

MERCADANTE'S *ELENA DA FELTRE*

(Wexford Festival: 28th and 31st October, 1997.)

Time has not been kind to Mercadante. Even well-informed musicians (to the extent that he is known to them at all) tend to think of him merely as one of the 'missing links' between Rossini and Verdi, which is a grotesque oversimplification. Comments on his astonishing output of 59 operas tend to overuse words like 'worthy' whilst being distinctly short on words like 'inspired'. Even the bicentenary of his birth in 1995 brought forth only one celebratory revival, *Donna Caritea* at the Valle d'Itria Festival in a wholly inadequate and unworthy performance. Wexford, which had mounted his first operatic success, *Elisa e Claudio*, in 1988, came up in 1997 with the virtually unknown *Elena da Feltre*, a little belatedly for the bicentenary, but none the less welcome for that.

After considerable success with operas in the Rossinian mould between 1819 and 1826, Mercadante spent the next five years in Spain and Portugal. When he returned to Italy he found that the popularity of his operas had yielded to those of Donizetti, and to some extent Bellini. An encounter in 1836 with the operas of Meyerbeer in Paris appears to have prompted certain 'reformist' ideas, which he tried to put into practice in a series of operas produced between 1837 and 1843. Of these the most celebrated, and arguably the best, is *Il Giuramento*, and it is to this period, after Donizetti had broken with Naples over the censorship of *Poliuto*, when Mercadante regained his eminence in that city, that *Elena da Feltre* also belongs.

First produced at the San Carlo in 1839, with a libretto by Cammarano (who provided texts for *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Il Trovatore*), *Elena* started badly. Mercadante was unable to supervise or be present at the opening night, which also proved to be the closing night, partly due to the ill health of the tenor (the first Arnold in *Guillaume Tell*), and possibly also to unresolved difficulties with the Naples censorship. Subsequently it fared better and held the stage in Italy and abroad until 1860. Since then, except for some excerpts broadcast by RAI in 1970 (available as a pirated cassette in USA), the opera has not resurfaced until now. Apart from its rarity, however, what made the prospect of the Wexford revival so intriguing was that it was with particular reference to *Elena* that Mercadante summarized his credo of operatic reform:

. . . varied forms, trivial cabalettas avoided, no crescendos, simpler vocal lines, fewer repeats, more original cadences, more emphasis on drama, rich orchestration without overwhelming the voices, no long solos in the ensembles . . . not much bass drum, and a lot less brass band.

One of the main interests of the production, therefore, was to see how well Mercadante had carried out this programme, and how effective was the result.

In an article on the cabalettas in *Elena* in the Donizetti Society Journal No. VI (1988) Karen Bryan shows that by the 1830s departures from the earlier stylized form of cabaletta were already quite common, and that in the case of four of the five cabalettas in *Elena* - the fifth being hardly a cabaletta at all - the modifications made by Mercadante are really quite minor. In the same way, although one might say that in one way or another in *Elena* Mercadante implements all of the points itemized above, they are neither so radical nor, in performance, so striking as the 'reformist' label would lead us to expect. There are no Rossinian crescendos. The vocal lines are often extremely simple: indeed, *Elena* is given a *romanza* and two *preghiere* to sing - not only no cabaletta, but no aria at all properly speaking. The treatment of cadences is quite varied. So, in general, it is quite true to say that Mercadante does avoid composition of a purely formulaic kind; but 'traditional' operatic forms and fashions were already in flux by 1839, and what Mercadante actually achieved in *Elena* does not seem to me to mark him out as being specially reformist.

More importantly, the two performances of *Elena* which I heard at Wexford seemed to bear out the impression I have from having listened to other Mercadante operas of this period, that the main obstacle to his lasting success was his inability to tap the rich vein of melodic inspiration which characterized all his important rivals, and that this, coupled with an inability to instil a sense of dramatic momentum into his recitative, is what finally undermines the impact of his work. Indeed, it is difficult not to feel that the effect of his reformist ideals was to reduce rather than strengthen the dramatic and musical vitality of his operas. One sighs for the elemental energy of early Verdi, bouncing cabalettas and all. Only in concerted writing did Mercadante seem to be able to invest his music with real theatrical viability, and in *Elena* it was the finale of Act II which made the greatest impression of the evening and, for me, is the moment which has remained longest in my memory. (It has a cabaletta and plenty of bass drum!)

Mercadante's operas, in short, require very persuasive presentation (which in recordings he seldom gets) to overcome their weaknesses and enable them to achieve their maximum effect. Sadly, the production of *Elena* at Wexford fell short of total persuasiveness in several respects. It was played against a single permanent set (by Marouan Dib) consisting of three wooden drawbridges (two to the left and one to the right) with heavy supporting chains, which were occasionally lowered and raised in various permutations but for no discernible dramatic reason. Apart from suggesting a generalized mediaeval ambience it played no part in enhancing any elements of the drama. Within this setting the producer, Sonja Frisell, seemed unable to find any way of projecting the drama imaginatively. The chorus shuffled on, stood and sang, and shuffled off again. It was all terribly reminiscent of the worst amateur productions of

opera we have seen. Monica Colonna alone amongst the principals showed any more than the most rudimentary acting ability, and was able to project the disintegration of Elena into madness in an affecting way.

Vocally the offering was rather mixed. Colonna confirmed the impression she had made last year, when she took over a couple of performances from Pendatchanska as Parisina, that she has a beautiful and expressive instrument, of which she is in full control, although she might have difficulties singing in a very large house (not a problem here). One wished that the part of Elena had given her more opportunities to display her talent. The tenor, Cesare Catani, as Ubaldo sang at an unremitting *fortissimo* as if he believed he were in the Verona arena, without any honey or tonal variation to his rather baritone *timbre*, and this rapidly became wearisome. His one attempt at *pianissimo* legato showed clearly the reason for his preferred stentorian style. Nicola Ulivieri, in the *basso* part of Guido, displayed a rich, but also rather baritone *timbre* - one would ideally have wished for a clearer vocal contrast between the two principal male roles - and sang pleasingly, although not without intonation problems when singing *mezzo voce*. The remaining parts were on the whole adequately taken, and the chorus sang well (although the Slavonic intonation of the women sounded foreign to Italian opera). Maurizio Benini was in charge of the excellent National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland. He directed in the most committed way, and secured responsive and spirited playing - in some ways the most persuasive element of the evening.

One of the reviewers in the British press wickedly suggested that we should all be grateful to Wexford for this revival because it showed that we can safely forget to revive any of his other operas! Well, no - for Mercadante reneged on his reformist aims in his last operas: *Orazi e Curiazi* (brimful of cabalettas and bass drum *and* cymbals), to judge from the Opera Rara recording, is full of vitality and possesses many of the qualities (including spontaneous lyricism) which *Elena* lacks. Perhaps *Elena* was the wrong choice to make the best case for Mercadante. Indeed, it had me thinking that there are lots of more rewarding operas of this period deserving of revival. Nevertheless, worthy rather than inspired though it may be, I was glad to have had the chance of seeing it - which is perhaps the final test of whether or not a revival has been worth while - although I was also reminded of Dr. Johnson's grudging appraisal of Scotland: worth seeing, but not worth going to see.

ALEX LIDDELL

