

**LADIES, BORN TO CONQUER AND TO RULE:
CORRADINO or MATILDE DI SHABRAN at BAD WILDBAD**

By Charles Jernigan, August 6, 2019

Femmine mie, guardate:
L'ho fatto delirar.
Femmine, siamo nate
Per vincere e regnar.

Ladies, take note:
I drove him crazy.
Ladies, we were born
To conquer and to rule.

The centerpiece of this year's Bel Canto Festival in Bad Wildbad was the first version of Rossini's *Matilde di Shabran*, which at the time of its debut in Rome in February, 1821 (with none other than Niccolò Paganini as the first violinist) was known as *Corradino, Cuor di ferro—Corradino, Iron Heart*. Rossini had produced *Maometto II* in December, 1820, in Naples, and was so rushed to get *Corradino* ready by the following February 24, that he enlisted his friend and admirer Giovanni Pacini to compose some of the pieces in Act II and help him with the recitatives. He also resorted to self-borrowing for the overture (from *Edoardo e Cristina*) and a chorus and an aria for Corradino (from *Ricciardo e Zoraide*). A few months later, with more time, Rossini substantially revised the work for Naples, replacing the Pacini numbers with his own compositions, recasting the role of the poet Isidoro for a famous Neapolitan singer who always sang in the Neapolitan dialect, discarding the aria for Corradino which was borrowed from *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, and recasting a bass aria for the mezzo travesty character Edoardo—among other changes. In 1822 the opera was again revised for the Vienna premiere, which merged aspects of the two previous versions.

Corradino or *Matilde* was successful and played in Italy and beyond for a number of years (it reached New York in 1834), usually in the Rome version which did not require a singer who could sing Neapolitan. Like most of Rossini's operas, it gradually dropped out of the repertory by 1850 and, with one exception, was not heard again until 1974 when a revival in Genoa used a cut version of the original Rome score (with the Pacini numbers). When the Rossini Opera Festival revived it in 1996 in a new critical edition (with the sensational, unexpected debut of Juan Diego Florez), the Naples version was used (with Isidoro singing in Neapolitan). Subsequent revivals in Pesaro and London (all with Florez, but with different sopranos) have continued to use the Naples score. The Bad Wildbad Festival presented the Vienna version in 1998, but this year's performances gave us the original, Rome version, complete with the Pacini numbers and the self-borrowings.

Rossini and his librettist Jacopo Ferretti called the work a “melodramma giacoso” but it is really a sophisticated comedy which contains some of the composer’s very best music, especially the ensembles. Richard Osborne believes it to be a parody—Rossini parodying his own earlier work as well as opera seria. The plot is a twist on Beauty and the Beast; in fact the subtitle is “Iron Heart and the Beauty.” Corradino is a petty tyrant living in a castle in Spain. He hates women and poets and has imprisoned the son (Edoardo) of his great rival, Raimondo. Soon a hungry, impecunious poet (Isidoro) wanders up to the castle looking for work or a handout, and is threatened with death for his temerity before being imprisoned. Next, Corradino’s doctor/advisor Aliprando arrives with a possible cure for the tyrant’s misogyny and misanthropy in the person of Matilde, Countess of Shabran. She immediately wraps the woman-hating Corradino around her little finger so that the tyrant doesn’t know whether he is coming or going. Finally, one other character arrives, the Contessa d’Arco, who wants to forge a political marriage with Corradino herself. She immediately sizes Matilde up as her rival. In Act II, Edoardo’s father, Raimondo Lopez arrives with an army to free Edoardo. The Contessa d’Arco has Edoardo set free and blames Matilde. Enraged, Corradino orders the poet Isidoro to kill Matilde by throwing her from a cliff. The soft-hearted poet cannot do it, but he tells Corradino that she is dead. Corradino is desperate and ready to kill himself when he learns that Matilde is innocent, but he is saved when presented with the real woman, who has only been killed “metaphorically” (Isidoro is a poet after all). Matilde swears love and fidelity to Corradino, but addresses her final rondo to the women in the audience: ‘the martial trumpet is still and now love and tranquility rule’. ‘Women’, she tells us all, ‘were born to conquer and to reign.’



