

MEYERBEER INCOGNITA

By Charles Jernigan, July 30, 2019

The Wildbad Festival regularly unearths unknown gems from the early nineteenth century, in this case Giacomo Meyerbeer's first Italian opera, which was receiving its first modern performance.

Meyerbeer's Romilda e Costanza

Melodramma semiserio in due atti

Libretto di Gaetano Rossi

Musica di Giacomo Meyerbeer

Teobaldo Patrick Kabongo

Retello Javier Povedano

Romilda Chiara Brunello

Lotario César Cortés

Costanza Luiza Fatyol

Albertone Emmanuel Franco

Annina Claire Gascoin

Pierotto Giulio Mastrototaro

Ugo Timopheychuk Pavlenko

Passionart Orchestra Krakow

Direttore Luciano Acocella

Górecki Chamber Choir

The young Meyerbeer, born Jacob Liebmann Beer in Berlin in 1791, began his promising career as a composer of operas in Germany, but when he traveled to Italy in 1816 to perfect his skills he was struck dumb at a performance of Rossini's *Tancredi* in Venice. From that point for many years he modeled his own work on the man he called a "Jupiter of Music." He Italianized his first name as "Giacomo" (he had already changed his last name in honor of a rich uncle to "Meyerbeer") and set out to write operas in the Rossini style. His first effort was *Romilda e Costanza*, a medieval fantasy of rivalry, twin brothers and an all's-well that-ends-well ending. As a completely unknown composer in Italy, he was willing to pay for the libretto himself, but when the impresario of the small theater in Venice he had induced to produce his first Italian opera demanded that Meyerbeer pay all of the production costs, the composer moved the whole enterprise to Padua, where his troubles did not

cease. The leading lady (Romilda) was to be mezzo-soprano Rosmunda Pisaroni, who would later gain fame in several Rossini operas. She became convinced that Meyerbeer had promised to marry her, and when he disabused her of the notion in no uncertain terms, she tried to sabotage the production by having friends among the singers and in the orchestra play and sing badly. There was also backstage turmoil around the Costanza, Caterina Liparini, who was having an affair with a young nobleman in the royal court. Even so, the opera was moderately successful at its premiere, and it was repeated in Milan, Florence and elsewhere. Meyerbeer's "Italian career" had begun and would continue with several operas—*Semiramide riconosciuta*, *Emma di Resburgo*, *Margarita d'Anjou*, *L'esule di Granata*, and the wildly successful *Il crociato in Egitto*. All of this came before Meyerbeer moved to Paris and became the architect of French Grand Opera.

Romilda e Costanza takes place in the realm of the princes of Province, where Teobaldo, the heir to the throne, is returning from a successful campaign against the dukes of Brittany. While there, he fell in love with Romilda, the daughter of the defeated duke. Costanza, daughter of Lotario, the Count of Sisteron has known him since childhood and believes that she should become the new Prince's wife—and thus she becomes Romilda's rival in love. Unbeknownst, Romilda and Teobaldo have actually married in Brittany, and she has followed him to Province disguised as a page. At home, Teobaldo's own twin brother Retello is a jealous rival, who plots to overthrow him and assume the throne himself. A sub-plot concerns Pierotto, Teobaldo's loyal retainer and foster brother, who marries Annina at the start of Act II. Through various intrigues Retello succeeds in overthrowing Teobaldo and is subsequently overthrown himself by loyalists led by Pierotto. In the end, Romilda and Teobaldo are united and the generous Teobaldo pardons everyone including the wicked Retello.

The music of this unknown score was always melodious without being particularly memorable. Certainly Rossini stands over this score like an unseen colossus, although often Meyerbeer speaks in his own voice in the early formulation of a distinctive style. The overture is nice and the Trio "Oh come a quell'aspetto" is catchy, the only piece to enjoy a recording (on the Opera Rara label) as far as I know. Romilda has a splendid "Gran Scena" in Act II, "Ombre ferali della morte," accompanied by the bassoon. The semiserio nature of the score comes mostly from Pierotto, who is a jolly character whose wedding in Act II presents Meyerbeer with the opportunity for some genre pieces which are not associated with the plot, and which will become a feature of his grand operas in France.

The Wildbad Festival had originally planned to mount Auber's *Le philtre*, the source of *L'elisir d'amore*, but changed the plan to Meyerbeer's *Emma di Resburgo*. Plans shifted again when a usable score of *Romilda e Costanza* turned up, perhaps because it would indeed be the first performance in the modern era (a performance of *Emma di Resburgo* from Vienna is available on CD). One of the chief reasons for exhuming unknown material seems to be the production of a CD, and it helps if there is no rival recording.

Unfortunately, I did not find the concert performance of July 26 very compelling. The problems began with the two ladies. Luiza Fatyol (Costanza) was visibly pregnant and perhaps tired because of her condition. Towards the end of the performance, she sat down

and did not participate in the happy finaletto. She sounded a bit shrill too. Chiara Brunello, the contralto Romilda, sang so softly most of the time that it was like “marking” or singing at half voice. Occasionally she let loose with a loud and shrill high note, which contrasted startlingly to her generally low volume singing. Tenor Patrick Kabongo was good as always in the semi heroic role of Teobaldo, and the others were fine in their more minor roles, but it seemed to me that their hearts were not in it. The same forces which attended the other Wildbad performances this year were led by Luciano Acocella, but it did not seem well rehearsed. The principals and the chorus had their noses buried in heavy scores throughout, and there was very little attempt to interact or invest the words and music with meaning because everyone was so intent on getting the notes right. Even the phrasing seemed uneven. Luciano Acocella led the Passionart folks and the Gorécki Choir. One can sympathize with musicians struggling with an unknown score, but more familiarity with it through rehearsal should not be too much to expect, especially since the performance will presumably be immortalized in a recording.

The bottom line: it is always interesting to hear an unknown score by a major composer, but the opera awaits an adequate and committed performance before we will know whether it is worth reviving.