

Maometto II

La Fenice, Venice 28 and 30 January, 2005

Maometto II, first mounted in Naples in 1820 to a lukewarm reception, was revamped by Rossini for the carnevale season at La Fenice in Venice in 1823. In the process, amongst other changes, a new overture was added; Anna's Act I entrance aria got cut; pages from *Bianca e Falliero* - notably the quartet from Act II - and from *Ermione* were grafted on; and the concluding pages were extensively rewritten to provide a happy ending, culminating in 'Tanti affetti'. Future generations have judged the Venetian version inferior both to that of Naples, and to the later conversion into *Le Siège de Corinthe*. It was, nevertheless, the Venetian version that La Fenice chose for carnival week in 2005 - and who, indeed, wants sad endings during carnival? First, however, a brief word about the re-arisen phoenix. Those who knew it in its previous incarnation will notice many differences. Not, perhaps, in the entrance, whose salmon-coloured decoration is still the pink of perfection. But the auditorium looks both familiar and different. The new gilding is inevitably quite vibrant, but glitzy rather than vulgar; the figurative paintings are faithful copies, but they lack fluency and refinement of brush-work, and stubbornly remain copies rather than recreations; the previous red of the walls of the boxes has been replaced with a turquoise that matches the body colour of the tiers - quite pleasing, but different. Water sprinklers are everywhere. Sadly, one thing that has not changed is the generally incommodious character of the seating in the boxes, and the stage view of those sitting nearest the proscenium is still masked by the tripartite, eye-level lamps between each box. One wishes that faithfulness to the original could have been slightly waived to improve sightlines.

Another difference, increasingly common in make-overs of opera-houses world wide, is that the floor of the stalls is now exposed, uncarpeted wood. There is also a space under the stalls to improve resonance. Whether due to this or not, the acoustic of the new theatre does appear to me to be quite bright, and a shade dry. I was interested to note that although the orchestral roster of La Fenice during the 1823 season had forty-three string players (25/10/2/6), Maestro Scimone opted for only thirty-one (18/6/4/3), while keeping to Rossini's specification of the remaining orchestral forces. I have to say, however, that the orchestral balance seemed fine, although Scimone was at times at pains to help his singers by visibly urging a reduction in volume from the orchestra. The four main protagonists all sang well and acted less well. Most interesting, in my view, was Anna Rita Gemmabella as Calbo who, at the second of the performances I attended, drew the longest and loudest cheers from the audience. She has been a mainstay of the Bad Wildbad bel canto festival for several years where, indeed, her performance as Calbo was the one redeeming feature of (the Naples version of) *Maometto II* in 2002. I marked her then as heading for an international career, and she still seems to me to be on track. The part of Anna was sung by Carmen Giannattasio, whose performance as Adelia in *Ugo conte di Parigi* in Bergamo in 2003 hinted at greater things to come. She did not disappoint. Although her voice is limited in size, and she occasionally had to push it at climaxes, her technique is quite up to Rossini's exacting requirements, and she was a delight to listen to. She, too, is going in the

right direction. Lorenzo Regazzo, in the title role, was the best-known and most experienced of the artists in these performances. Although his bass is rather soft-grained compared, say, with that of Samuel Ramey, he is clearly one of the best Rossini basses before the public, and no vocal demands appear to be beyond him. He dominated the stage both vocally and histrionically - although he should beware of too often adopting an 'I am the pirate king' stance, with legs astride and arms akimbo. Which leaves us with Maxim Mironov, who took the role of Paolo Erisso. This tall, young Russian - he is twenty three - was not made-up to look old enough to be Anna's father, nor did he have a commanding enough stage presence to convince as the Venetian commander pitted against Maometto. Nor, sadly, does he yet have a tenor voice in the heroic mould that the part clearly demands. He appears to have succeeded elsewhere as Ernesto in *Don Pasquale* and Fenton in *Falstaff*, and perhaps these are the sort of roles to which his voice is best suited at this stage of his development. Having said that, however, I hasten to add that he by no means disgraced himself as Erisso. He is possessed of an extremely pleasing (although not particularly Italianate-sounding) voice, good Italian pronunciation, and a very adequate Rossinian vocal technique. Already a welcome addition to the pool of Rossini tenors, I believe that, provided he does not overtax his voice now, he will develop into a much sought-after artist. I must also mention Nicola Marchesini in the small part of Conduliero. In the Venetian revision this is a problematic role because, in those parts surviving from the Naples version it is written for a tenor, but in the Venetian revisions it is written for a bass. Some have suggested that only a baritone can have any hope of encompassing the role, but at these performances the part was assigned - without any clear justification at all - to a high counter tenor! But what a startling voice it was. Marchesini is another comparatively recent operatic debutant, but what makes him potentially special is the colour and quality of his voice. It is closer to what I imagine is the true castrato sound, with immense power (and volume) allied to a clear soprano. If he has the technique to match - and it was not possible to determine this from the small part of Conduliero - he could be the ideal answer to having Mozart and Rossini castrato roles sung by a man. Scimone has been associated with this opera for many years now, and he led a committed and dramatic performance. The production was in the hands of Pier Luigi Pizzi, whose Palladian production was so successful in Pesaro two decades ago. On this occasion he used the full potential of the new Fenice stage machinery, setting the action in a ruined, roofless, octagonal Baroque temple, which rose to reveal its subterranean vaults, and disappeared sideways into the wings to reveal another battle-scarred landscape. The costumes, in monochrome hues, suggested the Greek War of Independence (more or less contemporary with the opera's composition), and the stage pictures were both pleasing and convincing. Destined, it seems, to become both a CD and a DVD, readers will be able to discover these things for themselves. As a performance it will hardly equal the currently available Philips set of the Naples version with Ramey, Palacio and Anderson, but Rossini enthusiasts will want to have the Venetian version as well. As a DVD it will solace lovers of traditional productions who prefer to spend their money on predictable enjoyment at home rather than risk the increasingly frequent disappointment offered by contemporary live opera.

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