

Giovanni Pacini

Addio Pesarese

La sposa fedele

Alexander Weatherson\



With an almost painfully emotive argument, with intense music prone to unpredictable second-thoughts, corrections, extensions and contractions and performed for the first time in Venice at the the Teatro Benedetto on 14 January 1819. With an interminable stage-life, *La sposa fedele* displays all the signs of a *jeu d'esprit*, a spoof, a parting of the ways for its provocative composer - at once a statement of intent and a sigh of self-congratulation at his almost sacriligious dismissal of the carapace of mannerisms imposed willingly or unwillingly upon the opera of his day under the spell of the great Pesarese.

Conceived at a time when his independence was an issue, when facile invention came readily to his pen, *La sposa fedele* suggests a Giovanni Pacini at his most devious, a vehicle for strange keys and unexpected instrumentation - a prototype of sorts for a challenging future setting

the pace for a stylistic rationale of his own devising that would come to fruition in the decades to follow. Despite a powerful plot, subject to capricious remodeling, adjustments to casting and scoring in accordance - or so it might seem – to an innate dissatisfaction with his own muse, a dissatisfaction never quite to come under control.

Widely supposed to be yet another vehicle for his famed Rossinian superstar of a father the *basso buffo* Luigi Pacini, but in fact a volatile confection that skirts all but the most vexatious of paternal prescriptions in favour of a chain of evasions of his own gestation, all chosen - or so at least it would seem - for their dismissal of the current mode.

The unspoken intention of this opera, plausibly enough, was to contradict the insidious presence of the operatic Jupiter enthroned in his Parnassus upon the stage below, but from a safe distance and in this instance using a marital *sturm und drang* of a plot to chase away any shadow of celestial conformity.

It should be made clear, however, that whatever the daring, initiative, however

attractive the proposition, that the efforts of the composer to escape a stranglehold *musical modus-vivendi* around him, they would have scant endorsement from his backup of comprimari, most notably in fact from his librettist Gaetano Rossi whose *Sposa fedele* - however torrid in intention - would rejoice perversely in every possible cliché encounter – every duet, trio, concertato structure then to be found on the contemporary stage - the management of which would prove hostile, even totally antipathetic, to the composer's intentions.

It was an underhand project in any event. An argument like *La sposa fedele* could never have appealed to the great maestro; anguished conjugal-love was not his forte, especially arm-in-arm with seamless sentimentality, such disorderly persuasions were not to find a place in any Rossinian textbook of operatic deportment.

Even more boldly, to endorse this negative project, Luigi has been demoted. Once the supreme cheerleader for all and everything in the operas of his son his function in this opera is

reduced to little more than that of mischief-maker. Despite a dutiful appearance now and then throughout this long score his vocal contribution is no more than decorative embroidery applied to the highly-coloured romantic wallpaper around him. The role of Michelone has almost nothing to do with the action..

Unnerved by the temerity of his proposition in all probability, caprice reigned from the outset. Once launched, Pacini revamped his score, altering everything, changing the order of major vocal items and reversing their contents. The Milanese publisher Ricordi had published Teodora's cavatina "Come sembravami" [Atto I ScIII] with its ecstatic cabaletta "Ma se fia che a me ritorni" almost immediately after the *prima* but unbelievably - for Giuditta Pasta at the Teatro Carignano in Torino just one year after the opera's *début* the composer changed the name of its heroine briefly from Teodora to Matilde and endowed her with a new sortita, the *romanza* "Lungi dal caro bene" that was to become a starring item in the concerts of the day

(and which her successor, Marianna Lewis in that same role and venue seven years later was not allowed to sing!) As was to be expected, and despite huge sales of the replacement aria, Ricordi was disconcerted, publishing as little as possible of the opera forthwith [an exception being the extraordinary second-act duet “*Deh! fermate*” supplied for the La Scala revival in 1819, with its amazing *unisono fioriture*]

In this last context - while taking up a gauntlet thrown down by the Pesarese - rather than embracing the lyrical simplification that was to become the norm in the romantic era to follow - this opera began exceptionally floridly and became more-and-more-so in the many later versions. As a consequence, it can be no surprise that music publishers began to look askance at this maestro.

As regards the “semiseria” qualifications of *La sposa fedele*, Papa provided the mandatory buffo presence both at the *prima* and in many revivals, for its mandatory “*happy ending*”: his son promptly abandoned the cheerful *concertato* with all the cast lined-up at the footlights in the comparatively cosy Venetian theatre of its

initiation and replaced it - as at La Scala the following year with a rip-roaring *aria finale*, in this instance supplied to Violante Camporesi his favourite diva leaving his audience convulsed as was her due. In further revivals later still he tempered the closing pages of the plot with a zany collection of unpredictable comings and goings as was only to be expected.

Thanks to Gaetano Rossi's imaginative *mise-en-scène*, while being ostentatiously *fedele* to operatic convention in most respects this lachrymose soulstorm of a plot was the first of the Pacinian stage-works to make contrary issues a major feature; familiar expectations are put aside, commonplace repetition demoted, symmetry of motifs avoided or outflanked, together with an abuse of rhythmic figuration - those stretches of *quartine* the very hallmark of current taste, omnipresent in the opera of the day. The shadow of the great maestro above losing pace before wilfully upfront moving and shaking.

Giovanni Pacini was far from alone in reacting to the mood of the moment. With his ear permanently to the ground he had become aware of a newcomer with parallel concerns now entering the arena (with operas like *Romilda e Costanza* of 1817, *Semiramide* of 1819, *Emma di Resburgo* of 1819 and *Margherita d'Anjou* of 1820). But unlike the eagerly emulative intent of Giacomo Meyerbeer, romantic rejection was to be his aim. Like the fascinating interloper, this notwithstanding, Pacini had antiquarian quirks that now came into their own. In the cause of disassociation from the mode of the moment his antiquarian upbringing took him to that pile of ancient scores whose permanent presence on his desk he owed to the veteran maestri of his retro youth - to that band of superannuated vocal stars once surrounding his famous father to whom he owed his vocation and education for the stage and for whom Metastasio's Cleofide set the pace for all accusations of operatic infidelity *sine qua non*. With the engaging result that the perennially shifting score of *La sposa fedele* offers a number of sly quotations from her torments at the hands

of unmodish maestri from a long distant preRossinian paradise - echoes from a fabulous era that remained lifelong at the heart of this composer.

The Venice cast must have been responsible for some of the dissent inherent in this semiseria saga. The key role of *Arrigo, Conte di Provenza* was created by Domenico Ronconi; while *Roberto di Foix* (in travesty for much of the plot as *Savoiaro*) was created by Ranieri Remorini, holder of important roles in the preceding and following operas by Pacini and given the task of repeating this particular role in major revivals. The primadonna *Teodora* was an unfamiliar Cristina Cassotti - as yet deprived of the many vocal challenges to be thrown at her in later revivals; her jealous husband *Erardo, Signor di Blangy* by Alberico Curioni; while *Riccardo, Brigida* and *Carlotta* were taken by relatively modest voices among whom the *Michelone, Custode dell Castello Capocaccia* of Luigi Pacini stood out like a flying banner.

Envoi.

Even if the “displacement” of his father in this opera was partly political and purely symbolic, Luigi would return in force in the following score that would make his son a household name on the operatic peninsula.. But Giovanni had made his independence a major issue, and a “sposa” of his own would be soon to emerge if not exactly as supposed. This long and complex tragi-comedy, written before either Donizetti or Bellini had made any real impression, should have been a game-changer!

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