

## Rossini's *Otello* in Martina Franca: some observations

In Newsletter 81, Dr. Günter Gruber speaks warmly of the performance of Rossini's *Otello* during the summer of 2000 at Martina Franca. Now, those who love the theater know that anything goes in the opera house, and there is no ground whatsoever for saying that one theatrical spectacle is legitimate and another not. If Dr. Gruber and others enjoyed the Martina Franca *Otello*, more power to them.

What is *not* acceptable, however, is to justify choices made by a Festival on spurious historical grounds. We have no evidence whatsoever that Rossini was responsible for Maria Malibran's parlor trick of assuming the title role of *Otello*, written for a tenor. She never did it on a regular basis, but only in order to attract the public to an evening in the theater for her benefit, after having heard her for an entire season as Desdemona. Having a woman sing the title role in Rossini's *Otello* today is no more or less appropriate than having a woman singing the title role in Verdi's *Ernani*. (Recall that Verdi was originally requested to prepare that part for a *musico*.) If you like that kind of thing, do it, but don't pretend that Rossini was responsible unless you have documentary evidence to support your claim.

As for the happy ending for *Otello*, it was an accommodation Rossini made for a particular Roman performance. It happened in that one Roman season (and immediately after, when the same company went on local tour) and never again. In the critical edition of *Otello*, the Rossini Foundation gave a detailed map as to how to reconstruct the happy ending as it was sung in Rome in 1819, and that road map was used by our English friends at Opera Rara when they included the happy ending as an appendix to their recent recording. No new music Rossini prepared for that performance survives (the new music involved exclusively accompanied recitative).

Since it was our judgement at the Rossini Foundation that the happy ending was aesthetically weak, we did not feel compelled to compose the necessary connecting music (as we did to allow performances of the tragic finale of *Tancredi* or certain scenes in *Il viaggio a Reims*). That Martina Franca felt it appropriate to do

so is well within their rights, as it is fully within their rights to double it up with the tragic ending (Pesaro did something similar with Rossini's two endings for *Tancredi* on one occasion). Indeed, if they wanted to conclude the opera with "Tanti affetti" sung by a female Otello, that too would be thoroughly within their rights. But it should be clearly understood that not a note of Rossini's newly composed music for this happy ending survives and that this happy ending never circulated in the nineteenth century. Rossini's opera made its reputation and remained for a long time in the repertory exclusively with its tragic ending.

Finally, I wish to comment on Dr. Gruber's statement: "Polemisch, denn auch die lokalen Zeitungen, warum nicht auch Pesaro Variationen der Rossiniopern aufführt, staat nur immer unflexible jene der edizione critica". This is a total misunderstanding of the concept of a critical edition, and I must say that I am surprised that such an avid follower of the Pesaro Festival as Dr. Gruber could make such a statement.

The critical edition of the works of Rossini offers every version of an opera that survives for which the composer was responsible. Performers choose on each occasion that they wish to present. Every performance of *Tancredi* in Pesaro has chosen different pieces; we have given the *Petite Messe* in three different versions; *Matilde di Shabran* was offered in a Neapolitan revision (and will in the future return, I'm sure, in its original Roman form); *L'italiana in Algeri* has been heard in multiple forms. When it has been necessary for reasons of staging or singers, cuts and modifications have been introduced.

If by "inflexible" Dr. Gruber means that at Pesaro we try most of the time to perform Rossini's operas as he wrote or revised them, then the Rossini Opera Festival is guilty as charged. At least there is one place in the world where you can regularly hear Rossini's music as he wrote or revised it. If Dr. Gruber wants his Rossini manipulated by Sergio Segalini and his team at Martina Franca, he has every right to have it that way, and Segalini has every right to do anything he wants to the Rossini operas in his theater. We must refuse to allow these manipulations to be justified, however, through the invention of false historical explanations or through the misrepresentation of the function of a critical edition.

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