

Colombo

discovers Europe

Catania, Teatro Massimo Bellini, May 19 and 21, 2006

Watching Woody Allen's cleverly knitted "Match Point" (2005) one is lavishly rewarded with a sound-track including, among well-known opera excerpts, 'Mia piccirella', an enchanting "barcarola napoletana", from *Salvator Rosa* (Genova, Carlo Felice 1874) by the Brazilian Italianate Carlos Gomes (1836-1896). I scarcely dare believe - nasty as I am - that an *Italian* movie-director would pay such attention to Gomes's music!

This Brazilian isn't just one more minor opera composer among the countless forgotten ones from the nineteenth century all the same. The overwhelming musical luxuriance and exotic genius displayed in *Il guarany* (La Scala 1870), his Italian début and greatest triumph, even struck Opera's High Priest Giuseppe Verdi favourably, at a time when the latter had not yet composed *Aida*. However, the newly independent Italy (except for *Salvatore Rosa*) were to receive a far less friendly welcome, including his still-underrated masterpiece *Fosca* (1873). In recent years, performances of Gomes's works here and there have revealed to contemporary audiences - especially those fed-up with the all too customary hits - how vital and appealing his music still is, thus vindicating a composer who is no longer cherished only in his exotic native land.

Colombo, which was composed in Milan, in the Spring 1892, is a cantata - described as a "poema corale-sinfonico" - and tending to take at various moments the shape of a real opera. Although Albino Falanca (actually Anibal Falcão, who sketched the plot) is credited with the libretto, the author of the Italian text is no one other than Gomes himself. Until about the first half of the nineteenth century cantatas were written for any purpose and dedicatee - the versatile Rossini and Donizetti, among others left a copious production of them - while, in the late Ottocento, cantatas became a much more rare item, Verdi's only contribution to the genre being the clumsy and ugly *Inno delle nazioni* (1862) while far more appealing is the *Cantata in onore di Gaetano Donizetti* (1875) by Ponchielli (who was a staunch friend of Gomes).

Gomes wasn't, as on other occasions, the best defender of his own cause. But the steps he took to get a chance of performing *Colombo* in Genoa to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, were distinctly half-hearted. Verdi had already dug the ground so that his protégé Alberto Franchetti could be entrusted with the task of composing his opera *Cristoforo Colombo*: according to Gaspare Nello Vetro's programme notes for this Catania concert there is no evidence that Verdi - wintering as usual in Genoa - put-in a good word for Franchetti with the Mayor of Genoa as no documents remain to prove it, but then so what! Verdi spent long months on the spot: VERBA VOLANT, SCRIPTA... NON MANENT!

Eventually the première of Gomes's cantata took place in Rio de Janeiro

instead, at the Teatro Lirico, on October 12, 1892, facing a hostile, disapproving audience. In the opinion of the Italo-brazilian musicologist Marcus Goes, to whom we owe the fascinating "**Carlos Gomes . Un pioniere alla Scala**" (Milano 1997): "*Colombo è un'opera di alto valore musicale per l'insuperabile impulso sinfonico che la anima, dall'inizio alla fine [...]. Colombo, oltre ad essere melodicamente ispirato, è esemplare nell'adattamento della musica alle parole e nell'impiego delle voci dei solisti e del coro. [...] ci sono parti sceniche nel Colombo di genialissima fattura teatrale, con una musica drammatica della maggiore qualità ed emotività come la scoperta della nuova terra nella terza parte, come la bonaccia in alto mare, che immobilizza le caravelle, anch'essa nella terza parte, come il racconto degli amori di gioventù di Colombo, nella prima parte...*" (263-264).

Piero Rattalino, Artistic Director of the Teatro Massimo Bellini in Catania, while nurturing an ambitious project, that of staging *Lo Schiavo* (Rio de Janeiro, Teatro Imperial 1889 an opera still awaiting its European stage première¹) in an unspecified future, did not in the interim let slip the chance of offering Gomes's *Colombo* - his first European landing - to Catania on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's death. The Catanese operagoers however did not come in crowds, most likely because of a complete lack of promotion, while the event was simply ignored outside the city. A recording, however, of the concert will be issued soon by Bongiovanni. Even the critic of "La Sicilia" wasn't there on the first evening, as the newspaper required its handyman to attend a far-more urgent affair, the first showing of *The Da Vinci Code*! What a pity.

The concert had been carefully rehearsed: the Teatro Bellini Orchestra sounded remarkably brilliant and its powerful coro in particular confirmed its renown. Under the energetic and supple baton of the Italo-brazilian Silvio Barbato, *Colombo*, without cuts, displayed its whole rich and colourful palette and refined instrumentation, carrying conviction both in its dramatic and elegiac moments as well as in the lyric expansiveness of its *New World* spiced dances and rumbustious fanfare.

Among the distinguished cast, Alexandru Agache sang the title role. The supreme crusader of the modern age (but for the unhappy Portuguese King Sebastian) found a convincing champion in the Roumanian baritone whose mellow and powerful singing fully expressed the variegated character of the Genoese adventurer. Shoulder-to-shoulder with him, the bass Francesco Palmieri made an impressive and austere Friar. To strike a balance, and in good dramatic contrast, the Royal couple, not just iconic as in history, shared a love duet, with the soprano Rossana Potenza (Queen Isabella of Castile), and the tenor Gustavo Porta (King Ferdinand of Aragon) both emphasising the gracefulness and strength of their regal roles. All these artists received warm applause, quite enough, we hope, to encourage Gomes to visit Catania again, and soon.

Fulvio Stefano Lo Presti

¹ When *Lo Schiavo* was performed in London in 1978, under the aegis of our Donizetti Society, it was given in concert form only.