

Paolo Carrer's *Marathon Salamis*

Alexander Weatherson

(This article was written as a result of the world premiere on February 14, 2003 at the Teatro Olympia in Athens of Paolo Carrer's opera *Marathon Salamis*, originally written in 1866 to a libretto by A. Martzokis and A. Kapsokephalos. It first appeared in Donizetti Society Newsletter 92 (June 2004).)

According to Stieger, the Greek composer Paolo Carrer [Pavlos Karrer] (born 12 May 1829 at Zakythos [Zante] and dying in the same place on 7 June 1896) wrote a handful of operas with an admirable Italianate dimension. Stieger's list is as follows: *Dante e Beatrice* [lib. S.Torelli] Milan, Carcano 1852; *Isabella d'Aspeno* [lib?] Corfu, T.San Giacomo 1854; *La redeviva* [lib.Giuseppe Sapio]. Milan, Carcano 1856; *Marco Botzaris* [lib. G.Caccialupi] "Sira 1866" [but in fact given a first integral staging at the T.Apollo, Patras in 1861]; *Frossini* [*I Kyra Phrossini*] [lib?] "Patras 1879" [but in fact first given in the T.Foscolo, Zante in 1868]; *Despo o L'eroina di Suli* [lib?] Patras 1882; and *Maria Antonietta* [lib. Romus] Zante T.Foscolo 1884, seven scores whose existence seems scarcely to extend beyond his faithful homeland. Though *Frossini* - certainly - has been revived in recent years in Athens and he has something of a faithful following not one note appears to have penetrated the wall of silence elsewhere surrounding his life in music beyond those shores. The assiduous Stieger seems to have missed *Fior di Maria o I misteri di Parigi* [Lib.?] Zante 1867, and then this list does not include a clutch of even remoter operas with such exotic titles as *Il conte Spourghitis*; *Lambros*; *Don Pigna* and the *Marathon Salamis* to be discussed here, for the painful reason that they were never staged in his lifetime.

If anyone supposes that even the top layer of the worldwide pile of neglected operas has been turned-over, forget it. Poor Carrer! Yet another overlooked master of the imperial period of Italian opera. How many books are unaware of his existence yet his vivid music epitomises the resistance which flourished defiantly despite a Verdian embargo in post-Risorgimento Italy, a refusenik dynastic movement cherished by a series of influential teachers which, passing from master to pupil, formed a family sequence that never quite rejected the belcantistic mode and succeeded *pari-passu* in welding the dying accents of the *melodramma romantico* to the *verismo* of the early twentieth century. The authors of this never-completely overt dissidence were Lauro Rossi and Amilcare Ponchielli, but drawn into the net were a full spectrum of *trascurati* from both before and after their day, including the aging Giovanni Pacini, the immigrant Carlos Gomes, Filippo Marchetti, Errico Petrella, Nicola De Giosa and Alfredo Catalani among many others even more dimly perceived whose supercharged works are painfully emerging in our day. How is it possible that we continue to ignore such committed works by such colourful composers? Italian by conviction, if not always by birth and all as melodically superlative as any before or after. Of this Greek composer, UTET (<http://www.utet.it/>) says complacently: "Le sue op. sono in gran parte perdute" (which fortunately is not true).

Carrer had an idiosyncratic musical education but reached maturity as a pupil of Raimondo Boucheron in Milan (a fragment of whose music can be heard in the *Requiem per Rossini*) and thus was part and parcel of the refusenik generation. He began well, two operas at the

Carcano in that city but failing to breach the walls of La Scala took up his bags and went home. He was not without admirers, his operas had nearly everything necessary for him to become a popular composer, he had a worldly and versatile nature (as the range of subject-matter of the list above makes clear) but fair-wind seldom blew favourably as far as his career was concerned, both in the land of his adoption and at home. A simple hearing of this unknown *Marathon Salamis* will oblige most listeners to fall out of their chair. Ten minutes into the opera and everyone will be aware that here is a real melodist, with a well-shaped, ecstatic lyricism confided to huge voices with the dramatic energy of a Ponchielli, a Petrella or a Gomes pumped-up by several others and by his own huge talent, with a wholly-mature understanding of the stage and enough memorable themes to supply lyres to an entire Mount Olympus of attendant Divinities.

I have been tempted to begin by saying: “Just listen to the Mirto/Fedima duet of Act II” but it is no use sampling remarkable bits and pieces of this long score, there are too many and they are non-stop. The vocality sounds Italian, the instrumentation evokes Greece, but with a sophistication often turned north of the Alps. This music rejoices in eclecticism, flamboyant orchestration, huge swinging *unison* alla Pacini; vast cori; in some ways opera determined to sum-up all the possibilities of his day in its overstuffed vitality; big tune after big tune; tutti after tutti; enough melting climaxes to defrost the North Eiger. Triumphant, violent, over-ripe, sweet, pathetic and incorporating a full-scale battle and the longest “Addio” in all opera. The plot makes Metastasio’s *Temistocle* seem as pointless as antimacassar and though it purports to be somewhere near historic truth, with its scheming, its crime and its screaming it actually overlaps *verismo* while still retaining a foothold in the forms and routines of mid-nineteenth century *melodramma*. If ever it appears on CD you will never be able to take it off. (Wherever can this unperformed music have been all this time - it must have been burning a hole on someone’s shelf?)

It is perfectly obvious that an opera like this is the absolute antithesis of Verdian compression and concentration; extravagance and expansiveness are its *modus vivendi*, instead of grave dramatic achievement everything is over-the-top, but at the same time predictable, lavish, sonorous, highly coloured, no holds-barred music that commands attention and rewards with a generosity that owes nothing to calculation. Quite another and totally welcome operatic experience is being proposed.

The performance and audience reception of *Marathon Salamis* were of a quality scarcely ever accorded to a rarity here. The Greek National State Opera cut no corners with a cast, orchestra and conductor that would be the envy of all those who aspire to stage forgotten opera anywhere. A team of tremendous voices was able to respond to every huge challenge: led by Andreas Koloumbis (Temistokle); Martha Arapi (Fedima), Lydia Aggelopoulou (Mirto) and Yannis Hristopoulos (Alessandro), magnificently set-off by Vassilis Kostopoulos (Gran sacerdote) and Dimitris Kassioumis (Xerxes). There was also a poet, Margarita Varlamou whose astonishing flourish at the start put everyone on their toes. Conducted by Byron Fidetzis this revival of the lost work on 14 February 2003 will hopefully begin a Carrer vogue that will be unstoppable and we shall hear all the rest!

Marathon Salamis Production Photographs

(Photographs courtesy of the Greek National Opera. They were not included in the original article)



Andreas Koloumbis (Temistocle), Marta Arapis(Fedima), Yannis Hristopoulou (Alessandro) and Lydia Aggelopoulou (Mirto), Act 1 Finale, Athens 14.02.2003

