

Werther at Bad Wildbad, July 2000

Following its concert last year of virtually unknown works by Paër and Winter, on 20 July 2001 the Rossini Festival in Bad Wildbad put on the world premiere of *Werther* (Verter). It was advertised as a work by Mayr, written in 1794, but during the Festival I was told by Reto Müller of the German Rossini Society (from a discussion of his with Paolo Fabbri) that the composer was more probably Puccitta* in the year 1802!

There is also some doubt about the librettist, named as Antonio Sografi (?) in the programme, although Sografi did write a comedy called *Verter*, derived from Goethe's tragedy, which was first performed in the San Crisostomo theatre at Venice in October 1794. Sografi changed the plot of Goethe's *Werther* and gave it a happy ending, with the hero saved from suicide by fortunate circumstances. This comedy was a great success and provided material for other works, notably Carlo Coccia's *Carlotta e Verter* of 1814.

In any event, whoever the composer, there is no firm evidence of any performance of the opera *Verter*, which disappeared before turning up in the Hasse collection in Venice, whence it was bought by the Milan government in 1813. It can now be seen in the library of the library of the Milan conservatoire, where it was discovered in 1994 by Luca Bianchini and Anna Trombetta, wrongly catalogued, with a different date, under the librettist Gaetano Rossi.

Although the opera follows Sografi's play, there are fewer characters and the plot is compressed into one act. Both Verter and Giorgio, the tutor, are in love with Carlotta (Charlotte), whose husband Alberto is travelling. She rejects their advances but nevertheless gives Giorgio the impression that she is not indifferent to Verter, who is preparing to leave. Giorgio's revenge is to make Alberto witness Verter's tender farewell to Carlotta and believe that that the couple are planning to flee together. In desperation, Verter tries to kill both himself and Giorgio with poisoned wine. On being told this, Giorgio admits the truth, Alberto realises his error and Ambrogio, Verter's servant, reveals that he has switched the wine bottles, so that all sing the praise of fidelity, love and friendship.

The opera was imaginatively staged by the artistic director of the Wildbad Festival, Jochen Schönleber, and convincingly emphasised the comic rather than tragic aspects of the libretto. In particular the character of Verter was turned into a brilliant parody of Goethe's often tedious original through the outstanding acting and singing of Daniele Cicchetti, excellently supported by Luca Salsi as Giorgio, Pavol Bršlik as Alberto, Gioacchino Zarrelli as Ambrogio, Anna Rita Gemmabella as Carlotta and Anke Herrmann as her servant, Paolina.

*See "footnote" **Accidentals** in this issue

Even if the music was not in fact composed by Mayr, it could have been and had many echoes of the period between Mozart and Rossini. The Czech Chamber Orchestra was vigorously conducted by Paul Terracini and the whole evening was an unexpected delight.

On the following day I had the pleasure to attend the dress rehearsal of Rossini's *Messa di Lugo*, also a German premiere, in which several of the soloists from Verter reappeared. This was in fact a series of brilliant fragments put together from works composed by Rossini between the ages of 11 and 17 for two basses, two tenors, a mezzo and a contralto - breathtaking in their originality and range of experiment with voices and supporting instruments. We can only hope that a CD will appear soon.

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