

Marianna Bottini's *Elena e Gerardo*

Temple Speech Room, Rugby School, Rugby
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Alan Jackson, November 2023

Marianna Bottini was born in Lucca in 1802. At the age of 20 she wrote her only opera, *Elena e Gerardo*. A year later she married and that was the end of her musical career, and though her sacred music continued to be performed, this opera lay forgotten in an archive in her home city. That is until now when it has been rediscovered for a single performance by Random Opera in The Temple Speech Room, Rugby, a small town in the middle of England known for its railway junction and its public (i.e. private) school where the game of Rugby Union was born.

The plot has echoes of *Romeo and Juliet*. Elena has secretly married Gerardo, who when the opera opens is abroad on a diplomatic mission. She is depressed and her father, Pietro decides that marriage to the man she loves will be the cure. Unfortunately, he thinks that this is Vittorio, close friend of Elena and in love with her, and best friend of Gerardo. Thinking that her father intends her for Gerardo, Elena consents to the marriage, but when Gerardo returns and it is revealed that Elena is already married (though Gerardo is not yet named), Pietro disowns her, Elena collapses as if dead, and we are faced with her funeral. Visiting her tomb Gerardo finds her still alive, just, and even though Vittorio magnanimously cedes her to Gerardo, Pietro is so affronted that his plans have been thwarted that he makes her choose between genuine filial duty and equally genuine love for her husband. Eventually Pietro relents and the opera ends happily.

Random Opera's flyer promised "A baroque bel canto gem, the work is full of virtuosic coloratura reminiscent of her contemporary Rossini". I might quarrel with the word "baroque" but, on the basis of a single hearing, the rest of this description is spot on. The evening was virtually a complete delight. There is indeed a great amount of Rossinian coloratura and for the most part this was despatched very impressively. Outstanding was soprano Kelli-Ann Masterson as Elena who displayed a beautiful, unforced voice that revelled in Bottini's elaborate coloratura. Also admirable in this florid music were mezzo Katie Macdonald as Gerardo (a breeches part) and tenor Rhydian Jenkins as Vittorio. The Temple Speech Room is a good deal more resonant than is ideal, and this covered the articulation of Martin Lamb as Pietro, who in all other respects was excellent. Sián Griffiths as Laura, Elena's confidante, or perhaps her mother (apologies for my confusion) completed the cast. There was an excellent small chorus, five of whom were covering the principal roles, and a very adequate chamber orchestra. The conductor was Thomas Payne, a graduate of the Royal Opera Houses' Jette Parker programme; he kept everything together, all his tempi seemed exactly right and he showed a real affinity for bel canto opera. Random Opera's General Director Richard Tegid Jones directed and his cast responded with convincing acting and movement. All looked good on stage. There were no sets and props were limited to a few chairs. Costumes, to my untrained eyes, looked convincingly early nineteenth century.

I have one quibble on the musical front. I know I have a mini obsession with this, but I noticed lots of blunt phrase endings mainly, but not entirely, in the recitatives. To my mind appoggiaturas should have been inserted. Is it coincidence that Bellini and Mercadante, who wrote out their appoggiaturas, both studied in Naples whereas Rossini, Donizetti and Bottini,

whose operas need singers to insert them, all studied in Bologna? Different traditions maybe, but they all wrote using the same lingua franca.

So, what about the opera itself? On a single hearing I hesitate to make judgments, but I loved it. Time and time again I was conscious of felicitous orchestral detail, mainly in the woodwinds. I also heard things that reminded me of early Bellini and Donizetti; at one moment Donizetti's *Chiara e Serafina* came to mind. Some things seemed to look backwards towards the turn of the century and the composers featured in Volume 1 (1800 -1810) of Opera Rara's "A Hundred Years of Italian Opera". It is true that Rossini was never too far away, if without that ultimate rhythmic energy that marks him out – but then none of his "followers" quite match it either. Those for whom bel canto opera is vacuous or superficial won't find *Elena e Gerardo* to their taste. But those of us who find florid song to be affecting in itself will surely enjoy it. The coloratura pauses at the start of Act II when Gerardo mourns the "death" of Elena over her lifeless body on its catafalque, a long and remarkable scene of expressive arioso. There isn't much in the way of double arias, but there is a variety of forms from single movement arias to multi-sectioned ensembles. The opera isn't perfect dramatically. There were times when I thought the libretto smacked a little of adolescent fiction, but then Marianna was hardly out of her teens when she wrote it – yes, she wrote both words and music. And yes, Pietro does remain the stubborn patriarch for rather too long. But overall, I am more than happy to accept Random Opera's judgment that *Elena e Gerardo* is a work eminently worthy of resuscitation and performance. It is certainly a remarkable achievement for a twenty-year old around the year 1820 and we must regret that, as with many other women, social conventions stopped her career before it had really started.

The programme note tells us that the autograph manuscript is not a finished piece of work, but more of a first draft with markers for orchestral detail. The task of producing the performing edition has been undertaken by musicologists Ian Schofield and Matthew Smith, and Richard Jones also acknowledges the contribution of Professor Alessandra Fiori who was coincidentally conducting her own research at the Istituto Boccherini, Lucca, where the score is held. Our thanks go to all of them. And to the singers who learned their parts for just a single outing. Now that a performing score exists it is to be hoped that other companies will adopt it. I'm told that the performance was filmed and will be available on YouTube.