

Franz and Gaetano at Buxton

Die schöne Galathee and Il campanello di notte
(Buxton Festival, 15th July 1999)

When L'amor coniugale was performed in 1973 I was invited to lecture on Mayr at London's Goethe Institut. Considering Mayr's and Goethe's background and correspondence it was a 'coming home'. But the moment I remember most was at the end of my efforts. An elderly lady came up to me and informed me that she was a descendant of Suppé and did I know that her illustrious forefather was related to Donizetti; indeed, did I know that he was a nephew. 'Yes', was my answer, for in 1953 I had read Heinrich Eduard Jacob's book on Johann Strauss, where on page 218 he provides the reader with the information. At the time of reading I could not readily believe what I considered to be such fantastic good news. Now a frail elderly lady confirmed the information. I asked her to write to me with more details of the family connection. The letter never arrived. Is there anyone out there who can provide the Society with a Family Tree?

I remember in the 50s hearing on a cracklerly radio wave-band a distant performance of Suppé's Boccaccio and being thrilled with what I managed to hear. As for the rest, it was those overtures which Classic FM are now flogging to death. In recent years a CD of the late Requiem fell into my hands and the composer ever-increased in my estimation.

Earlier this year I had the privilege of Caroline Clegg, the director of Buxton's Campanello, visiting our home to discuss Donizetti. It was an excellent day when themes ranged from the 'commedia dell'arte' to Pirandello in the context of Donizetti's acute sense of the theatre and how his operas, especially the comic works, fall flat if there is no savoir faire on the boards. Furthermore, it is no good singing Donizetti if one cannot declaim the words correctly. Suddenly we had to take some music examples. I took the recent Campanello CD 'edizione critica' from the shelves, but within a few seconds I knew that the case I was making was falling flat. The performance was dreadful. What's the use of critical editions if they are then massacred on the stage! Out came the old Cetra recording with Bruscantini and Capecchi - a case of chalk and cheese! Listen to Capecchi's diction in that old recording and you will gather the gist of our conversation.

At the end of the day I asked what was the second work to be performed - Suppé's Die schöne Galathee! You can imagine my joy.

What were the results?

I did not consider 'The beautiful Galatea' well focussed. You could sense the director, cast and orchestra asking, 'Is this

Offenbach? Oh! here's a little bit of G & S. Thank goodness for a Strauss-like waltz at last, etc.' Somehow Suppé had eluded them, but the results were all the same most enjoyable and maybe later performances discovered the originality of the music. The production needed a little more feeling for the Italian theatrical genius of the Absurd. After all Francesco Ezechiele Ermenegildo Cavaliere Suppé-Demelli was more Italian than Czech-Polish. [Books also mention Belgian blood.] His inspiration is clearly Italian opera comica which he adapted for the Viennese and German stage. Thomas Lindner in a letter to the writer provided the key to why somehow all concerned at Buxton had missed the real Suppé. I quote: 'Time and again, I am astonished at the italianità of Suppé's music, and if one just subtracts the waltz and operetta stuff typical of Vienna, Suppé could well be called the successor proper of Donizetti's opera buffa style.' There, in a nutshell, is what Buxton had not understood. Uncle and nephew are closer than we think. Furthermore we did not need those spurious letters published in the programme notes to convince us of the matter.

We could well be at the beginning of a Suppé revival. We talk of composers in the wake of a Mozart or a Beethoven; well, what about Donizetti's wake? He had far more influence than die hard academics admit: Adam, Thomas, Verdi, Bizet, Strauss II, Sullivan .. one can easily go on adding more names.

Il campanello was sheer delight. The performance started in the interval with the wedding guests turning up - an echo of Pirandello's Questa sera si recita a soggetto. I knew then and there that we were in for that irrepressible effervescence of the theatre. The wedding polka involved the whole cast and was repeated and repeated as all danced. What an infectious throw away piece that is, somewhat like the 'Tirolese' in act 2 of La fille du régiment. Thank goodness we did not have an 'edizione critica' here. Donizetti is living theatre, not sawdust for sweeping the boards. Here the key, in the composer's own words, is 'gusto'. I have seen very few tasteful productions of Donizetti's operas. It is hard for most to feel that marvellous Donizettian sense of the absurdity of true comedy through which may cut hints at pain, suffering and tragedy. A turn of harmony, intensity of melody, a touch of instrumentation, and suddenly we feel sorry for Don Annibale - with a name like that he is bound to lose the tussle with Enrico. (In this context, I wonder if Donizetti knew Mayr's cantata, Annibale a Cartago?)

The cast in both operas provided the audience with great entertainment. Wyn Davies and the Northern Chamber Orchestra ensured that the music bubbled along with enthusiasm. Thank you all for providing an evening of happiness to console us in this, our tragic world.

John Stewart Allitt

