

# ***Anna Bolena riconosciuta***

**by Alexander Weatherson,**

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Hands-up those who think they are familiar with the music of *Anna Bolena*.

Don't bother! What you are likely to have heard scarcely resembles the opera at all. . . Since its momentous Milanese resurrection in 1957 what has mostly been available is a rump - a shameless *reductio ad absurdum* of a score to the taste of twentieth century audiences with *verismo* approximations still ringing their ears. Vivid? But of course....especially at that first moment of rediscovery. Unforgettable? No one has ever been allowed to forget it.

The *Anna Bolena* of 1957 clearly was a moment in the history of La Scala worthy of the clamour of success of its first appearance (at the Carcano, in 1830) but sadly, as far from the whole score as conceived by Donizetti, from its integrity as intended by its composer and librettist, and from the assumption of the title-role by its first heroine Giuditta Pasta, as Land's End is from John O' Groats. Cut to blazes, re-orchestrated, tonally abused, it is not too cruel to describe the exceptional protagonist of 1957 (Maria Callas for the uninitiated) as half-Theda Bara, two-thirds tigress. Indeed, the opera never added-up except in the minds of those enthusiasts gagging upon the rediscovery of an operatic chimera, the so-called "soprano drammatico d'agilità" (as if any diva of Donizetti's day could have lasted for ten minutes without *agilità*).

A score which has been callously (I won't make a pun) truncated, recitatives cut, reprises omitted, a thoroughgoing abbreviation ["l'opera abbia scansione drammatica più netta" it was kindly explained to its audience (...ma Donizetti?)]. No overture, only a shadow of a shade of the mood, of the pacing the composer had so painstakingly invoked, a kind of chastised fragment leaning shamelessly on the enhanced emotional expansiveness of two or three big roles longing to get at the *fioriture* at the expense of everything else.

Recordings (especially pirates - the big betrayers of past performers as well as of past critical absurdity) are the big give-away. A *Bolena* on 2CD's? A *Bolena* with appendicised extracts from other operas on 3 CD's? At Cremona this autumn of the year 2000 the opera took 4 hours to perform even when 'Vivi tu' had been shelved by a shaky diaphragm.

The main difference, however, between the score of 1830 and that of 1957 and its immediate successors is not really one of length, but of style and space. The old chestnut about its new-born proto-romantic credentials and the abandonment of the earlier unformed Donizetti is too glib. *Anna Bolena* looks as far back as it looks forward, it is as much a farewell to the past as a beckoning to the future. That it marks a phase - the ending of one period and the beginning of another is perfectly true, but it is as a summation that it does so, as an embodiment of much that has gone arm-in-arm with much that is to come - which confers a genuine significance upon the score. Its breadth, its scope, its momentum (and, of course its memorable tunes) are in many ways something like a sum-total of everything in Donizetti's repertory leaving out almost nothing learned on his way to the top. But this does not describe the edition of 1957 which leaves something out every few bars. It was the ability of *Anna Bolena* to reconcile the tastes of the old guard - brought-up upon opera-seria -

with those of the adepts of the new romantic bloodletting - that made its fortune and his name.

The “past-historical” nature of *Anna Bolena* is, in fact, completely unconcealed. That in it he re-used music from Enrico di Borgogna - his very first staged opera of 1818 - says it all. But Romani too supplied an antiquarian argument where A does not love B, but loves C; B loves D, the bosom friend of A; while E, who also loves A, is jealous of C (Handel could have set all this without a qualm).

The sequence of numbers including unashamed exit-aria, tonally-closed duets and time-out ensembles tends to be perfectly linear and offends no traditionally-minded listener including those ravished by the long long finale ultimo, which fell agreeably upon ears fully attuned to the gran scena finale as blessed by the great Rossini. As Philip Gossett has pointed out so memorably, the music of *Anna Bolena* is sophisticated as never before but the step from his earliest work is not a big one. There is movement, there is evolution, the big advance is at hand. But not a great deal more than that.

None of this prevents *Anna Bolena* from being a masterpiece or from being a vehicle for the art of Giuditta Pasta, then at her apogee. The opera was composed in one month between 10 November and 10 December 1830 at her villa on Lake Como or so we are told. He left for Milan with the manuscript under his arm. This fact that this particular prima donna was to be the star is the real rationale of this famous opera. It is the extended, varied, orchestrally urgent recitatives, Pasta’s hallmark, that give rhetorical space to the score, it is the power of “declaimed song” that irradiates the whole when it is performed, as here, in Bergamo and at Cremona, almost for the first time since its original great diva and as an opera seria without fear or favour.

