

Gaspare Nello Vetro *Antonio Carlos Gomes: Il Guarany*, Collezione storica di "Malacoda" 8 (Parma 1996), 155pp

Fated, it seems, like Ponchielli, like Nicolai, like Flotow, like Humperdinck, like Saint-Saëns, like Smetana, like Catalani, to be represented in the public mind by one only opera, Antonio Carlos Gomes lives on in his *Il Guarany*. This unwillingness to admit more than one score to the pantheon is a feature of the monopolistic era of a Verdi, or a Wagner. Omniscience, it would appear, *squeezes* the unfortunate contemporaries until only the tops of their heads remain above water. We can rail against it - stage concert performances of neglected works which are received with acclaim - and then nothing...the tide resumes its former level. All and everything else the composer has striven to create remains submerged. Paradoxically too, a wonderful revival like that recently of *Il Guarany* at Bonn and repeated since, with Plácido Domingo in the title role, simply confirms this neglect with the excuse of the lazy listener that this is "the Judgement of history".

Unlike the unfortunate listing above, Gomes was a remarkably consistent composer from the beginning of his career, and the actual merits of scores like his *Salvator Rosa*, *Maria Tudor*, *Fosca* and *Lo schiavo*, for example, are not so evidently inferior to the favoured survivor. All are highly coloured and melodious operas; no more uneven; dramatic to a fault; eclectic to be sure but attractive excursions by one of the most accomplished non-indigent moths to be drawn to the flame of nineteenth-century Italy. Its title notwithstanding, Gaspare Nello Vetro's sympathetic book is not only about *Il Guarany*, there is an ample biography of the Brazilian composer contained within the organically constructed text and the other major operas - and their vicissitudes - are equally covered. An index, indeed, contains a fine chronology from 1866 onwards of his mature scores and which is a valuable reference tool.

The insights into the varied fortunes of this maestro are outlined with exceptional clarity, the contemporary Milanese in-fighting (not so different from today) throws a light on the neglect and precipitous decline he experienced in his lifetime:

"La Fosca...langue dimenticata e soffocata per vendetta della Signora Lucca...E perché? per avere io scritto il popolare Salvatore Rosa per Ricordi!"

In this way, then as now (and especially then) true merit fell before flagrant commercial exploitation. Not that the subsequent absorption of the firm of Lucca by Ricordi made any difference to his lack of luck and he soon fell from grace and was ejected from the magnificent villa he had built in Italy while still at the height of his powers. In detail, but in a commendably readable style this book, compact, elegantly printed, retells this sad tale, with a refreshing input from Brazilian sources with letters, souvenirs and a touching and rare iconography.

His native country has always kept faith and his music has never been forgotten there, with regular performances, medals, a book or two and recordings. Lets hope that there will be further revivals elsewhere too (together with Ponchielli, Nicolai et al) and soon, to correct the imbalance with which we view the age of Verdi and Wagner. This book by the distinguished Parmesan scholar should go a long way in giving encouragement to an overdue reassessment...

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