Ginardo, Corradino, Isidoro



Aliprando, Matilde

For many years I listened to a pirated recording of the 1974 Genoa performance, and even though it was not very convincing, it was good enough to make *Matilde di Shabran* the Rossini opera I most wanted to see. So I was there for the Florez debut in 1996 and for the subsequent Pesaro iterations (the sopranos were Elizabeth Futral, Annick Massis and Olga Peretyatko). I have come to believe that this opera is one of Rossini’s very greatest—a funny story and wonderfully rich musically. Of course you need a great cast, particularly for the two lead roles. The 2019 Wildbad performances gave us just that—wonderful leads, strong supporting singers and a very special orchestral performance by the Passionart Orchestra Krakow and the Górecki Chamber Choir led by José Miguel Pérez-Sierra.

Angelini is a graduate of Ohio State, with degrees in both bassoon and voice. He has sung in the U.S., Europe and even South America. The difficulty of his role as Corradino is the stuff of legends (how Florez came from nowhere to triumph in one of the most difficult Rossini roles), but Angelini has it, every hemidemisemiquaver (64th note). The Wildbad use of the original Rome score restored Corradino's aria towards the end of Act II ("Anima mia, Matilde") which Rossini had borrowed from *Ricciardo e Zoraide* and subsequently cut for Naples; it is torturous in the best sense, an incredibly difficult vocal display. Angelini may have been tired by that time, but he overcame all the difficulties and made the impossible coloratura an astonishing feat of sheer delight.

Perhaps even more wonderful was the Matilde of Spanish light-lyric soprano Sara Blanch. This was her fourth role at the Wildbad festival, after debuting there in 2015 in *L'Italiana in Algeri*. From the moment she entered with her coquettish entrance aria-duet, "Di capricci, di smorfiette," she commanded the stage. Blanch is an accomplished and delightful comedienne, and of course a complete mistress of the coloratura that the role demands. To be successful, she must show how Corradino could be bewitched by Matilde, and Blanch made it very clear since she bewitched the audience too. Her strong voice rode all the ensembles without ever being harsh and her bell-like clarity of tone never tired. Indeed, women are born to 'reign and conquer' if they are as charismatic on stage as Ms. Blanch.



Matilde and Conquests

Victoria Yarovaya in the pants role of Edoardo used her rich mezzo voice with great musicality. She has a major aria in Act I ("Piange il mio ciglio") and a delicious trio and duet in the second act. Most of the latter numbers are by Pacini, and although some of it is undistinguished, a slow section is quite lovely, worthy of Rossini. Her father, Raimondo, was sung by bass Shi Zong; in this version, Raimondo gets the Act II aria "Ah! perché, perché la morte" which goes to Edoardo in the Naples version. It has a long horn obbligato part, which Paganini played on the violin at the Rome premiere because the horn player was out sick. Aliprando was the excellent Emmanuel Franco. The Poet Isidoro is a major role, although somewhat reduced in the Rome version; he is a more sentimental take on a buffo bass role, here sung superbly by Giulio Mastrototaro. He is funny too, with his quotes from Tasso and Dante. The Contessa d'Arco was successfully undertaken by apprentice artist Lamia Beuque, while Ricardo Seguel was Ginardo and Julian Henao Gonzalez did double duty as Egoldo and Rodrigo.

The Krakow-based orchestra played every opera and concert which used an orchestra at Wildbad this year, and here they were at their best. Pérez-Sierra led his forces with a drive and a brightness which captured all of the brio in the score and drove the ensembles (and solos) breathlessly. The highly complex ensembles (2 duets, a trio, a quartet, a quintet and a sextet along with the *concertato* first finale) came off faultlessly, and one was forced to wonder how the singers could sing all those notes so fast, but they did, and they articulated the text too. Pérez-Sierra's youthful, fast-paced take on the score was undeniably exciting, and it all resulted in foot-stomping, shouting, bravo-ing, and mad applause from the capacity audience, roused to a fever-pitch of excitement.

I have been to many of the Wildbad festivals, starting in 1996, and this was the best performance I have ever seen there. And in my mind, *Matilde di Shabran* or *Corradino* (call in what you will) in the Rome or Naples or Vienna version (pick whichever you like) is one of Rossini's very best scores, brimming with all the life the 29 year old composer could put into it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if just one of the companies which plans to do still another *Barber of Seville* would say, 'to hell with that' and replace it with *Matilde di Shabran*? Wouldn't Rossini smile?