

Arrighetto or squaring up to Rossini

(Alla ricerca delle farse perdute)

Pesaro's artful gambit in reviving Coccia's hilarious *Arrighetto* this year whets the Proustian tastebuds with a vengeance, the madeleine of *Il mondo delle farse* dipped into a heady brew of old conflicts, of claims and counterclaims. These should not go over the top. Initially, contacts between the Neapolitan composer and the *pesarese* had begun on the wrong foot: Coccia's début opera *Il matrimonio per lettera di cambio* had failed dismally at Rome in 1807 while Rossini's official operatic exordium in an astonished Venice *La cambiale di matrimonio* (on the same plot needless to say) succeeded so convincingly three years later that he never found it necessary to glance behind his back throughout a long career. Poor Coccia. Not that the victor had everything his own way, there were countercurrents in the world of *farse*; the *semi-seria* mode - championed by Mayr, then by Carlo Coccia - almost immediately began to melt the glassy contours favoured by Rossinian cynicism and worldliness, so that comedy was no longer *wholly* impervious to human weakness or sentiment as the younger maestro would have preferred. Coccia defiantly suggested that love could actually triumph in the end - especially in his *Una fatale supposizione ovvero Amore e dovere* (1811) and *I solitari* (also 1811) (the latter thematically a whole decade or more ahead of its time). Indeed, he did it so effectively that he got into the good books of all the old buffers, Romantics to a man.

The San Moisè carnival season of 1812/13 is a case in point, the battlefield not quite flat, the issues not purely musical, into play was the Age of Enlightenment (which people confused with the Age of Reason) v the New Generation. Sentimental opera was fighting back.

The series of "lost" *farse* at Pesaro, *Il mondo delle farse*, full of discoveries, has not so far produced anything quite so confrontational as this *Arrighetto*, the fact is, Coccia's opera was well received in 1813, his great rival's offering, in the same theatre immediately afterwards, a sad flop. It is certainly ironic that Coccia's expert poet Angelo Anelli happens to have been an adept of the cynical mode (when he felt like it), thus it was Rossini who found himself on the wrong foot; Anelli would be both the evil genius and the fairy godmother of this Venetian Spring. It began dimly at the S.Moisè with an "old" opera by Farinelli which had one performance; then came Generali's *Isabella ossia Il più meritato compenso* which did rather better, both of these with Rossini's librettist Giuseppe Foppa. On 9 January 1813 came *Arrighetto* which thrived - in tandem with a few performances of *Una fatale supposizione* - until Rossini's *Il signor Bruschino ossia Il figlio per azzardo* took the stage on 27 January 1813. This last, alas, struck a false note in every way; too spiky, too brittle, too much brio and contested in part by the musicians themselves at the prima, it survived for a second night, and then was substituted by a revival of the Anelli/Pavesi *Ser Marcantonio*.

Bruschino would disappear until 1844. No one pretends there was any justice in this dismissal, audiences were not only blind (like justice) but also deaf, and then, after all, the earthquake reception of *Tancredi* at La Fenice ten days later put the record completely-and-utterly straight. But *Arrighetto*

had made a point. Whereas Foppa's libretto for *Bruschino* was dismissed as "French" (in 1813 this was not intended as a compliment) sterile and confused, that of Anelli for Coccia was relished as a sarcastic whodunit that kept even the flighty Venetians amused. It was also Italian enough for any chauvinist: Pesaro announces its revived *Arrighetto* as a "*Farsa sentimentale*" (which is an understatement) but actually it was first staged in Venice in 1813 simply as a "Dramma per musica" adding "*L'argomento del presente Dramma è tratto del Decamerone di Boccaccio, e della Novella in esso di Madama Beritola*" (itself intended as a joke). The fact is, Coccia had had the wit to allow himself to be involved in an extremely funny send-up of sentimental comedy, a tongue-in-cheek plot involving a series of totally over-the-top 'lost' sons and brothers in scenes of continuously improbable emotional excess. Set in "Cicilia" rumours of the fearful return of the legendary godfather Arrighetto emerge in the *Introduzione*. But we are let into the secret almost immediately: that he is under our noses, disguised as a gardener. Why, no one cares to explain. Indeed the frightful Arrighetto appears only as a pink panther 'Tebaldo' murmuring toothless platitudes 'Cara patria...amati figli/Non più guai...non più perigli...' swooning against a frieze of chattering inanities in a household where both his lost sons appear, one in lordly guise, the other servile and misunderstood, both unrecognised and both wishing to marry the same girl. The one single relief from schmaltz being the acid Donna Rosa who finds life totally boring. This setup - debunking - disguises - wicked satire - absurd poetry - making fun even of the farsical genre itself, is typical of Anelli, an operatic malcontent of genius whose turning upside-down of the conventions made him quite irresistible. It all ends happily with the audience in fits. Anelli even having the cheek to lay his cards on the table at the very end with this provocative quatrain:

*Questa sì, che veramente
È una storia da gazzetta.
Io la scrivo in fretta in fretta,
E la manda a far stampar*

Coccia invested this gloriously insincere pseudo-plot with delightful music. Within normal audience expectations, in contrast (and irrespective of any Gallic blight) Foppa's libretto for the great Rossini was utterly predictable, especially vis-a-vis the naughty sophistication of the preceding. His single "*Figlio per azzardo*" unable to rival Anelli's "*Due figli per azzardo*" (Anelli had been doing some reconnaissance in advance of course, jeering at his rival poet). Nothing in *Bruschino*, other than musically, was allowed to make an impression, there were no comparable novelties - indeed the overwordy dialogue and familiar situations were frankly the same recipe and structure as the *farse* that had been blessed by Rossini's genius so many times before. *Arrighetto*, in its disrespectful way, had had the same savage impact as "The Office" on the weary habitués of the S. Moisè. Rossini got the message: *L'italiana in Algeri* reusing Anelli's vivid libretto supplied to Luigi Mosca in 1808, on 22 May 1813 at the S Benedetto in that same city, would turn out to be the lynchpin of an imposing career. Coccia's opera went on to a decade of revivals, including that at La Scala on 8 June 1822 with Teresa Belloc, Sivelli, De Grecis, Sirlotti and Luigi Lablache. New pieces were added at Genoa in 1816 when it was divided into two acts... It is to be hoped, however, that the "fritto misto" effect of the recent *Clotilde*, can be avoided.

Alexander Weatherston