Like those of the composer himself, the roots of her career lay in opera-seria[1]. Scores like Zingarelli’s *Giulietta e Romeo* (which she sang in her first year on the stage in 1816 and went on singing for half the career to come - she sang both Romeo and Juliet - not of course at once), Cimarosa’s *Penelope* and Paer’s *Griselda* (both 1817), Nicolini’s *Giulio Cesare nelle Gallie* and Nasolini’s *La morte di Cleopatra* (both 1819). Her branding by operatic fire traversed the *Orazi e Curiazi* of Cimarosa (1819), via the *Fedra* of Orlandi (1819-20) ascending to the popular *La clemenza di Tito* of Mozart (1822). A brilliant high profile in the operas of Rossini did not prevent her reaching the apex of her first career in Mayr’s *Medea in Corinto* (1823) with which role she was permanently associated in the public mind (as in Donizetti’s mind too, no doubt). It was her heroic singing, her authoritative delivery and regal declamatory deportment that earned her her laurels, make no mistake about that, whatever she was later to achieve, as Bellini’s *Norma* would soon attest. By the time she reached *Anna Bolena* at the end of 1830 she had only rarely strayed beyond opera-seria, the exception being a solitary *Pirata* she had sung in Vienna a few months before. In London she had starred in Coccia’s decorous *Maria Stuart regina di Scozia*, in Mercadante’s chilly *Didone abbandonata* (both 1827) as well as in Mayr’s *Medea* and Paisiello’s *Nina pazza* (both 1828) - which last opera - like *Il pirata* - quite unmistakably had an input into *Anna Bolena*. It is not in the least difficult to maintain that the “classicismo” Donizetti had inherited, not just from Mayr but from these composers above, favoured by Pasta, coloured the music and plot he conceived for his collaboration with her. *Pace* the “divine” intervention of Maria Callas, any notion that Donizetti was burning his boats on a post-verismo bonfire in his *Anna Bolena* is simply wishful thinking.

I had the good fortune to hear the two performances of *Anna Bolena* at Cremona. How often can one claim to have left an opera house on a real high? In the full knowledge that one has heard a performance at the very apex of all hopes and

possibilities? This was an integral edition, as complete as feasible. We have been building-up to such a faithful version for the past decade, for some years the gaps have been closing (Monte-Carlo was a milestone), but this is the first time the space and pacing of the opera-seria rationale of the original score was put forward as the fons et origo of the drama, dependent - not just on vehemence, not just on the fascination of well-depicted characters - but upon the quite leisurely and quite deadly countdown to a dramatic apotheosis. Employing, what could be described as an architectonic dramaturgy, a deliberate use of pace and a space in the unfolding of the drama. The more penetrating for its slow progress. It is in this field that Pasta was pre-eminent, not only as a commanding voice but as a grand tragedian of the highest class. Donizetti, as was so often the case, used the conventions he had inherited, in this case the stately conventions of opera-seria, to make a work of art beyond the normal scope. And he too made his mark as few composers had ever done so memorably and so instantaneously.

How strange it is that the present day *Anna Bolena* should find its optimum interpreter in two remarkable Greek artists - two sovereign voices but Janus-like, facing in opposite directions. Dimitra Theodossiou sang the title-role like the heroine of a Greek Tragedy. It was an assumption first given birth in Naples (see Newsletter 81, pp 15-16) refined and intensified over a long series of performances until it achieved a perfection here in Cremona that completely transformed it, a detailing and a posture throughout that belonged to another age of great singing, a nemesis that was not Tudor but was timeless. No one at Cremona can ever forget the haunted queen poised in compressed violence, compact, contained, culminating in her final triumph, an indelible evocation of terrible despair with the burning eyes and brazen cheeks of a Medea-become-Medusa, outfacing the ravaging hordes (the cringing audience) with a super-human defiance, a chilling desperation and a conviction as overwhelming as an Athene of any yore. This was real drama, real Pasta, and real Donizetti, recovered complete at last. Now we can recognise *Anna Bolena*.

For once, Jonathan Miller's setting was an asset, a lego-like Louise Nevelson series of screens, vaguely palatial but adjustable enough to leave room for expansive gesture, cold and false it is true (when Anna thumped them in her delirium they gave a cardboard thud), more Gotham City than Hampton Court but not inefficient nor intrusive. As Giovanna, Sonia Ganassi was quite splendid, very beautiful, in supreme voice - both anguished and moving, she shared the ignominy of the queen in helpless commiseration, an assumption of the role fit to place side by side with that of the heroine. Andrea Papi was visually and vocally very superior, his impatience with Seymour and the Court historically very telling; the Percy of Fabio Sartori was mellifluous if rather unromantic in appearance; Smeton (Sonia Prina) not only was permitted to sing every note composed for her but actually looked like a boy for once. Rochefort (Paolo Battaglia) and Sir Harvey (Cristiano Olivieri) were both effective adjuncts to the drama. Tiziano Severini with huge sensitivity sustained both the pacing and the delicacy of this detailed evening, his reading too was a tour-de-force, there were no dry patches. Of course, such a crescendo of stagings resulted in a perfectly rehearsed edition, complete to excess; nothing was left to be desired. We have to thank Francesco Bellotto for this I think. We do indeed.

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[1] We are lucky now to have the comprehensively invaluable *Giuditta Pasta: Gloria del Bel Canto* of Giorgio Appolonia (Eda, Torino 2000).