



Il maestro delle Gabalette? **Mercadante's *Emma d'Antiochia***

So *now* we know what he really meant when he said "Ho...Bando alle Gabalette triviali, esilio a'crescendo. Tessitura corta: meno repliche - Qualche novità nelle cadenze - Curata la parte drammatica: l'orchestra ricca, senza coprire il canto - Tolti i lunghi assoli ne'pezii concertati, che obbligavano le altre parti ad essere fredde, a danno dell'azione - Poco gran cassa, e pochissima banda -"

Now we get the message, Mercadante was talking about *Emma d'Antiochia*. By 1838 and in this his well-publicised letter of reform to his friend Florimo he had come to a decision - he was never going to write an opera like *Emma* ever again. We can only be thankful.

At the time of writing this opera, four years earlier, the *altamurese* maestro had a real problem - he was struggling to draw his head out of a self-inflicted Rossinian noose. While *Bolena*, *Norma* and *Lucrezia Borgia* chalked-up a high-tide elsewhere on the Italian stage the operas which marked Mercadante's return from exile in Spain foundered in a rag-bag of empty gestures, predictable routines, pretty tunes in triple-time and cringe-making *bande* - a penchant for the most obvious dramatic-clichés imaginable flanked by stage-business which simply did not come-off. Few big moments, dreary plots, vulgarity triumphant with knee-jerk music heavily dependent upon great *prime donne*. Thus *Emma d'Antiochia* created as a starring role for Giuditta Pasta. Staged at La Fenice on 8 March 1834 together with "*cinq poupées*" including Eugenia Tadolini as Adelia, Domenico Donzelli as Ruggiero and Orazio Cartagenova as Corrado it made the tiniest of splashes: Pasta was out of voice and sang only the music that pleased her; the house was unruly (as usual); the press unsympathetic. *Emma d'Antiochia* survived, but just. Mercadante went home with his tail between his legs.

No one came to his assistance. Certainly not his librettist; Felice Romani was a broken reed, he would be entirely responsible for the failure of Mercadante's great Parisian adventure of two years later, *I briganti* came to grief, but Mercadante adored him and for one entire phase of his career this poet was responsible a stream of dim or unworthy texts: *Francesca da Rimini* (1830- unperformed); *Zaira* (1831- four stagings); *I normanni a Parigi* (1832 - qualified rapture); *Ismalia* (1832 - a flop); *Il conte d'Essex* (1833 - three stagings); *Emma d'Antiochia* (1834 - modest revivals); *Uggero il danese* (1834 - six stagings), *La gioventù di Enrico V* (1834 - a fiasco); *I due Figaro* (1835 - ditto); and *Francesco Donato* (1835 - which not only failed at the prima but repeated it in a complete revision of ten years later). A dreary sequence even in those culinary days. Romani's text for *Emma* was nothing but a compendium of the stock in the kitchen cupboard: Emma was a sort-of Fausta; Aladino a sort-of Tamas; Corrado a sort-of Oroveso; Ruggiero a semi-clone of Crispo, and Adelia - a bleating Adalgisa. Not one of these characters could be taken seriously and nowhere did Mercadante breathe life into them... And then in revival *Emma d'Antiochia* made only a poor impression: Pasta repeated her starring role

once, at La Scala in 1835, Cambiasi gives it a tepid "*Buono*" while the *Norma* which followed also with the great diva got "*Ottimo*"; her rival Henriette Méric-Lalande gave it a go at Trieste in the same year, also supported by Donzelli and Cartagenova where it made little impact. La Ronzi took it on in Naples with Ronconi and Napoleone Moriani too in 1835 where it was cut to shreds. Otherwise it attracted only modest casts. What we can be sure is that never did it get such a good performance as the one under review here, *never* can it have had such an expert advocacy as this one in the edition of Opera Rara with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in the Royal Festival Hall in London. *Never* was the music so well prepared or so well directed or - I would be prepared to claim - were any of the great ladies listed above so well rehearsed or as vocally convincing as on this revival. So 2003 *should* mark-up a big plus for Mercadante, the problem is that, paradoxically, having such a fine orchestra and chorus, such expert conducting and such good voices, that instead of exaggerating the opera's strengths it exaggerated its weaknesses. The quite brilliant performance simply drew attention to the gimcrack score and the lack of substance in the plot.

