

Conferences and Farces

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If someone had said to me in the seventies that I would live to attend four international conferences on Mayr held within the span of four years, I would have retorted that they were being absurd. But then much of life is a farce and it has the constant habit of surprising one positively and unfortunately negatively. This year both Bergamo and Ingolstadt boasted conferences. Some excellent papers were given, but many were more like bits and pieces of a jumble box, some more relevant than others. I am continuously being made aware of our paucity of understanding of Italian music from circa Cimarosa to Donizetti's times. It is as if we are unable to set matters into a proper context and are, therefore, unable to ask the right questions. If we understand this period merely by an appreciation of Rossini, well you then have your answer as to why things are pretty thin, for the Pesarese quickly fell into a formula whilst others were thinking of the stage in more dramatic terms.

This was made quite apparent at Bergamo on hearing two early Mayr farces, *L'avarò* and *L'intrigo della lettera*, both of which will be issued soon on the Fonit Cetra label. The rediscovery of Mayr on disc is a rather curious affair, we have *Medea* which is like starting out on our appreciation of Beethoven with the fifth symphony; now we will soon have two early farces which correspond roughly, say, to Donizetti's earliest operas. Meanwhile the bulk of the operas for which Mayr was famous remain virtually unknown whilst the late masterpieces are ignored.

The members of the Bergamo Conference were treated to the dress rehearsal of the two farces and I was the only participant to stay on for the first night. It was a good decision, for not only had the performance tightened-up, but also one simply has to hear Mayr more than once in order to begin to appreciate all that lies beyond the first encounter with the sound of his music.

How best to describe succinctly these two works to readers? Firstly, the sheer musicality of the evening. The orchestra played well under Roberto Rizzi who had taken up his task with commitment, discovering that the words being sung were the key. I am grateful to the Teatro Donizetti that they sat me in the front row of the stalls for the second evening from which I could hear every word being sung; and, there it was, Mayr's genius, unfolding itself before me on stage. Word, melody, rhythm, harmony and instrumentation, all a wonderful, exuberant outpouring of delight. He was taking the whole Venetian tradition of farce and mingling it with his own cultural background and genius. For example, Tarocco's aria in *L'intrigo* 'Donne mie quel vostro core/Al vederlo è tutto amore', which starts in the world of Mozart's *Figaro* only to end predating Rossini's *Barber* by very nearly twenty years. At times one did not know what to listen to; perhaps just to the words, then the melody or maybe just observe the amazing fun going on in the orchestral pit as instrumentalists vied with one another to play their entrances and melodic lines cleanly.

L'intrigo della lettera (1797) is one of Mayr's first farces and was originally presented as a double-bill with his *Il segreto* at the Teatro San Moisè. Perhaps this is how the revival ought to have been staged, for the delightful 'absurdity' of the piece somewhat clashed with the greater seriousness of intent to be heard in *L'avarò* (1799), a work looking forwards to a more mature expression as may eventually be found in *L'amor coniugale* (1805). It was an amazing twist of intellect that this Bavarian, who was already about thirty years old, could turn his mind to composing and so successfully identify himself with the Venetian world. Indeed, I would suggest that if we associate the Tiepolo's, the Guardi, Longhi, Goldoni, Casanova and Da Ponte with the twilight of Venice, then Mayr's farces have to be added to this list, for they sum up a century of carnival better than any other compositions I know.

The Teatro Donizetti put a lot of effort into the staging and visually both farces were a delight. All sang with commitment but it was Daniela Mazzucato as Arabella (*L'intrigo della lettera*), the 'prima donna assoluta', wife of the absent-minded artist, who stole the show with her brilliant cavatina 'Se vezzi, se amanti'. Both overtures to the operas are a delight to listen to, both being totally different in concept, reminding one that it was Rossini who fell into a formula whilst Mayr and Donizetti were always ready to express themselves afresh.

L'intrigo is a fine piece of theatre and could easily stand on equal terms besides *Rita* as a double-bill. It is funny and Foppa's text has double meanings which would not have escaped a nitpicking Neapolitan censor. It can even be given a modern twist with the perennial character of the artist lost in his work and all that nonsense of 'art for art's sake'. Arabella is a beautiful

sexual creature who beguiles us even more than the capricious natures of Norina or Adina. With her three main scenes at the beginning, middle and end of the farce, it is she who holds all the others captive with her charms. The farce comes to a splendid finale when the lover's hide in the armour found in the artist's studio and suitably haunt the lecherous Tarocco, extracting from him a legal document permitting them to marry. The music flows into a fine sextet and concluding scene. This is a work which should live on, for it is a brilliant anecdote to the overdose of butterflies, wayward women, bohemians, hunchbacks, troubadours, and Chinese princesses which seems to make up the diet of most opera goers.

L'avaro (based on Goldoni's play who in turn based his work on Molière) was also originally performed as a Mayr double-bill with the hilarious *Labino, e Carlotta*. It is a harder piece to stage without fine singers who can also act. It is a 'drawing room' farce with no change of scene. Here I feel the Bergamo production failed with its attempt to change sets. The whole piece should be imagined by the reader as taking place in one of those Venetian airless and lightless, hence claustrophobic rooms, so admirably portrayed in Longhi's paintings. There is a greater emphasis on character and on an appreciation of the interplay of roles as each plays at spying-out the other on the whirl of the social merry-go-round. It is not a 'farce' in the strict Venetian sense, that is absurd and crackers like carnival time; it is certainly the harder piece to perform. Furthermore it has to be very well acted.

Foppa enlarged the love interest of Goldoni's play by successfully introducing an extra character into the plot, Armellina. It tells how an old scrooge managed to marry off his son's widow and his niece without paying out a penny in doweries. There is much intimate repartee in the dialogue and this easily became lost in a big theatre like the Teatro Donizetti. Mayr himself tightened up the action in later performances by cutting the Tenente's and Conte's arias. Their absence is not missed in the slightest, except for the fact that the Conte's role is brief. The miser has some fine lines to deliver with appropriate musical declamation; for example, his monologue 'O che mondo rivoltato', his duet with Eugenia (his son's widow) 'Amore è un vischio', and 'Non toccate la mia roba' as he grasps at his money bags in the finale.

The farce is a bitter satire on society. The miser's avarice is contrasted to a totally inamiable approach to marriage, the Conte's socially limited horizon, and a make-do match between the other two lovers. Eugenia's first choice would no doubt have been the more masculine, worldly-wise Tenente, but she is intent upon climbing socially with the aid of her sexual charms and this frisson is more important to her than love. To her mind Boboli, a student of law, is clearly inexperienced and suffering from infatuation; the Conte is a fop and would be pretty useless except for his money and property, whereas the Tenente represents the new order coming about in society due to the Revolution north of the Alps and has a certain savoir-faire with women that is lacking in the other two suitors. Indeed, there is not much difference between Ambrogio's avarice and Eugenia's shrewd, calculating mind. Foppa and Mayr are making a quite different dramatic point in this farce and I don't think this was sufficiently understood by the director of the Bergamo production...but to hear the music was a joy!

With the recording of these two farces I hope Fonit Cetra will atone for the bad performance of *La rosa bianca e la rosa rossa* which found its way on to their label. Perhaps someone, as a result, may now take up the challenge to make a critical edition of this seminal work and get it properly performed.

MARTINA FRANCA 1996
(revised programme)



Pacini *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* 2/4 August

(the opera will be revived at the Teatro Massimo Bellini, Catania during the period 23-30 September 1996)

Offenbach *La Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein* 20/22 July

Piccini *L'americano* 27/29 July