

More Mayr Milestones

The New Year has been launched with the excellent recording of *Sisara*, Mayr's early oratorio for the Mendicanti and performed during Holy Week 1773, and later performed a second time the following year. (Guild GMCD 7288/9)

It is a privilege to hear this splendid music. Historically it illustrates the music that was being performed in the Conservatorios just before the collapse of Venice under Napoleon and at the end of a cultural age. Musically we can now hear the music that swept Mayr to fame and led to the performance of his first opera *Saffo* at La Fenice in the following year. In other words, how Mayr launched himself into the musical world. It is amazing to think that here he was nearly thirty years of age with practically no formal training and compositions that basically amount to songs suddenly 'appearing' as the composer to be reckoned with.

Guild's recording offers for the first time the experience of hearing Mayr being played on early instruments with style and zest under the careful direction of Franz Hauk. The 'Filarmonici di Verona' play superbly and it is enough to compare the rendering of the overture (which moves without a break into the oratorio's first movement) to the playing on that generally disappointing disc of 'Sinfonias' under Donato Renzetti, to recognise that one has entered a new dimension of sound and interpretation. It is the sheer fluency of the music, whether vocal or instrumental, that intoxicates and carries the ear along. The instruments sing (Interestingly Mayr was studying Tartini at this time who emphasised just this quality). There is a fluidity not before known and it is quite amazing to compare to the ear this music to that of the late works like *Atalia* and then to recognise the 'revolution' that Mayr wrought in Italian music. The mainstream, as Alexander Weatherston has often said, flows through him to Donizetti and beyond. Franz Hauk's careful selection of works to revive and record is gradually opening for us the panorama of Mayr's work. Surely it is Hauk's bringing of his German training to the composer's feel for the Italian idiom of the period which makes these discs so welcome. There is so much one could write about *Sisara*, one could easily fill a whole Donizetti Journal; therefore, for brevity's sake I will leave the reader to make his own discoveries. Just remember that with *Sisara* we are still in the world of Harlequin and Colombine and the Domino masks that once walked the streets of Venice, whilst with the late works we are strolling with Rossini and the young Donizetti about to be launched on his career. A revolution has taken place.

However, just one thought. How does *Sisara* compare with *La Passione* composed in the following year for Forlì? *La Passione* shows signs of the dramatic intensity creeping into Mayr's work, especially in the arioso sections and the arias for Maria and Giuseppe in the oratorio's second half. The Guild recording, with hindsight, may be said to lack something of this drama, primarily through enunciation and empathy. The soloists of the London performance of 1974 for all its imperfections conveyed something of the the intensity of the Passion that is lacking the recording. The words being sung as both Mayr and Donizetti emphasised are essential and are the key to interpreting their music.

Another milestone is the publication of the proceedings of the conference held in Bergamo: *Mayr a S. Maria Maggiore: 1802-2002*. This important volume of studies helps us to place Mayr in a greater context and may be said to lead us on from Iris Winkler's excellent book on Mayr in Venice. There are four sections dividing the essays: *Il contesto storico*, *La Cappella di S. Maria Maggiore*, *Gli Itinerari and Didattica e Musica per la Cappella* (in this last section Pieralberto Cattaneo's study of Mayr's first *Vespers for Corpus Christi 1802* subsequently led to a performane which we hope will be soon recorded). I will home in on one essay in particular: Francesco Bellotto's contribution that comes to terms with the 'difficult' aspect of Mayr - that is his initial background with the Bavaria *Illuminati* and the Masonic world of his times - is full of new insights and information. For example, who was the Reverend Count Pesenti who became Mayr's patron after v. Bassus? There is a point of view that all this aspect of Mayr is irrelevant. Nonsense. Our education and the people we mix with during our years of formation are basic to understanding ourselves when we reach that point of maturity and look back on our lives and begin to see them in perspective, only then do we begin to recognise where we have come from. Bellotto's essay is a major contribution. Hopefully we will not have to suffer a best seller with the title, *The Mayr Codex!*

As if to set the seal of imprimatur on the need for research into the more concealed aspect of Mayr's teaching, the dust cover illustrates "La corte di Ludovico il Moro" painted by the composer's friend Giuseppe Diotti. Gaffurio on whom Mayr wrote at length, standing behind his patrons is a portrait of Simon Mayr. Here is a clear indication of the extent to which Donizetti's teacher identified his musical knowledge with the classical tradition associated with Pythagoras. Remember also that an inscription hanging on the south door of S. Maria Maggiore in 1845 at Mayr's funeral read 'Ritrovatore di soavi numeri'. All those musical treatises copied out by Mayr (in general associated with Tartini's school) truly need a sympathetic, knowledgeable study if we are to set into context his school and begin to correctly appreciate the deep genius of Donizetti.

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Another milestone is that Ricordi are to publish the critical editions of the 'Mayr Gesellschaft' and in this work initially Franz Hauk and Anders Wiklund are the prime moving forces. And so we now have two 'foundations': Mayr's in Germany and Donizetti's in Italy. The 'Simon Mayr-Tage' are held at Ingolstadt in September-October. These are organised by Hans Amler and Franz Hauk with a dedicated team under Iris Winkler. The 'Tage' hold performances of Mayr's sacred and profane music. Last year gave performances of *Sisara* and *Il Segreto*, together with other works, as well as lectures.

There is one disappointment for 2005. *Fedra* has had to be postponed. Though a substantial amount of money was raised for this important revival the Kulturamt of Ingolstadt failed to fund the essential local performances after those given in Munich. And so we must wait with patience. I am told Ingolstadt prefers funding football rather than the jewel in the city's crown.

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