Why don't we go back to the "reform" agenda of 1838: far from having "*pochissima banda*." *Emma's* sinfonia is a kind of "Concerto for *banda* and Orchestra" with the tinny wind ensemble playing hide and seek from the wings with the large instrumental cohort on stage (a bit like - but a travesty of - the effect created by Coccia in his *Caterina di Guisa* of one year before) the tawdry shrilling at the side repeatedly taken-up by the full orchestra and then bounced back, David Parry's immaculate command of all this was sheer joy, rhythmically impeccable, a *tour-de-force*, but the total effect was reminiscent of everything that used to be heard on Brighton Pier. This arch dialogue set the pace of much that was to come, a succession of postures none of them having any relationship whatsoever with the idiotic plot or with the semaphored anguish of the protagonists. The orchestra was certainly "*ricca*", it covered the singing repeatedly, poor Corrado sometimes vanished. I don't recall a *big drum* but the "*Gabalette*" were relentlessly "*triviali*" and as for the "*Tessitura corta*" the role written for Pasta consisted of little but flights of shallow virtuosity fit to wow craven melomaniacs anywhere in the world (as it certainly did at the Royal Festival Hall). Whether the "*parte drammatica*" can be said to have been "*Curata*" is a moot point; Act II was slightly more concentrated dramatically-speaking than the other two, the finale in fact was good but the act began with a rambling prelude which was immediately followed by an extraordinary intermezzo featuring a bass clarinet making fascinating sounds but outrageously "*a danno dell'azione*" and as it was capped by the inevitable *banda* it took the whole idea of a score in numbers to its nadir.

Maybe it would be better to discuss the plusses: *Emma d'Antiochia* seems to me to have few "Reminiscences", this must have pleased eager beavers in the audience at La Fenice hot to pounce upon borrowing of any kind - either self-borrowing or from any rival - the only regret is that in the past such "Reminiscences" have been useful to quantify Mercadante's limited range of fantasy. All the music here was "new", or so it seems, and solely by Mercadante himself. Bravo. Each of the three acts contains a fine duet for tenor and soprano, not especially memorable music *per se* but clean, lively and exhilarating. In these duets the quality of the singing was

especially good, Nelly Miricioiu and Bruce Ford are a perfect pair, a nearly legendary duo, and both were in fine voice so that together with Parry's admirable pacing and the splendid choral backing the unhappy lovers may jointly be said to have brought the Syrian desert to bloom. Bravo again. Roberto Servile has a superb dark baritone, as Corrado he was affecting but the huge orchestra behind him was not an asset - his two arias were underpowered on this occasion, this will not necessarily be the case in the coming recording of course. Colin Lee (as Emma's slave, Aladino - her "Rock" I fear may be the best description) on whose inanimate bosom she expires at curtain-fall, sang as touchingly as the role demands, upstaging Adelia dramatically, but this role (surely Eugenia Tadolini, who sang Adelia at the prima, must have been a trifle underemployed?) is peripheral except at the very end of the opera when Maria Costanza Nocentini's pleasing voice came into its own. Nelly Miricioiu showed herself to be a real star from her first notes, she alone literally "acted" her long long title-role physically pointing a forceful delivery and urging on the thrilling melismas of the tragic *finale ultimo* which she projected to the packed house with a conviction which defies any cavil about their meaning, such extraordinary singing fell on hugely appreciative ears.

It is in this respect that the opera did work a magic of sorts, though later despised by its author this *Emma d'Antiochia* perfectly epitomises the dilemma of a composer in mid-stream, clutching at a salving lifeline between the florid excess of the first decades in Italy - and the emotional excess that he - and we, of course - are perfectly aware will soon replace it (22 October 2003).



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