

GLI EQUIVOCI

(Batignano, 11th August, 1999
Bampton, 22nd July, 2000)

An opera buffa with music by an Englishman (albeit of Italian extraction) to a libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte based on Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, written for the Viennese court in 1786, cannot fail to be a work about which one is immensely curious. Given its first modern performance at the Camden Festival in London in 1974, followed by a BBC broadcast of a studio performance three years later, it has only – so far as I am aware – had three subsequent outings: one at Wexford in 1992 (which I unfortunately missed), and the two performances being reviewed here. The opera was a considerable success in its time, and judging from a pirated recording of execrable sound quality of the 1974 performance, with which I have lived for several years, it is not difficult to understand why. So I had high hopes of the performances at Batignano and Bampton. The reality, I fear, fell far short of my hopes.

Musica nel Chiostro, organized by the enterprising Adam Pollock at Batignano, has been running a festival of rare opera since 1974 and has, over the years, gained a reputation for slightly eccentric, peripatetic productions (with the audience following the singers as they play each scene in a new location) – a reputation fully justified by the production of *Gli Equivoci*. The parking of cars arriving along the dusty track that leads to the ruined monastery where the operas are performed was efficiently overseen by what at first appeared to be junior carabinieri, but who turned out to be 'extras' dressed as border guards and soldiers. The inside of the cloister, where all but the first scene took place, was Ephesus (the location of the plot), and to gain entry to 'Ephesus' members of the audience were issued with a 48-hour visa, valid subject to conditions like observance of the nightly curfew, not photographing the port or military zones, and so on. It was all highly amusing, except to some members of the audience who mislaid their visas and were subjected to questioning, and even to body security frisking, by the border guards when they tried to take their seats.

This was, then, a very high-spirited production, sung in Italian. A riot I almost said, and in the hyper-active finales – yielding nothing in length or complexity to those of the mature Mozart – this was almost literally so, as the characters dashed through, round and behind the audience in all directions. Here all pretence of ensemble went for a burton and, generally, musical values seemed to take second place to the requirements of a zany staging in the round. The orchestra, seated in a loggia high above and behind the stage, consistently sounded distant and feeble – particularly during the overture and the first scene, which were played outside the monastery. The wind blew the sound away; the singers sounded completely unsupported.

The cast consisted of young (aspiring) professionals, mainly British, and few of them had voices equal to the demands of the music. The two principal female roles, Sofronia and Sostrata, with rather more elaborate and interesting

music than the men (who do not merit a mention), were competently sung by Eldrydd Cynan Jones and Natalie Christie. The conductor, out of sight of the singers most of the time, followed more frequently than he led.

It would be good to report that at Bampton, a small town in Oxfordshire, where the opera was given in English as *The Comedy of Errors*, greater justice was done to Storaice and da Ponte. While praising the dedication of a team of locals who give voluntary assistance to the venture – two performances only, given *al aperto* in the deanery garden – this was opera on a shoestring. Bampton Classical Opera has been going since 1992 and has tackled rarities like Gazzaniga's *Don Giovanni* – next year it will essay *The Philosopher's Stone*, the 1790 collaboration which involved both Mozart and Shikaneder. Like Musica nel Chioostro, it hires young British hopefuls, most of them already with some professional experience, but again they generally left much to be desired. Sofronia – here, in Arthur Davies's witty English translation, given her original Shakespearian name of Adriana – was sung affectingly by Catherine Hamilton. The two Dromios, Mark Saberton and Thomas Guthrie, and the Solinus (Solino), Henry Herford, provided the best male singing. The rest veered from pleasant enough light voices under some strain to a reincarnation of Florence Foster Jenkins. The orchestra, which lacked sufficient string weight but was otherwise euphonious, sat in a tent to the right of the stage, its contribution frequently blown away by a high wind on a sunless summer evening which had the audience huddled in wind-cheaters and rugs enduring the cold with gritty British determination.

The production, at the opposite extreme from Batignano, lacked pace. The delivery of the *recitativo* was often rather flaccid, and there were wearisome waits while characters came from corners of the garden, past the orchestra, to reach the stage and continue the action, which was played in front of an *alla turca* shop-window dressing borrowed from Laura Ashley. If the English translation kept the largely local audience in touch with the action, it also imparted a certain Gilbert-and-Sullivan-like air to the proceedings.

So, I still await an ideal performance of *Gli Equivoci*. Described by the contemporary Irish tenor Michael Kelly, a friend of Storaice, as 'beyond description beautiful', it certainly merits one (preferably not out-of-doors). These performances, despite their shortcomings, did however convince me that with singers with adequate vocal resources and a strong, inventive production – also an essential requirement for an untiresome and amusing production of Shakespeare's original play – this is undoubtedly a viable opera. The duet by Sofronia and Sostrata, accompanied by two basset horns, which marks their first appearance reminds one strongly of *Così fan tutte*, and the finales to both acts (thanks, no doubt, to da Ponte as much as to Storaice) also have a strong Mozartian flavour. A decent recording would be welcome – Opera Rara, are you listening? – sponsored, perhaps, by the Peter Moores Foundation. How worthy it would be for them to support an English opera and not just opera in English for a change.

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