are only now, after a vacuum of 150 years, beginning to be understood, appreciated, and (happily) recorded on compact disc. For our delectation, here is the essential companion to Johann Simon – become Giovanni Simone – Mayr, the Master of Gaetano Donizetti, a legend in his lifetime, and ours.

Alexander Weatherston

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