

If revivals of Mercadante's operas have made no *furore* - most of them have earned only a collector's immortality at the hands of the worshippers of the "black disc" - the infrequent books on his life and works have done even worse. It is true that the excesses of Notarnicola put his cause back considerably, but we have seen very few genuine attempts to evaluate the true merits of this composer, only postures of confrontation between him and Rossini and Verdi, we have been told very little about his real achievements and virtually nothing about those singularities he could claim as his own in a musical world where all the most potent recipes seem to have been confided to his contemporary Bellini, and his much feared rivals Donizetti and Pacini.

But Mercadante did have something personal to say, even though the language he chose was more commonplace than it need have been owing to the defensive stance he took in a Naples in decline. His *mezzogiorno* witnessed the slipping away of power, of prestige, of economic identity; in his lifetime the north took more and more of the initiative, it would have required a far more extrovert, far more confident maestro to reverse the musical trend. This, Mercadante, cushioned in the false security of local eminence, signally failed to do and his music diminished in effect with his reputation.

Perhaps he would have done better had he not won the Direction of the Naples Conservatorio from Donizetti and remained better-placed to judge events in tranquility in Novara? How can anyone tell. Perhaps too his tragic blindness inhibited his capacity to respond to those stimuli which might have directed his muse to more novel directions - less conventional and nearer to his heart. Perhaps he might have refuted the notion of "*sterili sinfonie*" more consistently and thus become a champion of orchestral music rather than just another contender for operatic renown.

The above speculations may, or may not, be helpful, but the *mezzogiorno* has remained helpful to Mercadante and his cause. We are much indebted to Santo Palermo whose *Epistolario* (see n.1 of preceding review) began a new phase of candour in Mercadante studies; we are grateful too for the volume under review here, which itemises the composer's oeuvre in a useful fashion, avoiding unnecessary polemic while rejecting the hagiographic adulation which has blemished so much of the work of his predecessors. Gian-Luca Petrucci's book is basically a collection of headings and lists, it represents above all the viewpoint of an interpretive (and scholarly) musician which gives it a special flavour; to some viewpoints it also determines its weaknesses in that the extra-operatic compositions of the maestro are given a prominence that alters the balance too drastically for some tastes. Almost all the information he gives is essential for a grounding, but the lists are fallible - alas - as all such lists usually are, not fatally for the book but disturbing and disappointing. The list of operas contains some "wild ones", ie *pastiches* in which the composer himself can scarcely have had a hand, the list of *musica strumentale* - descriptive only, without sources - mostly succeeds in being tantalising, only the *Catalogo delle opere per flauto* (the author being a most distinguished flautist) is well covered, while, as for the appended statistics, one can only revert to the sobering remark someone made "*There are lies, damned lies, and statistics*". Anything can be proved with statistics. The *tavole* in the appendix attributed to Marcello Conati are most curious, lacking any kind of real definition, giving us dates of performances but not telling us *where* the operas were performed, lists which omit some exceptionally important works (Coccia's *Caterina di Guisa*; Pacini's *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei*),² which give the same opera under two different titles (Luigi Ricci's *Aladino* and *Abate Taccarella* are the same opera, as are Pacini's *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* and *Il trionfo delle fedi*, and Coccia's *Clotilde* and *La foresta di Hermanstadt*) with omissions and mis-spellings galore. Conversely, the book covers areas of investigation which are virgin territory like those of *L'editoria mercadantiana* and *Archivi e biblioteche con importanti corpus mercadantiani*. In sum, a brave volume and a handy addition to the basic knowledge about this composer, but more for his byways than highways, and does much to correct the misdirections of the past.

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¹ B. Notarnicola *Mercadante nella gloria e nella luce - Verdi non ha vinto Mercadante* (Roma 1948-9)

² In the *Anni teatrali (Opere)* for 1825 and 1833 respectively, 187 & 189