



MATILDE DI SHABRAN

Pesaro Festival, 13, 17, 20, 23 August, 1996

Matilde di Shabran began inauspiciously. Rossini had contracted to write an opera, announced as *Matilde*, for the December opening of the 1820 carnival season of the restored Apollo Theatre in Rome, while still at work on *Maometto II* for Naples, where it was first performed on 3rd December. Soon afterwards he arrived in Rome with Act I of *Matilde* substantially complete, only to jettison the libretto and look for another. Giacomo Ferretti, his *Cenerentola* collaborator, already at work on two other operas, agreed to complete a libretto, *Corradino il Terribile*, of which he had written only five scenes, changing the heroine's name from Isabella Shabran to Matilde di Shabran, and renaming the opera to correspond with the already announced *Matilde*.

Both the hard-pressed author and composer had to work at considerable speed, and Rossini was still receiving instalments of the libretto when rehearsals started. After successive postponements, *Matilde di Shabran* was eventually premiered on 26th February, 1821, as the sixth and last opera of the season. This was only possible, however, not just at the cost of some self-borrowing - nothing new for Rossini this! - but of including three numbers expressly but anonymously composed by Pacini, to whom Rossini had turned in desperation. Moreover, on the first night Paganini had to replace the conductor who had had a fatal apoplectic fit on the day of the dress rehearsal, and the rumours surrounding the opera's delay culminated in disturbances in and outside the theatre. With the odds so weighted against it *Matilde di Shabran* had an unsurprisingly poor reception - Rossini had to exert pressure on the management to receive the balance of his fee - and the general judgement, as Stendhal dismissively put it, was "execrable libretto, but pretty music".

When the opera was given at Naples in December, 1821, Rossini carried out extensive revisions. He rewrote the overture (borrowed from *Eduardo e Cristina*), removed his self-borrowings from *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (which was known to the Naples public, though not in Rome), replaced the Pacini numbers with new compositions of his own, and made some other minor modifications. The resulting Naples version is therefore entirely his own original work (apart from the recitatives, which may be by Pacini), Act II being more extensively different from the Rome version than Act I.

Despite its poor reception in Rome, *Matilde di Shabran* enjoyed considerable success in Italy and abroad during the next quarter century, then less frequently until it dropped out of the repertory in 1892. It was revived (and recorded) in Genoa in 1974, but does not appear to have been given again until its revival at Pesaro in 1996. Oddly, however, its extensive nineteenth century success and its Genoa revival were all in the opera's Rome version, which was the one published last century by Riccordi. At Pesaro, however, we were given an opportunity to assess the hitherto unknown Naples version, whose score has been reconstructed for the forthcoming critical edition. It turns out to be a vast improvement on the Rome

version despite certain difficulties, amongst them the recasting of the *buffo* role of Isidoro in Neapolitan dialect, and the loss of the tenor's only aria (one of the self-borrowings). The gains, on the other hand, are immense, the main one being a new number for Edoardo (a *travesti* role), with a horn introduction and accompaniment of almost *concertante* proportions.

The opera, a *dramma per musica* in the *semi-seria* genre of *Torvaldo e Dorliska*, has an absurd plot about a cruel mediaeval misogynist, Corradino Cuor di Ferro (Ironheart), who, having ordered the death of the heroine, Matilde, realizes he really loves her. Her execution having been entrusted to the incompetent poet, Isidoro, she survives to be united with this wholly unlikeable despot, presumably to live happily ever after. The absurdity, and the episodic nature of the libretto (due no doubt to the circumstances of its composition), with an overlong Act I, remain the opera's greatest drawbacks. The music, on the other hand, emerges as amongst Rossini's most attractive, often in the style of *La Cenerentola*, with sparkling duets and ensembles - a quartet, quintet and a sextet - and plenty of Rossinian jauntiness offset by tender, even melting, lyricism.

The director at Pesaro, Pier'Alli, who was also responsible for the decor and costumes, chose to make a virtue of the libretto's absurdity and gave the opera an amusing production, full of grotesquerie, set in a toy fort (Cuor di Ferro's castle) complete with gun ports which opened from time to time to fire salvos at the audience. As a decorative solution to dealing with the vast but shallow space of the Palafestival (normally a sports stadium) this worked well, and, treated as a children's fairy tale, the puppet-like two-dimensionality of the characters and pantomime nature of some of the action ceased to be a problem.

Musically we were given a very decent if not a completely ideal performance - but one which escaped the boos which greeted *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, another of the Festival offerings, on the night I saw it. Outstanding were the American contralto Patricia Spence, making her Pesaro debut in what is virtually the only wholly serious role of Edoardo, and Bruno Praticò in the comic role of Isidoro. Spence has an attractive timbre allied to a well-developed technique, and she made light of the florid demands of her (new) big aria "Ah! perchè, perchè la morte". Praticò, projecting a larger-than-life personality, made Isidoro into an engaging and amusing character, and, a few moments of roughness apart, sang well. Bruce Ford, originally cast as Corradino, had to withdraw for health reasons a month before the performance. He was replaced by the twenty-three year old Peruvian Juan Diego Florez, who learned the part at very short notice and thereby saved the performance. He is basically an attractive *tenor di grazia*, but as yet his technique is not entirely adequate to deal with Rossini's very considerable demands, and some of his decoration was stressed and slightly smudged. Nevertheless, he produced a great deal of pleasing singing and showed much promise. I shall look forward to hearing him again. *Matilde* herself was sung by another young American debutante, Elizabeth Furtral. With a devastatingly pretty stage presence - how could Cuor di Ferro resist? - she presented a credible Matilde, but her attractive voice was on the small side for the Palafestival and rather monochrome in expression. At times, especially in the final, *Cenerentola*-like, *rondo*, in which the claims of femininity are

celebrated, she was taxed by the extreme complexity of the ornamentation. However, I do not wish to carp too much: it was an acceptable performance, and Miss Furtral doubtless has a distinguished future ahead of her.

The supporting roles, whose singers included Roberto Frontali, Pietro Spagnoli and Mauro Uterzi, were without exception well taken, and the Prague Chamber Chorus was excellent in the small part allotted to it. The orchestra was that of the Teatro Comunale of Bologna, playing with stylish precision and taste for the Canadian conductor Yves Abel, who maintained a near ideal balance with the stage despite the absence of a sunken pit. If the performance seemed a little hard-driven on a few occasions when one would have wished him to linger on the felicities of Rossini's orchestration, a lively approach was undoubtedly an advantage in Act I, which, at over two hours long, cannot be allowed to drag at all. Pesaro also prides itself on the authenticity with which recitative is accompanied - by fortepiano, cello and bass. Here there was, for me, a novelty. At the front of the orchestra, at each side of the stage, we had a separate fortepiano and cello. The rationale of this was not entirely clear, and which team accompanied seemed to depend on the singers' stage location. This may have been a practical solution to the (not undue) width of the stage, but is its authenticity attested by precedent? I wonder.

In short, *Matilde di Shabran* in the Naples version triumphantly revealed itself, given the imaginative sort of production it received here, as a perfectly viable and stageworthy opera, whose uniformly high standard of musical inspiration makes its twentieth century neglect all the more astounding and regrettable. As has happened with many other operas which have been exhumed at Pesaro, one hopes that *Matilde di Shabran* will now attract the attention of other opera houses and emerge from its - musically, at any rate - entirely undeserved neglect.

Alex Liddell

Books

Verdi *Tutti i libretti d'opera*, a cura di Piero Mioli. Introduzione di Gustavo Marchesi
Grandi Tascabili Economici Newton. 2 Vols. Lit 11800

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John Stewart Allitt