

## AMERICAN PREMIERE? ROSSINI'S *ZELMIRA* AT WASHINGTON CONCERT OPERA

Charles Jernigan, April 14, 2019



*Zelmira* is one of the least known of Rossini's 39 operas. It had its premiere on 16 February, 1822, at the San Carlo Opera House in Naples, the last of the Rossini operas premiered there. Rossini had been under contract with Domenico Barbaja, impresario of the San Carlo, since 1815 and had composed nine operas for the Parthenopean city (as well as nine operas for other cities during the seven year period). *Zelmira* was a great success with the public, and the critics generally found it the most advanced and orchestrally complex of Rossini's works; he wrote it with an eye to a coming production in Vienna, the city of Beethoven. Barbaja had assumed direction of the Theater am Kärntnertor and had planned to offer a three month Rossini festival to kick off his tenure, including Rossini's most recent opera, *Zelmira*. (It was during this stay in Vienna that Rossini met Beethoven). Within a few years it had been seen in Venice and numerous other Italian cities, as well as Paris, Lisbon and London. It *may* have been seen in New Orleans in 1835. At that time New Orleans rivaled New York as a center for opera in America; for a time there was a French opera house and an Italian one, and a number of operas of the period had their American premieres there, including some by Rossini and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Unfortunately the records are lost, and we are not sure whether *Zelmira* was one of them. If not, then this performance by Washington Concert Opera is the American premiere—perhaps the last Rossini opera to receive its American premiere (although I am not sure that *Ricciardo e Zoraide* has ever been performed in this country).

It is generally thought that the the libretto of *Zelmira* by Andrea Leone Tottola, the main house poet of the San Carlo, is a dramatically inferior bit of work, as is the French play *Zelmire* by Dormont de Belloy (1769), upon which it is based. The action takes place on the island of Lesbos in ancient times. Before the curtain rises, Polidoro, the king, has been attacked by a rival, Azor, and, thought to be dead, has really been hidden away in the family mausoleum by his daughter Zelmira. Now, Azor has been killed and a new usurper, Antenore, has accused Zelmira of the murder of both Azor and her father. Zelmira's husband, Ilo, has been away fighting in Troy. In the lengthy first act (1 hour, 40 minutes), Ilo returns, but is convinced by

Antenore and his henchman Leucippo that Zelmira has killed Azor and Polidoro, and she is unable to tell him that she is innocent. Antenore is crowned king, but when Leucippo starts to murder Ilo, Zelmira saves him. Leucippo turns the tables and convinces the credible Ilo that Zelmira, who is holding a knife, was about to kill him and that he, Leucippo, has saved him. Zelmira is imprisoned. In Act II Emma, Zelmira's companion, is able to relay the truth to Ilo, and the latter frees Polidoro and conquers the baddies. All ends happily, in time for a joyous rondo finale by Zelmira.

The King of the Two Sicilies (which included Naples), Ferdinand I, was especially pleased with the opera and complimented all involved, and well he might have been. Ferdinand had ruled under one title or another since 1759, when he was eight years old, and he had seen several attacks on his reign during that time, including by Napoleon, who set his brother-in-law Joachim Murat on the throne for awhile, forcing Ferdinand to flee to Sicily. In 1822 the latest challenge to his reign came from the Carbonari who carried out the "1820 Revolution" and forced Ferdinand to sign a constitution and accept a parliament. The Austrians, however, worried that this 'liberalism' might spread and sent an army to Naples, restoring Ferdinand's power in 1821. An opera about an aged ruler (Polidoro) overthrown but then restored to the throne with the malefactors punished was certain to please the royal family in Naples (Ferdinand was 72 in 1822) and the Austrians in Vienna when *Zelmira* moved there two months later. The story may creak dramatically (the whole plot would collapse if Zelmira told Ilo the truth when he returns early in Act I), but the restoration of a rightful monarch as a plot subject likely overrode any plot deficiencies in the development. After all, in Naples, the opera house has a direct physical connection to the royal palace, symbolizing the control, among other things, that the royals exercised over entertainment.

There are some strong features in the libretto, however, including the exciting opening *in media res*, with the chorus lamenting the murder of Azor the previous night. We plunge right into the drama without an overture and musically at least, the excitement never lets up. Rossini himself obviously felt strongly about the work. In Vienna he had a strong *seconda donna* for the role of Emma—Zelmira's companion, a small role in the Naples version—Fanny Eckerlin, and he wrote new music for her. In Paris, he had a new Zelmira, the acclaimed Giuditta Pasta, and he revised and lengthened the opera's finale for her. For the Naples premiere he had had a remarkable cast too: his mistress, Isabella Colbran, the Zelmira, would continue singing the role in Vienna and in London, although her voice was in decline by the time of the London premiere (1824) and she was not well received; *Zelmira* would be her last stage role. Also in Naples there were two extraordinary tenors, Giovanni David (Ilo) and Andrea Nozzari (Antenore), and Rossini wrote amazing difficult music for both of them, which, in today's world, has made it very difficult to produce the opera.

In Washington we got almost all the score with some judicious cuts (I think) in repeats of ensembles and perhaps in the through-composed, accompanied recitatives. We also got the aria for Fanny Eckerlin (Emma) composed for Vienna (a prayer at the beginning of Act II, "Ciel pietoso, ciel clemente"—"Piteous heaven, clement heaven") and the Paris finale composed for Pasta. This includes another prayer ("Da te spero, o ciel clemente"—"I hope in you, o clement heaven") and a fast stretta drawn from *Ermione*, which had recently failed in Naples: "Dei vendici ognor voi siete"—"You are vengeful gods." Finally, the Naples rondo

finale, “Deh, circondatemi, o cari oggetti”—“Ah, gather around me, dear beloved ones,” becomes a trio for Zelmira, Polidoro and Ilo. The Paris Ilo had been no less than Giovanni Battista Rubini, perhaps the greatest tenor of the epoch, and Nicolas Levasseur, a superb bass, was the Polidoro; Rossini gives them all a chance to generate great vocal excitement in the finale.

