

***Ruy Blas* - mad, melodious and dangerous to those who have fixed ideas about Verdi's rivals**

Filippo Marchetti's *Ruy Blas* is one of those insane, melodious confections of the Verdian heyday - by no means all of them written by the *bussetano*, a list that includes his own *Trovatore* (1853), but also Apolloni's *L'ebreo* (1855), Pacini's *Niccolò dei Lapi* (1852-67 [posthumous 1873]), Petrella's *Jone* (1858), Gomes' *Guarany* (1870), Ponchielli's *Gioconda* (1876), as well as a few more. All with cardboard plots of misdemeanor in high places, exquisite cantilena and cathartic endings of spectacular bloodshed.

This is not to imply that any of them is feeble or ridiculous, very much the reverse. Here and there is a real masterpiece (Verdi; Pacini; Gomes; Ponchielli). All are irresistible. Should *Ruy Blas* be included? I think so. The tunes are copious, the orchestration spacious and stereophonic, practically every vocal punch finds its mark, the opera surges along, melodrama red in tooth and claw.

With its prima at La Scala in 1869, it proved to be a popular favorite for many decades. D'Ormeville's breathless libretto - all gasps and expletives - should have been a real impediment but literary standards had all but gone down the drain at the mid-century and in any case several of the list above have truly deplorable texts (Apolloni and Gomes in particular). It was, of course, a plot that both Donizetti and Verdi put aside, this is not hard to understand, Victor Hugo's play on which the opera is based (1838) is a pretentious rigmarole made edible only with lashings of the tomato sauce of romanticism. His muse - as with the absurd *Hernani* - is set half-way between Byron and Barbara Cartland, snobbish, padded with demagogic harrangues and facile republicanism (the *vicomte* Hugo had a lot to live down). No one can accuse him even of attempting to draw real-life portraits and poor Marchetti has to pull out every vocal stop to bring his heroine - the lovelorn Donna Maria de Neubourg, wife of Charles II of Spain, as well as his villain, the dissident Don Sallustio de Bazan, *marchese de Finlas e primo ministro del Re* (how these mellifluous titles run off the pen of our egalitarian poet) - to life. Everyone else in the cast - including his title role - is operatic soft-soap. *Ruy Blas*, whatever the honest intentions of the composer, is not an example of "levelling by love" as Hugo's apologists would prefer, but of levelling by music. It is Marchetti's appealing melodies and impressive instrumental palette that soothes the nagging doubts of the listener.

Incontestably the sympathetic Teatro Pergolesi di Jesi managed more than a iota of authenticity in its bold choice of revival for 1998, and this despite brutal cuts in a score which needs every little bit of encouragement. Much of the stentorian declamation and pungent writing came over, even in such a diminished edition, but the composer's deliberate juxtaposition of overwhelmingly grandiose ceremony and the closet affair between an unhappy queen and a valet simply failed to register on a stage seven metres deep, and no ballet. A willing audience was obliged to try to recreate Marchetti's tragic *mise-en-scène* in their own minds. Indeed, at times, the sheer volume of sound militated against any kind of rapprochement with the house. In general - and in this respect in particular - the drama is all in the orchestra, the singers are left with the fag-end of the operatic conventions brought to maturity by Donizetti and the early Verdi. Marchetti uses vehemence to some effect and there are moments of real beauty (almost all the music for Donna Maria is touching and effective, and that for her lady-in-waiting Casilda is engaging [however mutilated]) but the vocal writing lacks the definition required to enable the Hugo/D'Ormeville puppets to be something more than sawdust and string. Despite what others have said, I don't detect any signs of verismo in this opera, it is an exercise (opposite) Marchetti's *Ruy Blas* : with Dimitra Theodossiou (as Donna Maria) and Mario Malagnini (as Ruy Blas)

in the amplification of the mood of two decades earlier, the singing is sometimes extravagant but never more than than generalised in its emotions, and only at the very end of the opera, in a most memorable climax, does the action become fully integrated into the music. The final moments are very moving indeed.

We would all like to know where Jesi finds its admirable casts (*other* theatres devoted to long-lost operas have so many problems). *Ruy Blas* had a superlative prima donna in Dimitra Theodossiou, her clear well-articulated soprano, ample and generously coloured, the angelic delivery of this Queen of Spain sometimes reminding listeners of another Queen of Spain, Montserrat Caballé. Beautiful, young, good stage presence, she was the unwise and betrayed Donna Maria to the inch. Mario Malagnini too made a very good impression, though rigged-up in seventeenth century Army Surplus (his white tee-shirt was a hoot) he sang with a conviction and security that almost made him a credible hero, nice central tenor singing with good reserves of decibels. He did what he could with the action and was justly applauded. It was maybe his best role to date. As Don Sallustio, the very presentable Alberto Gazale raged and sneered with gusto, a nasty piece of work he was suitably implacable and rose to the challenges with a good dark voice. His big aria which really sets the plot in motion (Act I Sc. III) was bold and brought back nineteenth century echoes with a vengeance, one of those warhorses our century inherited in its earliest recordings, a precursor of Iago's cynicism and Barnaba's bitter nihilism. As Casilda Sylvia Marini was fluent and delivered what was left of her music attractively. No one else in the cast has a big role, no one let the side down (only the conductor, Daniel Lipton, with his really quite unpardonable pruning knife).



This opera by Marchetti is very enjoyable, the delectable love-duet (Act III) is a gem. The projected CD should give people a taste of the Verdian undertow. Of course one can pick holes in the plot as I have done, nothing is easier than with romantic excess of this kind, the *vicende* of this valet-cum-lover are more moronic than Byronic but the music justifies its setting and is a real challenge to the omniscience which is usually all we are offered of this phase in the annals of late nineteenth century Italy. A nicely shaped, nicely scored offering to posterity it shows us an alternative to the not less over-the-top *Don Carlos* and *Aida* between whose two stools it falls. If it proves dangerous to the Verdian hegemony, all well and good, and Jesi's admirable initiative should be followed by another revival - soon - and in a more ambitious production.

La Scala? Not a hope.

Alexander Weatherson

(opposite) *Ruy Blas* : Alberto Gazale (Don Sallustio) obliges *Ruy Blas* to submit to his plot against the Queen.
(photos courtesy Teatro G.B.Pergolesi di Jesi)