

The elusive
Bartolomeo Merelli
Librettist/impresario extraordinary
Alexander Weatherson

Enrico di Borgogna! Le nozze in villa! I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti!

What do we have here but a come-back for this fellow classmate of Gaetano Donizetti, this loyal Bergamasc painfully discounted but now at the cutting edge of modern rediscovery - an ingenious pupil of Mayr destined to become one of the master movers of the age whose frayed reputation (discarded by Donizetti and repudiated by Verdi) swept him under the carpet. Now may be the time such a dismissed protagonist, such an all-powerful magus of La Scala¹ and far-from-negligible scribbler of libretti can be permitted a virtue or two...



Schmidl² seems to be the only authority who finds truly heartfelt words of praise for this operatic black hole: “ *uno dei più illuminati e potenti impresari, che aveva saputo destare tante vive emozioni coi suoi superbi spettacoli nei*

¹ He was Impresario from the autumn of 1836 to 30 November 1850, and again from 1 August 1861 to the beginning of 1863. Verdi's contest with Merelli - accused of having gone behind his back with Verdi's publishing rights - was the reason for the latter's absence from La Scala for thirty-six years but without Merelli he would never have been there in the first place

² Carlo Schmidl *Dizionario Universale dei Musicisti* Vol.2 (Milan 1929) 89

maggiori pubblici d'Europa.” And it is a fact that so many of our oversold supermarket brands date from his stint at La Scala.

The endearing text of *I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti* could well be the best witness to his finest qualities - to his sympathy for his native city and empathy for the musical culture of which he was a part. Not only was he a favoured pupil of the Bavarian maestro but Mayr made a gift of Merelli's texts to his most gifted pupil, it was the young Bartolomeo Merelli (1794-1879) who supplied his first real libretti to the young Donizetti – in all, four or so texts - not among the most daring but among the most formative; he wrote several libretti for Mayr at much the same time and a similar handful for the young Nicola Vaccai including the outrageous text of *Il precipizio o le fucine di Norvegia* (1826) in which there is a mandatory appearance of the *aurora borealis* - one of those scenic marvels that were such an impediment to revival, then as now.

Indeed, as regards his brief literary parabola he must have been one of those inflexible poetasters who felt it their duty to spur composers to dangerous limits, even Verdi can be regarded as benefiting from such a persuasion (it depends how you look at the facts). His Bergamasc classmate was spared such extremes: *Enrico di Borgogna* and *Una follia* both from 1818 were staged comparatively uneventfully in Venice (barring singer's problems); *Le nozze in villa* officially dates from the following year and was mounted modestly in Mantua (so modestly indeed that it vanished). Merelli's libretto for *I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti* dates from 1819 and too has its puzzles, it quotes engagingly from *Le nozze in villa* but this *azione drammatico-musicale in un atto: I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti* is supposed to be set in 1817 (three years before *Le nozze in villa* arrived on stage). Lapse of memory? It is very improbable. He also supplied the text for Donizetti's *Zoraida di Granata* in 1822 but it was turned inside out by Jacopo Ferretti two years later.

These early operas of Donizetti's shared the poet's desk with the libretto for *Il lupo d'Ostende ossia L'innocenza salvata dalla colpa* for Vaccai, also for Venice, but display little of the bizarre fantasy Merelli piled upon that surprisingly docile maestro, in fact in respect of the sequence and content of this operatic verse a puzzling picture of Bartolomeo Merelli emerges: however did he manage to juggle the romantic-historical *Enrico di Borgogna*, the semi-serious phantasmagoria of the Belgian wolf, *Le nozze in villa* and the schoolboy sentiment of his quasi-autobiographical *virtuosi ambulanti* all at the same time? However did he keep it all in the air? Wasn't it rather indigestible. Truly Merelli is an elusive figure.

All the evidence points to the fact that Merelli was exceptionally well-read as well as remarkably worldly - not something one can say with certainty about his earliest clientèle but something Mayr must have spotted at an early age. He was both a scholar and creatively imaginative unlike his hard-nosed rivals in the music business, educated beyond his years, wise before his time he put his

money where his interests lay in later life but seems to have lacked the necessary social skills or diplomacy to make a bridge with his clients. He was not always prudent. He was a fixer, but lacked useful powers of communication except when writing libretti. Clearly an enlightened impresario, not more devious than Barbaja or Lanari but far less adroit, and famously unlucky in his choice of protégés (!)

What can one say about his more tender contacts, that is, the fellows displayed so graphically in his libretto for *I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti*?

Schoolboy nostalgia? The participants are named thus in the libretto:

Carlo Trezzini
Girolamo Forini
Giovanni Gorini (sic)
Giacomo Cantù
Gio. Battista Rossi
Orazio Campana
Filippo Perico
Pietro Ceribelli
Francesco Ceruti

Tutti Allievi delle lezioni caritatevoli di Bergamo

Il fatto si suppone nell'anno 1817

L'azione è nel Locale della Scuola Musicale

What do we know of them? Well we know Giovanni Corini (correct spelling) was an accomplished pianist as we are told in the libretto that during the event he played a piano concerto by Antonio Gonzales (who was *maestro di cembalo e organo della Scuola*) while prefacing the performance was a concerto for two violins by Joseph Kreutzer played by two pupils who were not otherwise participants in this *accademia finale*: Giovanni Vailati and Antonio Piatti. Fortunately Girolamo Forini is the subject of a book devoted to this world: Pierluigi Forcella's invaluable opuscolo³ is a goldmine of insights and information by a Bergamasc fully worthy of that splendid city; from this inestimable source we know that Giovanni Corini "*fu pianista presso la corte del Re di Sardegna a Torino*" that Giacomo Cantù "*si impose come compositore, organista e pianista*" and also that Mayr prepared the way for the concert with a sextet expressly for six sopranos: *Quali accenti* that involved Forini, Corini, Cantù, Campana, Rossi and Trezzini. These sopranos were due to flower vocally and quite soon: Carlo

