

## **ERMIONE COMES BACK TO NAPLES**

**Charles Jernigan, November 2019**

A little more than two hundred years ago, on March 27, 1819, Gioachino Rossini suffered the greatest failure of his illustrious career when *Ermione*, a stark tragedy, debuted at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. The surrounding details of the fiasco went mysteriously unreported or were suppressed, and today we have no idea why the opera failed—the singers, the production, the music itself. Only one report survives, and it was a letter sent to a Viennese musical publication, which said that the first night audience had heard the opera in silence. No Neapolitan journal or newspaper reported on the opera, a true oddity since by 1819 Rossini had become their favorite son, with six successful operas in that city alone. Rossini, himself, who usually wrote his parents with news of his latest works, including the less successful (he would draw a wine flask—a fiasco—on the stationary) was silent: he does not mention the failure of *Ermione* in any known letter to anyone.

Still, we know that he thought highly of what he had written. He immediately started to use *Ermione*'s music in other scores, starting scarcely one month after the premiere with the highly successful *Eduardo e Cristina*. His stillborn opera for London (which was never produced because the company went bankrupt), *Ugo, Re d'Italia*, probably used lots of *Ermione*. *Ermione* was one of the few scores he carried with him whenever he moved. When asked about it later in life, he called it “my little Italian *Guillaume Tell*” and said that it would only be revived after his death. He was right about that.

After seven performances at the San Carlo in 1819, it was withdrawn and not revived anywhere until 1976, in a substantially cut concert version in Siena. The first modern stage performances took place at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro in 1987 with Caballe, Horne and Chris Merritt; the following year it returned to the San Carlo in the Pesaro production after a hiatus of almost 170 years, and since then it has marched triumphantly around the world with performances in Omaha, San Francisco, Santa Fe, New York and many European cities. Whenever opera companies have found singers capable of singing some of the most difficult music Rossini ever wrote, it has triumphed, astounding audiences for its tragic power and its forward thinking musical expression.

The libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola is taken from Racine's *Andromaque*, but in the opera the emphasis moves from Hector's wife Andromache to Hermione—Ermione—, the daughter of Menelaus, the King of Sparta. After the fall of Troy, Andromaca (to use the Italian spelling) has been taken prisoner by Pirro, ruler of Epirus, along with her young son Astianatte. Pirro, who has previously been engaged to Ermione, falls irrationally in love with Andromaca, and thus wants to break off his engagement to Ermione, but an alliance between a Trojan queen and a Greek king would never be allowed by the other Greeks. Oreste arrives bringing a message from the kings of Greece, who wish to have young Astianatte killed, thus ending the line of the Trojan hero Hector. Oreste, however, is himself in love with Ermione. Pirro tries to win Andromaca by agreeing to save her son, and Ermione uses Oreste to carry out her jealous revenge: she eventually convinces him to assassinate Pirro. In the finale, he does the deed, and

is rushed away by his men, while Ermione is left in tatters as she has seen to the killing of the man she loves. In the end, Pirro is dead and the lives of Ermione and Oreste are in ruins.

The opera is a taut tragedy about fury and jealousy and gives us an astonishing psychological portrait of the disintegration of the protagonist as she vacillates between passion and hatred, fury and dissembling. We also see the fatal collapse of the men—Pirro and Oreste—who cannot control their desire with their reason. In this maelstrom, only Andromaca offers an oasis of calm, both psychologically and vocally. Rossini cloaks these uncomfortable psychoses with music which uses his florid style to give us concise portraits of human emotions strained to the breaking point. It is intensely modern, and it makes the audience uncomfortable too—perhaps the reason that the San Carlo audience of 1819 did not know what to make of it.

The role of Ermione is a tour-de-force, written for Rossini's soon-to-be wife Isabella Colbran, but the two principal men, Pirro and Oreste, both tenors, have excruciatingly difficult roles too. These singers must act with their voices as well as sing difficult coloratura and many "acuti" (high notes). The music pushes everyone to the breaking point.

