

Truth Triumphs

One of Mayr's most popular operas in his own lifetime gains a triumphant revival.

In Trieste in 2001 faithfulness to history counts-on the 200th anniversary of the opening of their 'New' Theatre on 21st April 1801 the Fondazione Teatro Lirico "Giuseppe Verdi" Trieste and the Comune di Trieste pulled out all the stops to give the opera written for the original opening, Mayr's '*Ginevra di Scozia*', a worthy revival.

The story of Mayr's migration from Bavaria to Italy to marry the 'galant' symphonic style to the bel canto of opera is well known. How the two traditions mutated into the style of Donizetti, Mayr's best known pupil, has been less clear amid difficulties with source material and the variable quality of the recordings available. Trieste's new production, after a tentative start, has superbly filled this gap and revealed why this opera became Mayr's first international success, rapidly traversing Italy and being taken up in his native country, reaching Vienna in its launch year (albeit with additions by Weigl). Weber reviewed a performance in Munich in 1810 that didn't even use Mayr's overture (a *Semiramis* by Catel was used instead). Weber, in spite of his antipathy to insertions, praised the Weigl contributions as being 'a blessing' given that Mayr showed 'complete forgetfulness of his German origin'. Courtesy of Opera Rara we can sample one of Weigl's inserts (on ORCH 101) and it certainly sounds closer to the Mannheim tradition than any of the music in the reconstructed 'original version' by Marco Beghelli that was used this time in Trieste.

But enough of the background-on to the performances themselves.

Before the overture the curtain had opened to reveal a tartan-painted gauze screen that bore a coat of arms with the motto 'Truth Triumphs'. A sense of Metastasian protocol seemed to be intended as the screen reappeared at crucial moments in the unfolding drama.

Had Weber heard the proper overture in 1810 he would have enjoyed a piece of symphonic construction that should have pleased his Germanic sensibilities. He would also have heard some 'cod-Scots tune-smithing' (it is impossible to call it anything else because it could have been modelled on any British regional folk dance) that is reprised in the final chorus. The sense of musical parentheses round these fanciful events (derived from Ariosto, not Scottish history) were very necessary for my Scottish sensibilities! Anyone who has visited St Andrews will know that, even at mid-summer, it is cold place lacking lush greenery. It has also never been the capital of Scotland. The Trieste décor by Lauro Crisman created a warm environment themed with tartan of blue and green and gentle Mediterranean arches under which the courtly misunderstandings burgeoned. The chorus wore their plaid as a fashion accessory over their Capuleti e Montecchi tunics.

Mayr had brought some tricks over the Alps. This is Opera Seria without a da Capo aria in sight. The ensembles lead episodically through the evolving drama, with solos and chorus intermingled. The music, as well as giving opportunities to the singers, adds a commentary to what is going on. The style is recognisably the milieu of the Viennese Mozart, but with greater emphasis on coloratura. One might call it "La Clemenza di Tito Part II"; The Ungrateful Bite Back! The opera was launched with gusto, but soon the first night nerves and, perhaps, an element of unpreparedness, showed in some shaky ensemble. Once the pace had flagged on the opening night it never really recovered, and some of the singers were clearly

pushing their voices to try to maximise the affetti-200 years is a hard burden to carry on a sometimes very demanding vocal line. Victoria Loukianetz as the eponymous heroine had the most gruelling time with some stratospheric notes and some disappearing phrases in the *passato*. Daniella Barcellona had an easier time as the knight Ariodante *en travesti*. Antonino Siragusa as the bad boy of the plot, Polinesso, made less impression mainly because he was upstaged by the countertenor Marco Lazzara as the comparatively unimportant Lurcanio, who gains some above average music from Mayr. Among the rest of the cast Anna Laura Longo as the Lady-in Waiting, Dalinda, who loved the bad Polinesso (who tried to have her killed) showed promising acting style. As the plot reached its crunch point, with Ginevra blamed for all the troubles, the gauze screen descended to remind the audience of the Metastasian motto, 'Truth Triumphs'. And so it did, much to the relief of all. The first night audience had been polite rather than exuberant. Many seemed to be there to be seen rather than appreciate the opera. A few found the whole thing baffling and left at the interval. Two acts of 1 1/2 hours each made for a long evening. The curtain came down at midnight, and there were celebrations to follow.

The following day the second performance was a *matinée* due to start at 4pm. As a sign of the importance Trieste has given to this production the 8 performances are shared between 2 casts. The prospect of seeing and hearing this unfamiliar opera a second time was too great a temptation. The Sunday afternoon audience in the 'gods' proved to be a mixture of OAPs (who had paid nothing) and *cognoscenti* (who were there for the singing). The opera had barely begun when the differences became clear. Without first night nerves and the burden of a 'great event' the music flowed without any artificial forcing and the underlying jig-like lilt of much of the vocal music transmitted itself into lightness that had been absent the night before.

Of the singers the laurels must go to Elizabeth Vidal as Ginevra who floated faultlessly through the difficulties of her part. Her night was crowned with the big Act 2 Rondo where her cadenza of such exquisitely placed notes, delivered with an unforced lightness, sparked audience uproar as she danced off the stage. It was difficult to remember that the start of the aria had nearly been aborted by the unfortunate fainting of a motionless soldier in the background!

The rest of the cast joined in the enjoyment, cutting nearly 10 minutes off the running time and bringing justified applause at the end. In this cast all high voices were female, which removed one source of confusion for the audience and made for more uniform characterisation. Polinesso (the tenor Marco Ferrato) seemed more Machiavellian, and the King more regal (including extemporary organisation of the stretcher bearers for his loyal, but recumbent soldier. It would be fair to say that without the significance of the 200th Anniversary of the theatre this opera would not have been revived. Also, no theatre other than Trieste would have had the reason to lavish such time and effort on it. Anywhere else it would have succumbed to the vagaries that have plagued other Mayr performances. Opera Rara, with the help of The Peter Moores Foundation, have recorded *Ginevra* and it should be available early next year. And in prospect now is Mayr's even earlier *Werther* (with a happy ending!) at Wildbad-a slighter work that has been found¹ and lovingly prepared by Luca Bianchini and Anna Trombetta of Italian Opera.

For the ghost of Mayr, and for his growing band of fans, these are exciting times. And for everyone a vital link in the evolution of opera before Rossini is becoming visible.

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¹ It was found "before it was lost" as they say as it was on the shelves of the Milan Conservatorio Library. Its date is conjectural. [Edit.]