

Black humour and Lauro Rossi's *Il domino nero*

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A tight-lipped response to *Il domino nero* was to be expected of course, whatever the critics may have said or done either in their day or ours: a high-kicking nun, a buffo villain and wide expanses of undressed young ladies must always have been viewed as a gauge flung down at the feet of the guardians of good taste. Indeed the intrepid Lauro Rossi might well have been accused of prostituting his great talent ... except ... that his opera is pure joy. And then, how exactly this particular romp can have been supposed to live-up (or down) to its description as an *opera comica* cannot be imagined – an all-purpose term of imprecise origin to be sure but some of its music is as “serious” (however mockingly) as any of the day, despite the fact that much of the rest would have been considered flighty even by Offenbach. A plot up-staging Auber and a gaggle of improbable characters in untenable garb was not intended to concentrate the mind at all – not even in the royal palaces, brothels and convents that pass in breathless succession – but only to give them a run for their money.

The timing of this opera is all-important I believe, both for its music and its text, with the choice of singers at the *prima* running in third place. 1849 was a year of disillusion in Italy, the *débâcle* of 1848 still weighing heavily upon everyday life. Nothing (or nothing for the better) had changed as a result of the failed and bloody insurrection, cynicism was rife with – as its targets – those institutions that had remained untouched, that is, royal palaces, brothels and convents – immune and immutable (apparently) staples of existence throughout the civilised world. It is not too fantastical to suppose that this opera witnessed a re-run of the sarcastic interlude at the turn of the century when the response to political mayhem was a tidal-wave of operatic derision – even La Scala gave itself over to *farse* when Napoleonic invasion and a glimpse of democracy came and went so fast and fruitlessly. It is significant that in Lauro Rossi's *Il domino nero* there is little or no attempt to justify the surreal comings and goings, there is almost no recitative – only a string of arias and ensembles, the one real attempt at verbal communication coming at the start of Act II, and then simply because the presence of a nun in a brothel takes a bit of explaining! In fact, Francesco Rubino's libretto is often at odds with the music, not much help to the composer and even less to the listener,

but then it too flaunts an easy acceptance of the facile social versatility current in the opera houses of the day, nothing but grist to the political mill at the cynical mid-century. The opera, I should like to propose, targets the then status-quo under the ægis of comedy, its grand sonorous cori in complete disproportion to the trivial occurrences on the stage and mimicking the balloon of flatus emanating from above.

But it is not the libretto, nor the librettist, that is of major interest in this opera. It is the composer himself. Lauro Rossi was a retiring figure despite a colourful past who somehow managed to avoid the public eye. His *Domino nero* may, in fact, represent an uncharacteristic twitching-aside-of-the-curtain of discretion which normally concealed this complex and musically very-gifted man. With a delicious Neapolitan musical foundation, with quick wits and an irresistible melodic reserve, he was brought to wide public notice at the age of 24 when his *La casa disabitata* (sometimes called *I falsi monetari*) made it to La Scala in 1834, and though in later life he staged operas from one end of the peninsula to the other (with an oddly Wagnerian *Bjorn* in London in 1877) it was Milan that saw all the real landmarks to his career, including *Azema di Granata* (on much the same plot as Donizetti's *Imelda de' Lambertazzi* in 1846¹), this *Il domino nero*, and the eventual accolade of his Directorship of the famous Milan Conservatorio. His *La contessa di Mons*, at Turin in 1874, was his last real success. Despite stints in foreign parts his Neapolitan roots remained strong, residence in Mexico and India and a long stint in Milan – certainly the most strenuous of the three – made no difference to his compositional make-up, the vivacity, disrespect and high-spirits garnered in the Parthenopean capital always remained to the fore. In *Il domino nero*, surely Lauro Rossi was harking back to his giddy youth when such ribald offerings as *La sonnambula con Pulcinella* was hugely relished in the Naples backstreet theatres (its pantomime Amina sung by a baritone and an antidote to the stiff-upper-lip S. Carlo), *Il domino nero* finding an echo in the captivating ensembles with their ground-bass of insistent buffo patter, lifeblood of all naughty debunking in that irreverent city. Indeed, wicked meridional parody is rife in this opera, insidiously gaining strength throughout with a skill that removes any suspicion of idle mannerism. It is as if he was proposing – like the good teacher he would become – a series of expert musical models of parody to his pupils: a *primo tempo* here, a *stretta* there – all pointedly varied and unfolding a complete course in current musical foibles (anticipating even what