The San Carlo's 2019 production was by Jacopo Spirei (stage direction) with sets by Nikolaus Webern and costumes by Giusi Giustino. It moved the time of the opera to the mid-twentieth century, judging by most of the costumes. The sets made Pirro's palace ("Abborito Reggia"—"abhorred palace") look like a bland Hilton hotel with cream colored walls and soft wall lighting. The opening scene of the opera, with the chorus of Trojan prisoners, had wide bars under cream colored arches. Instead of the garden specified in the libretto, the second scene consisted of those Hiltonesque walls. The throne room of Pirro was a semi-circular amphitheater, all in white. The chorus sat arrayed in the seats instead of colorfully marching in to Rossini's march music as specified in the libretto. On-stage characters included six young women dressed in diaphanous Greek chitons. They were extras, to remind us, I suppose of the Greek origins of the story. They looked odd as they slinked over the tiers of the amphitheater set or stood around among the modern-dressed singers. The chorus stood in static poses or rows and rarely acted at all. The principals acted some, but for the most part, they too were static, often standing and singing directly to the audience (while watching the conductor) rather than acknowledging the character to whom they were supposedly singing. Mr. Spirei may have felt that the static poses and dull, whitish scenery gave a classical feel to the story, but, for me, it robbed it of passion and downplayed the tension which this opera must have.



Trojan Prisoners in the Epirus Hilton

We saw the opera twice, on Nov. 9 and 10, with two different Ermiones (and changes for two of the minor characters, Fenicio and Pilade and the non-singing role of the boy Astianatte). On

Nov. 9 the Ermione was Angela Meade, a superstar by any estimation, and she saved the evening by her great performance in Ermione's final *scena*, which begins with her solo "Amata, l'amai,/L'adoro, sprezzata" ("I loved him when I was loved,/Despised, I adore him") and goes through the end of the act, including a duet with Oreste after he has killed Pirro, to the shattering finale. Meade's great vocal range and technique won the evening, and her acting was moderately moving. The rest of the performance was technically accurate, but somnolent.



Irvin (in blue suit), Iervolino, Meade

The second performance had Arianna Vendittelli, a colleague of the conductor, who has sung at his Innsbruck Festival for Early Music in several baroque works. She is tall and slim compared to Meade's girth, and her voice is lighter and not as well developed in the lower ranges. She was quite competent, however, and acted better than Meade, who probably cannot move easily around the stage, yet the static nature of the production hemmed her in too. Like Meade, she reaped happy applause and bravas at the end.

The two tenors Rossini had in 1819 were among the most gifted of his era. We had John Irvin, a young American, as Pirro and the well-known Antonino Siragusa as Oreste. Irvin, a tall thin man, was not adequate for his taxing role: he sang the notes, faked some of the difficult coloratura runs, and was not powerful enough to project Pirro's determination to take on the whole of Greece as well as Ermione's fury. He reaped scattered boo's at the first performance, and a sea of them on the 10th. The poor man held his hands behind his ears as if to say, "I can't hear you" and then motioned to the audience to give it to him: they did. Siragusa was applauded. He has a strong, high tenor which always seems a little pinched to me, and he strutted around in his red band leader's uniform, often singing directly to the audience.

Mezzo-soprano Teresa Iervolino sang the rather one-note role of Andromaca. She laments her dead husband (Hector) and her state as Pirro's prisoner, and she fears for her son. Iervolino is an audience favorite, and she has a fine, rich, deep mezzo voice—almost a contralto. I liked her, although the production made her role a little dull. The secondary singers were all fine—Filippo Adami and Julian Henao (Pilade), Guido Loconsolo and Ugo Guagliardo (Fenicio), Gaia Petrone (Cleone), Chiara Tirota (Cefisa) and Cristiano Olivieri (Attalo).

The large San Carlo chorus, directed by Gea Garatti Ansini, was static and did not sing lustily enough for my taste.

Unfortunately, I found Alessndro De Marchi's conducting rather dull. He is a specialist in baroque opera and is the Music Director of the Innsbruck Early Music Festival, where I have seen many fine productions of baroque works with De Marchi in the pit. But here he failed to keep the tension high and the action taut. The slow passages in the arias and ensembles were very, very slow, and dragged. He did build the crescendo at the heart of the Act I finale, but with Rossini's serious operas, you need to be on the edge of your seat, bursting with a tension which explodes in the end with the great release of cheers and applause. I never felt that in this production. *Ermione* is not a long opera (about 2 hours of music), but I was not unhappy when it was over—both days—and we could walk down the beautiful, spiffy-clean nineteenth century Galleria to a restaurant, a glass of wine and a Neapolitan pizza.

The entire opera is available for free, streamed live on Nov. 9 (with Meade), at <https://operavision.eu>. It can be accessed for the next few months. It will give you a good look at the Teatro San Carlo, Italy's most beautiful opera house. And you can find the back of my grey head in the fourth row as the camera pans the audience before the opera starts. It's the head with the balding spot on the back.