

First Recording

Giovanni Pacini *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* melodramma tragico in due atti, libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola, recording effectuated at the Festival della Valle d'Itria, Martina Franca, 1996, on the bicentenary of the composer's birth.

Dynamic CDS 1781-2 (2 CD's)

This important and fascinating opera has now appeared on disc, not only the happiest of rediscoveries in terms of musical merit but an overdue addition to our knowledge of the wilfully misrepresented third decade of the nineteenth century. Both Pacini's reassessment, and the epoch itself, have been distorted by a far-from-disinterested cloud of neglect, a situation which is only now beginning to be remedied. The explanation is simple enough: Pacini fecklessly condemned himself - and his fellow maestri - to a "Rossinian" straightjacket with his teasing remarks, bolstering the *bellinian* dream which could brook no opposition, certainly no precursors. How good it is then, after such an artificial oblivion, to be able to report a heroic recording of Pacini's splendid opera worthy of the initiative of Martina Franca, of the composer, and of the cast; a recording in optimum acoustic, live of course, indeed *alive*, above all to the stereophonic spread - the remarkable brainchild of this composer - lifting the whole from representation to revelation. If only there could be enough untrammelled ears to take note.

Among other demolished shibboleths (for which il nostro *Nino* also was to blame) this *L'ultimo giorno* makes it clear that there is no gulf between the "early works", *ie* those written before 1835, and the rest of his tumultuous composing, Giovanni Pacini was in continuous evolution like everyone else whatever he says in his memoirs. As far as I can make out this astonishingly precocious composer was in full control in 1815, 1825, 1835, 1845 and so on until 1865 and later, as well as in the years in-between. Maybe, one day we shall be lucky enough to have sufficient of his music before us to prove it.

This score set so many seeds in the minds of his contemporaries, it is impossible to imagine operas like *L'esule di Roma* and *I normanni a Parigi* (not to mention *Caritea!*) without it, yet has nothing in common with any and all except for its unforgettable duets. Pacini plowed his own furrow, often stubbornly, often crookedly, but never without unearthing something exciting. He was a real innovator, and sooner or later will be given his due. Excellent performance and recording notwithstanding, this coffret lacks something of the essential framework for understanding such a prodigy from the past, an "unknown" opera requires elucidation both historically and thematically, this, the notes, cultivated though they are, signally fail to do, being yet another example of saying very little in several languages. A disquisition on Rossinianism is not helpful (Pacini was far more in debt to Rossini's predecessors, as the latter was aware, hence the teasing), listeners would appreciate more about the extraordinary demands made on the singers, more about Giovanni David, vocal athlete that he was; more details: that Rubini did attempt the Act I aria for Appio Diomede on the first evenings at La Scala but preferred later to sing in its place 'I tuoi frequenti palpiti' (which was scarcely easier); Reina got a replacement aria at Venice 'Se già presso all'ora estrema'; Donzelli - miscast in Paris - was supplied with an aria made out of the Act I duettino "Io la vedrò fra palpiti" - catchy but not so murderous and omitted at La Scala (though printed in the libretto). In revival, in fact, this frantic aria was usually cut... of necessity. Above all, that the aria was never published in its original keys and that even the compelling performance in this recording by a gifted Raul Gimenez is sung in transposition. Pacini (emulated by Bellini) wished to convey an extension of emotion by such an abnormal tessitura, flaunting the most acute extremity of despair, of love, or fury, not mere display. The force, accuracy and intensity of Iano Tamar's Ottavia comes over admirably; Nicolas Rivenq has the temperament for this music but expresses the unfortunate Magistrate's dilemma rather more convincingly than his *gravitas*. The supporting roles do just that. On a par with the interpreters and with the responsible revision of the score by Emanuele Pasqualin, is the Orchestra del Teatro Bellini di Catania under the baton of Giuliano Carella; tempi, conception and sheer dynamism are all in really imaginative order - it is not their fault if the final dénouement - a visual triumph - has to be left here to the imagination. A video might have been considered. But *how* grateful we all are for revival *and* recording...

Alexander Weatherson