³ Pierluigi Forcella *Girolamo Forini maestro di bel canto da Bergamo alla Baviera* (Bergamo 1998)

Trezzini became a celebrated tenor and had a fine international career,⁴ alas his life ended abruptly at the age of 29; Gio. Battista Rossi also a tenor “*era cantante a Venezia e altrove*” while Forini himself maintained a high-profile orbit both at home in Bergamo and in Mayr’s fief of Bavaria; baritenore, composer and teacher he was an important vocal coach whose expertise was recognised by Donizetti. He also wrote an opera for home consumption, with the title *Lutalto da Vico-lungo* with a libretto by G.Benedetto Pucci staged at the Teatro Sociale of Bergamo in the carnival of 1842; Giuseppe Zobboli sang the title role and Carlotta Griffini that of Nelinda.⁵

Amusingly, in *I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti* it is for Forini that Merelli ascribes his premonitory one-liner: ⁶

“ *Computista qual son io
Non può i conti mai sbagliar*”

an in-joke – but clearly one shared by Donizetti!

It would seem that Bartolomeo Merelli – though senior to Donizetti - was as familiar with these juvenile voices as was the composer, he even knew what café’s they frequented where they went to eat and drink.⁷ Forini and Rossi have been given major items to sing and Trezzini what amounts to an *aria finale* - a distribution anticipating their forthcoming transit of the stage. In the course of the text a didactic fable translated from German by Merelli “L’Ussignuolo, le Rane, ed Il Poeta” declaimed by Perico is nothing more or less than a species of *Credo* on the part of the librettist while all the ensuing verses as declaimed by Campana and Cantù are simply a musicological diatribe designed to display as much as possible the learning of the poet as that of the talented students. The interpolated extracts of music by Weigl,⁸ Rossini⁹ and Donizetti¹⁰ to be heard within the action being chosen solely to demonstrate the current vocal strengths of the Scuola, while the casting of Ceribelli and Ceruti as the *piccioli virtuosi* indicates that they were demonstrably diminutive musical *ragazzi* - small boys,

⁴ Luigi Pilon *Cantanti bergamaschi all’epoca di Donizetti* Vol 1 *La Vocalità e i Cantanti* [in] *Il Teatro di Donizetti*, Atti dei Convegni delle Celebrazioni (Bergamo 1997) 62-66

⁵ Stieger gives Giambattista Poggi as librettist; the Teatro Sociale chronology of 2009 ascribes it to Pucci (the latter no doubt correct); Forini was *maestro al cembalo* at the performance with his former fellow student Antonio Piatti as its conductor

⁶ In the detailed distribution of the *Scena Prima* quartetto whose music was written expressly (it would seem) by Donizetti

⁷ Viz. the reference in *Scena Quarta* to Pino da Giacomo “*Padrone di una delle botteghe di caffè che trovansi in piazza*”

⁸ A coro from his *L’amor marinaro*

⁹ The celebrated duet from *Armida* ‘*Amor possente nome*”

¹⁰ From *Le nozze in villa*: Sabina’s scena ed aria ‘*Voi v’opporreste invan/Non mostarmi in tale istante.*’ Its *Le nozze in villa* origin is supplied in a footnote to the libretto

in need of succour and support. However diverting, funny, ironic, erudite, tear-jerking or tongue-in-cheek this libretto by Merelli was both apposite and to the point as far as the prospects of his cast was concerned, as well as passingly poignant.

His own career may have been no less poignant. Having spent many years in Vienna in semi-control of the Kärntnertortheater in tandem with that of La Scala, at the Risorgimento Merelli gave up his sway in Milan and went into uncomfortable retirement, his resources much eroded. Like many establishment figures he was accused of being an Austrian *aficionado*. But political conviction and patriotism were not necessarily subject to the same clear divisions cherished by lofty historians today. In those years of passionate evolution like all those other unfortunates responsible for the direction of Opera Houses he resisted change - committed to a financial rule of thumb if not by nature or personal opinion he preferred the status quo without which fingers were burned on a regular basis.

So what have we learned from this corporate musical fable for talented beginners? It was both a *jeu d'esprit* and full of engaging details about real people at a critical moment in their development. It has delicious music. It confirms too that we know almost nothing of its author. This once supremely powerful pupil of Mayr - this impresario/librettist seems even less accessible after reading this key libretto! But some facts do emerge: the text of *Le nozze in villa* was apparently conceived under juvenile auspices and the opera may have been ready for performance two or three years earlier than is supposed; Merelli seems never to have offered operatic overtures to his fellow *virtuosi* in later life - with the exception of course of Gaetano Donizetti and this did not end well; he did not abandon Bergamo but Bergamo may alas be accused of having abandoned him. All the composers to whom he had supplied libretti abandoned him once they had attained a secure niche in the repertory! And this applies supremely to those he championed...

In advanced age Bartolomeo Merelli probably reflected that composers and gratitude, material reward, and even musical satisfaction were irreconcilable concepts!