The Washington cast certainly did the opera proud, and showed why performing it—if you have the singers—is not only a worthwhile exhumation, but can make for a very exciting evening. At the top of the list was Lawrence Brownlee as Ilo. One of my friends is currently in Paris seeing operas with Michael Spyres, Juan Diego Florez and Javier Camarena; Brownlee is certainly in that exalted rank. His large voice is clarion-toned and rings with confidence. The astonishingly difficult runs which Rossini wrote for Giovanni David (and later Rubini) seemed child’s play to him. The difficult tessitura kept him in extremely high tenorial territory for what seemed like forever, and his opening aria, “Terra amica”—“Friendly land,” earned him an ovation which went on and on with several shouts of “bis” mixed in with the applause; alas, time constraints kept him from repeating the cabaletta, but after awhile, as the applause continued, he burst into smiles. How could he help it? He had conquered Everest, and we all were there to share the triumph. One might add that Brownlee’s breath control is remarkable. In a duet with Polidoro, Brownlee sang long phrases of coloratura without breaking for a breath, while the excellent Polidoro, singing the same music, did have to pause and breathe. Add Brownlee’s ability to express character and feeling in the ornate music, and you have the makings of a great artist. He is clearly a favorite in DC, but it is his magnificent talent which carries the day and not his media popularity.

Spanish soprano Silvia Tro Santafé sang the title role. Her voice must be something like audiences heard from Colbran or Pasta, who sang roles which today we would consider mezzo-soprano and soprano. She has a strong middle voice with excellent high notes, but the low, mezzo-like coloring makes her voice interesting. Ms. Tro Santafé’s voice is big too, easily able to fill the large (1482 capacity) Lisner Auditorium, unlike many practitioners of florid music. It is possible that Isabella Colbran’s voice was beginning to show a decline by 1822, and that is the reason that Rossini did not write the usual “sortita” or entrance aria for her (both tenors get an Act I showpiece). In fact, until the rondo finale of the Naples version, all her work is in duets and ensembles. She did get to let loose in the final aria, but by that time she would be warmed up. That is not to say that Tro Santafé (or Colbran) had an easy part, and our Zelmira accomplished her coloratura duties very well, notwithstanding a few muddled runs with sixteenth notes which fused.

In an embarrassment of riches, WCO cast the role of Emma with none other than Vivica Genaux. A mezzo-soprano who can descend to the contralto register, Ms. Genaux continues to have one of the most beautiful and interesting timbres among singers of her generation. Needless to say, she has the technique to handle the line that Rossini wrote for Fanny Eckerlin in the additional aria for Vienna, which earned adoring applause, but the highlight, for me, was Emma’s gorgeous duet with Zelmira, “Perché mi guardi e piangi” (“Why do you look at me and weep”), accompanied only by harp (played by Eric Sabatino) and English horn (played by Joseph DeLuccio). With the two chocolatey voices blending with the instruments, all in the hands of such virtuosos, we were in operatic heaven. Ms. Genaux, as

always, was elegant with her long, ink-black hair, dressed in a striking green and black gown with bejeweled heels which were almost as high as the notes she sang. She remains as beautiful and vocally fascinating at 49 as she was over twenty years ago when I first heard her in Verona as a memorable Cenerentola.

The other tenor—the Nozzari role—was something of a disappointment. Not that Julius Ahn was incapable, but he was not up to the level of the others. He had the range, though his high notes were sometimes pinched and sometimes they did not come out right. Antenore may be a villain, but he is not a secondary role vocally, and his fireworks are every bit as spectacular as those of the others. Ahn just did not bring it off at the same level, and his Italian was faulty too. Patrick Carfizzi as Polidoro was better, in fact when one realizes that 40 years ago no bass alive could come close to singing the florid vocal line Rossini demands, we must be especially thankful that someone with Carfizzi's rich bass voice has the technique (for the most part) for such a role. Mr. Carfizzi bears a striking resemblance to the conservative commentator Michael Gerson, and he did not attempt to portray an old, confused and abused monarch, but vocally he was strong.

Only tall and skinny Matthew Scollin as Leucippo, Antenore's wicked henchman, really "acted" his role, with vocal snarls and angry emphases. For everyone, this *Zelmira* was a first outing with their roles and the singers had their heads buried in their scores much of the time. At the end, however, Ms. Tro Santafé did bring passion and some fire to her part.

Antony Walker, the conductor-artistic director of Washington Concert Opera, has an especially knowing way with Rossini. I have seen this opera twice at the Rossini Festival in Pesaro (in 1995 and 2009), and in spite of fine casts, neither time did it make the impression it made here, and I think it was because of the excitement that Walker brings to the score. As a Rossini specialist, he is top notch; as a conductor he is energetic to say the least: he sings along, he sighs, he is more active than an athlete at a workout, and he leaps up on the podium at the climaxes of the big numbers! Not that the 50 person orchestra was faultless. At one point a wrong entrance by percussion (cymbals no less) jarred an otherwise placid and poignant melody. The 40 member WCO Chorus, placed behind the orchestra, seemed somewhat distant to me, but everyone rose to the exciting climaxes that only Rossini can bring off in a way that makes the blood race and the mouth want to cheer.

It was announced that *Zelmira* was a "good sell," and indeed 90% or more of the seats seemed full. If this was the American premiere of *Zelmira*, it was an auspicious opening. Now: who is going to dare to stage it in the USA?

(Charles saw the performance on April 5, 2019)