

“Ombra del maestro mio...”

The pursuit of distant music can seldom be more engaging than on the trail of of the mezzogiorno-mezzogiovane career of Donizetti, then in “exile” in Naples. (Have you noticed how many of the Neapolitan operas deal with exile, or alienation: *Alahor in Granata*, *Otto mesi in due ore*, *L'esule di Roma*, *Il paria* ? A list including, hypothetically, both *Gabriella di Vergy* and *Emilia di Liverpool* - site of unwilling departure *par excellence* - irrespective of the curious ideas his librettist had about its actual geographic location). Two of these - *L'esule di Roma* and *Otto mesi in due ore* - stayed with him more or less until the end of his days.

Years of happiness and despair, they proved to be, flaunting the contrast between southern ebulliance and the warmth of his surroundings with an impossible workload; summer nights in Posilippo, cholera and ideological confusion in the streets. But his one-year stay in Palermo - even more distant - may well have intensified all this. A splendid capital to rival Naples and with a history even more imposing; a city at the crossroads of several civilisations, Phoenecian, Greek, Arab, Norman, Teutonic yet somehow continuous and compliant with them all and all leaving something behind. A perfect amalgam of romantic plots for any nineteenth-century composer. If his *Alahor in Granata*, conceived expressly for Palermo, did not prove to be the most fortunate of his operas it did at least have the most empathic setting. One glimpse of the Teatro Bellini, intact superficially, the *Real Teatro Carolino* of yore, says it all: a pompous facade rubbing shoulders with Moorish, Norman and Baroque neighbours in the heart of the city as it blossomed under Spanish rule, palm trees, dust, domes, decay, magnificence, extravagance, opulence, the opera could well have been staged on the square outside (now covered with cars and a café). Only petrol fumes had been added since Donizetti's day.

Did he feel like an exile in Palermo? It is not sure, but his opera was born to be at home there, where splendour, intransigence, and the political idealism of the embattled Muley Hassem have always had a place. As they have now.

The Teatro Carolino harboured more than Donizetti. Here Pacini staged his *Maria, regina d'Inghilterra* and *Medea* for the first time - both recently returned to life. As a *catanese* Pacini claimed fraternal citizenship in that city. He and Donizetti must often - though not together - have climbed, optimistically or apprehensively, the elegant staircase from which one steps now into a past tense. The theatre is a ruin. It is sobering to stand in the shell of the famous place, burned and scoured, deprived of all ornament but endowed with a ghostly carapace of existence, a theatre still, but an abstract, a phantom, a mere outline upon which any amount of reverie can be expended at will. Not a big space, the curve of the boxes quite close to the stage, the quality of the great voices that sang there must have been accutely measured, every nuance of expression tangible at close hand, opera as an immediate art: Zobeida's tears and Medea's fury could only have been tearing and poignant in such an intimate proximity. With no life now - no seats, no lights, no painting, no gilding, empty, a void, cruel cement securing the skeleton ribs, the space seems to be waiting, yearning for voices, costumes, arguments, music, in preference to the architects and restorers whose future prestation is to be sought, and by no means ruled out, I'm glad to say.

As a consequence of the intervention of the architect Gloria Martellucci and the *Associazione Amici del Teatro Massimo* we were not only given the singular honour of entering this once-celebrated theatre - closed and forbidden for years - but of hearing, for the first time since 1830, the music of *Alahor in Granata* on the remains of the stage. The last

time the house heard this music with a keyboard accompaniment must have been in the presence of the composer.

As the fine baritone¹ sang the opening notes of the splendid aria of the protagonist, written for Antonio Tamburini, 'Ombra del padre mio', more than one member of this society looked round for the maestro... Moving? An understatement. Ghosts thrive in theatres, under the shattered palcoscenico the young men who had made nineteenth century Italian opera were still living and breathing.

Displaced from Seville where its rebirth had been marked by an exceptionally brilliant production, Donizetti's *Alahor in Granata* thus returned to Palermo - but now to the magnificence of the Teatro Massimo, itself recently restored to the bosom of its citizens. The revised staging - it seems to me - too was conscious of the phantom career of the composer in the lonely ruin at the end of a busy street. We actually glimpsed Alahor's ghostly father at the start, during his cavatina, as well as at the end when reconciliation with the former enemy was imminent, just as we glimpsed the maestro from the corner of the eye at every unguarded moment. "*Donizetti era solo. Nelle lettere echeggia la solitudine, con rincocchi frequenti come monologo interiore. Assillo inventivo, modo di illudere un vuoto esistenziale, insieme alla fantasia geniale e al magistero tecnico*", Sergio Albertini quotes affectingly from Gianandrea Gavazzeni in the local press. Every note of *Alahor in Granata* in this edition, necessarily that of the 1830 revival rather than that of 1826, evokes an age, a past, that is now coming within reach as the gaps in the early career of the composer are closing. We know more, with an opera like this, constrained stylistically and materially, of the resource, the resilience, of the survival tactics and the accommodations that would always be at his command. Greater successes tell us less. *Alahor* stands on the brink of change, its music can be enjoyed without reference to any other opera but within it, the dear shade of the romantic composer to come is clear and unmistakable. **Alexander Weatherson**

¹ Singing for us was Carlo Cigni last heard at Dordrecht in the role of Il borgomastro (di Saardam)

