

Mahomet visits Bad Wildbad

Maometto (von Winter) – 18 July, 2002
Maometto II (Rossini) – 17 and 19 July, 2002

This year the Wildbad Festival had the happy idea of presenting two contrasting operas on Muslim themes, with equally contrasting results. Hands up those to whom the name of the opera composer Peter von Winter is already familiar. If you have raised your hand it may be because you have come across two excerpts from his operas in Opera Rara's (sadly as yet incomplete) compendium *A Hundred Years of Italian Opera*. One of these is a charming trio from *Maometto*, and it was, indeed, this brief piece which originally stimulated the production of the complete opera at Wildbad. A prolific composer of singspiel and all forms of opera, Winter (1754-1825) had a career spanning some thirty years up until 1819, with *Maometto*, one of three operas written for La Scala, Milan, produced during the carnival season of 1817. It was a huge success, enjoying forty-five performances, and led to a similar commission (*I due Valdomiri*) for La Scala's following carnival season.

The performance at Wildbad was also successful and will, I gather, appear as a CD. (If not, seek out a German enthusiast who taped the Deutschland Radio broadcast on 13 July.) Based very closely on Voltaire's notorious tragedy indicting fanaticism *Mahomet le Prophète*, the opera has a serviceable libretto by Felice Romani, and it emerged at Wildbad as a highly enjoyable piece.

The plot, set in Mecca, is a complex one concerning the power struggle between Mahomet the Prophet (tenor) and Zopiro (bass), the local political demagogue whose children Palmira (soprano) and Seide (a breeches role for mezzo) become pawns in the action. Mahomet, aided by his gloating side-kick Omar (baritone), triumphs while Zopiro is killed by Seide, who is himself poisoned. Palmira, who commits suicide in Voltaire's play, here survives, having rejected Mahomet's offer of marriage only to be imprisoned once more. The contemporary resonances of all this were not lost on the director, Bruno Berger-Gorski, who peopled his production with a predictable but largely appropriate array of TV-familiar figures – a turbaned ayatollah, gun-toting hooded terrorists, crews of TV reporters, and so on. For crowd scenes the chorus sang from the sides of the orchestra while being harangued from the stage: in a reversal of this, Mahomet addressed those on the stage from the back of the auditorium. Live TV footage of the leaders in full oratorical spate, shot by the reporters on stage, were projected on to the back cloth. It all worked remarkably well – and, happily, no real terrorists appeared to suppress this stage representation of the Prophet – for fundamentalists one of the ultimate blasphemies.

Musically, the evening was for the most part a gratifying one. The first four chords of the overture, startlingly reminiscent of the opening of Haydn's Symphony No. 104, led us into a sound world that proved to be a stylistic patchwork more German than Italian, with Mozart and Weber most frequently brought to mind. Winter shows skill in adapting and developing musical forms to suit dramatic circumstance, as well as a talent for extended finales.

Palmira, on stage in a straight-jacket for all of the first act and most of the second, is both vocally and dramatically a demanding part in which Maria Luigia Borsi acquitted herself well. As Seide, Gloria Montanari (her eyes glued to the conductor) displayed an agile and well-focussed mezzo, but lacked the power to project the role properly. The talented Korean tenor Sebastian Na – visually more an Afghan than an Arab mullah – used his melifluous voice to good effect but, while technically in command of his role, had an occasional tendency to drag behind the conductor's tempi. Only Antonio de Gobbi as Zopiro seemed miscast. Lacking a proper mezzavoce, he resorted to a hoarse piano whisper in his rather wooden delivery of recitative and, except when forte resonance was required, sang in a rather gruff, expressiveless monotone. (Having written that, I have to acknowledge that he received the warmest applause of the evening.)

Gabriele Bellini led a well-paced and taut performance, with the (expanded) Czech Chamber Soloists and the Czech Philharmonic Choir, both from Brno, providing the singers with very able support. In short, if not an evening to die for, a worthwhile revival and a reminder, of which we are constantly in need, that the pages of operatic history are strewn with forgotten composers who were very competent masters and produced many worthy and still-viable examples of their craft.

Winter's opera was sandwiched between two concert performance of Rossini's *Maometto II*, originally written for Naples. Although Rossini knew of Winter's opera and mentioned it favourably in his letters, the subject matter (set in the fifteenth century) is quite different. Eventually re-elaborated for the Paris Opera as *Le Siège de Corinthe*, the version used at Wildbad was an intermediate revision of the original work made for Venice in 1822. Most of Act I survives intact, but in Act II after the opening duet between Anna and Mahomet almost everything is new apart from Calbo's aria *Non temer*, and we end happily with *Tanti affetti*.

Like too many performances at Wildbad in recent years, musical standards here were below par – more akin to a student concert than a serious festival. Only the mezzo Anna Rita Gemmabella sang comfortably within the demands of her role (Calbo), clearly showing considerable potential for an international career. All the other singers were in various degrees stressed, and

evinced tell-tale signs of inadequacy – wandering intonation, sketchy and poorly articulated vocal decoration and, in two cases, too many of those hoarse gargling sounds that are the protest of a voice not under control. In the title role Denis Sedor, the Russian-Israeli bass, exhibited a richly resonant Slavonic voice of great beauty when not pushed beyond its limits (though, in fairness, his frequent sipping of water on both evenings may have indicated vocal indisposition). As Anna, Luisa Islam-Ali-Zade had almost all the notes, but her effortful delivery lacked grace, and her tone hardened noticeably at the top. About the tenor, Massimiliano Barbolini, it is difficult to say anything positive. With a thin and reedy timbre, he seemed unable to vary his vocal colouring, and sounded like a petulant schoolboy when attempting to be dramatic; he was unable to sing his decorations cleanly, tired quickly, and was generally not up to the part. Brad Cohen led the chorus and orchestra in a rather stolid performance, somewhat lacking in light and shade.

Rossini wrote his Naples operas (of which we have had several at Wildbad) for the likes of Colbran, Nozzari and David. They all breathe the oxygen of supreme vocal technical accomplishment and refinement, and impose cruel vocal demands for which, at this stage of their careers, young singers who have just reached professional status, or who are at the chrysalis stage of emerging from studenthood, are seldom adequately prepared. I know that the festival runs on a very restricted budget, but one must ask if it is wise or fair to ask young singers to attempt such roles. At Wildbad there is always the possibility of CDs of an opera being issued, so it must be really tempting to make a bid for the wider exposure that such CDs provide. In my view young singers are ill-served by such pressure, and do their voices no good by taking on such roles.

None of this is to say, of course, that Wildbad should not continue to offer opportunities to young singers. The recent performances under Zedda have amply demonstrated that able young singers exist, and one's pleasure and excitement are all the greater when they triumph. Perhaps the festival is attempting to do too much: this year we had four operas, whereas in the past two were the rule. Maybe, in future, to attempt less would be to achieve more. By selecting artists who are vocally capable of the roles they are offered, the festival would increase the chances of more of its performances reaching CD permanence, thereby increasing its own income. It is one thing to offer rarities that tempt opera buffs like me to travel to Wildbad; it is another thing to do them justice. To feel my effort has been justified in going to Wildbad I require both, and only *Maometto* offered me that this year.

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