

# Paventa insano

To start with, a quotation from the film *The Shawshank Redemption* :  
 (When Susanna and the Countess's duettino from *Le Nozze di Figaro* is broadcast throughout the prison the following narration is spoken by the character 'Red')

*"I have no idea to this day what these two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared: higher and further than anybody in a grey place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments every last man in Shawshank felt free."*

That musical experience has bound all the inmates of Shawshank in a mute state of emotional bliss. Yet in the opera the duettino is not even a moment of great emotion. It accompanies the writing of a fake letter: a little conspiracy to trap the Count at his philandering. But the power of music makes it whatever you, the listener, want, or need it to be.

As I listen to the new Opera Rara recital CD *Paventa insano* I am reminded of this same power of music that is able to burst the boundaries of its original context: quite an achievement for excerpts from these many forgotten Italian operas (genuine, rather than Viennese copy) that leap back into life at Opera Rara's behest. The theme of the recital CD is the less well-known operas of Pacini and Mercadante; the two composers most affected by the mid-century Verdi juggernaut. I use the term 'less well-known' to distinguish these products of Pacini and Mercadante's long careers from the few operas that survive in the repertoire and the handful that Opera Rara have generously given (and will give) back to us in complete form.

I have the same stunned but equivocal response as those Shawshank prisoners. The title invites me to 'fear the singer's anger', but I detect no anger. I am in the same state of rapt escape from the reality around me as those prisoners. The fatal doom of most of the plots leaves me completely untouched. I sense no irony; I am aware of no conspiracies. I am just in wondrous admiration of the sheer beauty of these Bel Canto performances.

This well-filled CD is not a showcase for a particular performer (though there are plenty of wonderful musical achievements among its 10 tracks). Nor is it remotely academic in its planning or execution (the items are not arranged chronologically, as Jeremy Common's notes with talk of 'early', 'middle' and 'late' periods might lead you to expect). The tempting

programme of 'bleeding chunks' from totally unfamiliar operas (described as 'arias and ensembles') contains a mouth-watering morsel from a finale (Mercadante's *I normanni a Parigi*), an insert aria (by Mercadante for his own *Elena da Feltre*), various separate ensembles and a complete aria finale (Pacini's *Allan Cameron*). The sequence (the two composers alternate) gives variety and, in a fascinating twist, confuses the listener as to which is being played. My long-standing prejudice against Murky-dante has been successfully challenged. No longer can I dismiss him as a purveyor of lugubrious chants leavened by four-square ensembles. He is by turns as melodic as Donizetti, as moving as Verdi, and his musical thought (heresy of heresies) as deep as that expected of German composers. Pacini, a composer in need of more advocacy than most (to everyone but our Chairman) comes over with stunning variety and an unique musical voice. I suspect that it is his 'bleeding chunks' that will be most surprising.

Certainly my Scottish sensitivity is engaged by Jeremy Common's attempts to make sense of the background to Pacini's *Allan Cameron*. He dwells on the possible sources of the eponymous hero without finding a solution. In doing so he never really engages with the cavalier (literally) treatment of Scottish history (Ottocento Italy in the midst of its own political turmoil, took refuge often in the opera house, and whilst there revelled in the real or imagined disloyalties in a remote chilly northern nation to which they hadn't travelled much since the unsuccessful Roman attempt at civilisation). My own prosaic explanation is that the 'Allan Cameron' of the title was Cameron of Lochiel; his forename of Ewan, when given the more usual Scottish spelling of 'Euan' could, if written in longhand, become something like 'eUan' and thence '*Allan*' to a librettist and composer with no interest in accuracy but in search of euphony. No explanation does any harm to the wonderful music: the aria finale forms the single biggest item on the CD and will do much to make Pacini a household name and increase demands to hear more of his music.

Like the inmates of Shawshank I am in thrall to the escapist power of this music. On this year's chilly days before any sign of spring the Mediterranean warmth spilling out of music in these wonderful performances (was any such level of ensemble possible in its original performances?) brings on a happy glow quite out of keeping with the often very serious situations faced by the characters that are singing. This is music the loss of which would have diminished us all. Hurrah for Opera Rara. What a testimony to Patric Schmid's taste and judgement!

If you haven't yet acquired this disc then go and get it now 'while stocks last'. Believe me, it will stay on your CD player longer than most of the other new issues in this 'Mozart' year.

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