¹ According to Fulvio Stefano Lo Presti

would be in vogue before long); thus in the soprano/tenor duetto-finale to Act I for example, the music opens with hints of Verdi, transforms itself into those of Pacini (how those two must have shuddered at the ease with which Lauro Rossi does this) and then into a species of Verdi/Pacini *combo-stretta* in a jaunty but gruesome conclusion. Not merely amusing or witty, but sharp and pertinent in its relish for the postures of his rivals, both large and small. And not simply pastiche, Lauro Rossi had a *faible* for Spain and something resembling an Iberian dream invests much of this music with a melting softening to the savage ear. That he was a wonderful didact is clear by the quality of his pupils, you have only to listen to the *Salvator Rosa* of Carlos Gomes to hear the influence of Lauro Rossi, while the operas of Ponchielli are primed with his ease and versatility.

If black humour was certainly the *raison d'être* for this zany plot, Lauro Rossi's skilful handling of the material displays a masterly touch. The role of Estella, the desperate nun who hides herself under a domino to claim her heritage, was created for the remarkable soprano Adelaide Cortesi and in itself precipitated a whole range of "quotes" – droll, wicked or scurrilous it is impossible to pin-point precisely in our day. La Cortesi-Servadio, daughter of a celebrated ballet dancer and choreographer, was born almost on the stage and a "character" like Lauro Rossi himself, taking on roles that extended from operetta to the gloomiest depths of tragedy without a second thought. Her most repeated role was that of Pacini's *Medea* which she sang in interminable revivals in Europe and America. She had a voice of great range and Lauro Rossi gave her a truly personal niche in *Il domino nero* - not simply beginning the overture with a quote from *Medea* (and several sly quotes in succession) but indulging in full her over-exuberant persona with coquetry, trendy allusions, folksy posturing and every possible wild extravagance punctuated with archidonizettian virtuosity (occasionally outdoing the exemplar). Ultimately becoming touching to everyone's surprise. Her "Andalusian canzone" (in the brothel scene) is a winner, bringing the undressed clientèle flocking to her side and leaving the tarts in a sulk. The role is extraordinarily demanding, asking for a non-stop virtuosity and flair (she is hardly ever off the stage) together with a chest voice worthy of a contralto. There are many truly outstanding moments in this brilliant score, the marvellous male-voice trio in Act I would "make the reputation of any composer" – funny, lyrical and ingenious all at the same time; two felicitous tenor arias; and the glittering *aria-finale* (for the prima donna of course) in the form of an infectious *rondino*, catchy, syncopated and remaining irreproachably in the ears on blissful exit from the theatre.

The Teatro Pergolesi with its shallow stage reached for the stars with a production whose detail and flair kept the audience on its toes, provocative and tantalising in equal measure. What a good idea to employ an expert as *metteur-en-scène*! How novel. Something other theatres might consider don't you think? The Regia of Maurizio Nichetti and the décor and costumes of Mariapia Angelini revealed that they had taken the trouble to look closely at the score. From the opening of the opera, with the moon suspended on a string, we knew we were in for a tongue in every possible cheek. A "blind" girl selling bouquets to male passers-by (they were badges of entry to the brothel – Estella had the foresight to grab one), clever props, scenic ingenuity and witty routines - the errant heroine got herself back into the convent by pulling her domino hood over her head and joining her sisters in a queue for Mass - with no ragged ends. Chiara Taigi was perfectly phenomenal in a title-role she had learned in ten days. How can it be possible to be note-perfect under such circumstances? But she was. The huge challenges were overcome with superb verve and flair, the opera depended on her and she triumphed. The seductive tenor of Luis Damaso is a gift we owe to Spain, he had the wit to sing his role quite straight – and so set-off everyone else to magical effect. Michele Porcelli's clear baritone and the treacherous buffo of Mauro Buda were both taken memorably. An overjoyed *coro* turned-itself into courtiers, randy soldiers, tarts and nuns without turning a hair under the agile baton of Bruno Aprea. But the real discovery was the music. The revision was in the hands of Paola Ciarlantini and Lorenzo Fico, they used a score in the Milan Conservatorio Library in tandem with the autograph conserved in the Ricordi Archive in one of those polished revisions we all hope for. If the opera was a real success – and it was indeed - and in every measure - in the end it was due to them.