

PRIMO OTTOCENTO

This is an enterprising series of studies. It is dedicated to 'our' period and is edited by Thomas Lindner and Daniel Brandenburg. The publishers are Edition Praesens of Vienna (Ullaufgasse 3, A-1170 Wien). The series was launched with the papers presented at the Vienna Donizetti Symposium (*Donizetti in Wien*) held in 1997 organised most successfully by the enterprising *Freunde der Musik Gaetano Donizetti* of that beautiful city. This is a volume that should be on all the shelves of members of the *Donizetti Society*, in particular because of Dr Maximilian Hohenegger's important essay on Donizetti's illness which takes to task what I call the 'American' point of view. Dr Hohenegger gives us a far more enlightened and sympathetic understanding. It would be good if this essay could be translated into English for a wider public.

In this volume readers will find papers on: Czerny's 'Souvenirs-fantasies' on themes from Donizetti's operas (Valeriano Sacchiero); the *Diluvio Universale* set in the context of Vienna (PierAngelo Pelucchi); the *Duc d'Albe* (Stefan Koth); Donizetti's Viennese operas (Leopold Kantner); Rubini as an interpreter of Donizetti (Konrad Huber); Italian opera in Vienna during Donizetti's period (Clemens Höslinger); The String Quartets (Giovanni Carli Ballola); The fortunes of Donizetti in Slovakia (Jaroslav Blaho) and my own, Aspects of Donizetti's letters written in Vienna.

Looking back on the Symposium two themes stick in my mind, firstly Czerny's 'Donizetti' piano pieces, for they raise an area ready for study much wider than one limited to Liszt. Thalberg obviously comes to mind, but also Henselt and others. Henselt's *opus 1*, a variation fantasy on Dulcamara's and Adina's duet at the beginning of Act I of *L'elisir d'amore*, for example, is a good piece of music. Czerny too has written some splendid music and deserves a sympathetic study. Like Mayr he was a most charitable teacher. The second theme, and this was endorsed by the Ingolstadt Mayr Symposium, is the need to explore libraries in 'eastern' Europe. It is a field waiting for study.

Primo Ottocento's publication takes its stand alongside our recent journal dedicated to *Donizetti and Paris*.

Another volume is dedicated to *Errico Petrella* and is by Sebastian Werr. The book is an important contribution and helps insight into 'our' period. Too easily Petrella and Pacini (not to mention others) get sidelined because

of Verdi's influence. This summer Lucca offered a conference on Puccini, apparently it was good, but I fear there is congestion on the bookshelves when it comes to labels such as 'Puccini' and 'Verdi'. Pacini was right, Verdi was the beginning of a change in singing style that was not to help singers, eventually they became trapped in mannerisms and these made it hard for them to sing earlier operas with sensitivity. The 'three tenor' circuit of Verdi and Puccini arias illustrates exactly what I mean. Verdi with rancour wrote, 'Let's have the honest truth... Petrella is a poor musician; his masterpiece, *Le precauzioni*, may please amateurs with a few attractive violin tunes, but as a work of art it can't stand up, not only to the great works, but even to operas like *Crispino, Follia in Roma ...*'. To be honest, if I was offered yet another revival of *Rigoletto* or *Traviata* in contrast to a work by Petrella or the Riccis, or Pacini, etc., I know very well which I should choose!

Going by the recording of *Jone* (an unfortunate title), Petrella cannot be all that bad! Furthermore Donizetti, in contrast to Verdi, would never have spoken of a colleague with such bitterness. Werr notes that in 1858, Verdi had 169 performances of his operas, Donizetti could still muster 80, Rossini was in decline with 40, Bellini had 36, and Petrella had 28, leaving Mercadante behind with 12 and Pacini with 8. I fear Verdi wanted to rule the roost and then sign himself off to immortality.

Werr's excellent study may be enjoyed by those who do not have German as a language, for there are 96 letters of Petrella and a host of quotes in Italian that aid one with German text. The chapters are systematically laid out, from studying the composer's fortunes with the critics, his public and style, to detailed studies of the operas. There is a chapter on the Neapolitan comic operas and the Petrella as the 'last' composer to have worked in the wake of the Neapolitan buffo style. This was about to be over-shadowed by Verdi, *verismo* and the domination of the Germanic school. Undoubtedly Naples was not musically renewing itself, for even Donizetti looked back uneasily to earlier days with operas like *Adelia* and *Caterina Cornaro*. *Don Pasquale*, on the other hand, as we know is a happy fusion of Neapolitan and Venetian traditions spiced by genius. Thus, superficially it may be easy to cast aside Petrella's comic works, but surely *Le precauzione* deserves to be revived, regardless of Verdi's judgement, especially on reading Werr. (Anyhow the old fellow could not have composed an opera buffa to save his soul!)

There is an interesting quote from Pannain:

Le precauzioni [...] fu la commedia più significativa di questo momento. Una commedia di piccoli esseri, con tipi antiquati lucidati con la vernice del colore locale. Il capolavoro dell'ingenuità paesana, l'ideale del Teatro Nuovo [Naples] fatto musica: eco di quella tradizione di comicità che aveva sollazzato il pubblico del Settecento ed anche specchio di quella società mediocre e modesta che da cinquanta anni accoglieva con favore le espressioni dell'opera buffa e semiseria.

It is sufficient to listen carefully to Paisiello or Cimarosa to recognise the fact that Neapolitan comic works depended on superb acting. The music demands to be expressed through movement and gesture. Singers standing on the stage like sacks of potatoes would destroy the genius of the tradition at a stroke. Perhaps the Neapolitans of Petrella's times needed a Dario Fo to lift productions. Revivals beware.

Werr provides the reader with a detailed analysis of the serious works. Those who have a recording of *Jone* will find the appropriate pages useful and there will be soon felt a desire to hear revivals of operas such as *Marco Visconti*, *La contessa d'Amalfi* and *Caterina Howard*. To quote Petrella, they are 'opere che non meritano stare ne' scaffali ... speriamo almeno per l'avvenire'. (p. 226.)

I find it hard to understand why either Petrella's or Ponchielli's *I promessi sposi* have not been revived. Manzoni's novel is Italy's most famous tale, equalling Scott, and yet there seems little interest in these two operas. Perhaps having seen an embarrassing episode of a RAI production of *I promessi sposi*, it is best for non-Italians to commit themselves to such revivals. The episode I saw was bad, very bad, and lacked totally the panache that the BBC instils into period pieces such as those wonderful tales of Dickens.

Résumés of all the operas are given together with lists of the original cast. The letters make an important section of the book. There are 19 illustrations, a bibliography and an index.

Highly recommended.

John Stewart Allitt

