

Marathon Salamis

Opera in 4 Acts by Paolo Carrer,
Libretto by A. Martzokis/A. Kapsokephalos (composed 1866)
Greek National Opera, T. Olympia, Athens.
World Première 14 February 2003
Alexander Weatherson

According to Stieger the Greek composer Paolo Carrer [Pavlos Karrer] born 12 May 1829 at Zakynthos [Zante] and dying in the same place on 7 June 1896 wrote a handful of operas with an admirable Italianate dimension. Stieger's list is as follows: *Dante e Beatrice* [lib. S.Torelli] Milan, T. Carcano 1852; *Isabella d'Aspeno* [lib?] Corfu, T. San Giacomo 1854; *La redeviva* [lib.Giuseppe Sapio] Milan, T. Carcano 1856; *Marco Botzaris* [lib. G.Caccialupi] [Stieger says Sira 1866 but in fact given a first integral staging at the T. Apollo, Patras in 1861]; *Frossini* (I Kyra Phrossini) [lib?] [Stieger says Patras 1879 but in fact first given in the T. Foscolo, Zante in 1868]; *Despo o L'eroina di Suli* [lib?] Patras, T. Apollo 1882; and *Maria Antonietta* [lib. Romus] Zante, T.Foscolo, 1884. Seven scores, knowledge of whose existence appears never to have spread far beyond his faithful homeland. Though *Frossini* - it is true - has been revived in recent years in Athens and he has something of a faithful following there, not one note of any of the rest seems to have found an echo beyond those shores. The assiduous Stieger missed *Fior di Maria o I misteri di Parigi* [Lib.?] Zante, 1867, and then his list does not include a clutch of even remoter operas with such exotic titles as *Il conte Spourghitis*; *Lambros*; *Don Pigna* and the *Marathon Salamis* whose resurrection is reported here for the painful reason that they were never staged in his lifetime.

If anyone supposes that even the top layer of the worldwide pile of neglected operas has been turned-over you can forget it. Poor Carrer! Yet another overlooked master of the imperial period of Italian opera. How many books ignore him, yet his vivid music epitomises the resistance that flourished defiantly despite a Verdian embargo, a refusnik dynastic manifestation cherished by a series of influential teachers, passing from master to pupil and forming a family sequence that welded the dying traditions of the *romanticisti* to those of the *veristi* at the end of the century without passing through Emilia-Romagna. The *bussetino* had always to watch his tail. The authors of this never-completely overt dissidence were primarily Lauro Rossi and Amilcare Ponchielli, but drawn into the sequence was a full spectrum of *trascurati* from both before and after their day, including the veteran Giovanni Pacini, the Brazilian Carlos Gomes, Filippo Marchetti, Errico Petrella, Antonio Cagnoni, and Nicola Di Giosa among many others even more dimly perceived whose supercharged works are only painfully emerging in our day - if at all. How is it possible that we continue to sideline such committed works by such gifted composers whose music is potentially so rewarding? All of them Italian by conviction if not always by birth and all as fluent and expressive as any composer of their day, great and small. Of this Greek maestro UTET says complacently: "*Le sue op. sono in gran parte perdute*" (fortunately, it is not true).

Carrer had an idiosyncratic musical foundation but reached maturity as a pupil of Raimondo Boucheron in Milan (a fragment of whose music can be heard in the abortive Verdi-masterminded *Requiem per Rossini*) thus was a founder member of the refusnik

collective. He began well, two operas at the Teatro Carcano in that same city, but failing to break through the sound-barrier of La Scala took up his bags and went home. He was not without recognition, his operas had nearly everything necessary for him to become a popular composer, he had a worldly and versatile nature (as the range of subject-matter of his list of operas makes clear), he was the natural dramatist all his compatriots are entitled to be considered, but fortune was seldom on his side either in the country of his musical education or, in fact, at home. A simple hearing of this unknown *Marathon Salamis* will oblige most listeners to fall out of their chair. Ten minutes into the opera and everyone will be aware that here is a real melodist, with a well-shaped, ecstatic lyricism confided to huge voices with the over-reaching energy of a Petrella or a Gomes, a confident wholly-mature understanding of the theatre, and enough memorable tunes to supply lyres to an entire Mount Olympus. I have been tempted to begin by saying: "*Just listen to the Mirto/Fedima duet of Act I*" but it is no use sampling any selective bits and pieces of this long score and holding them up to praise, there are too many good ones, and they are non-stop. The vocalità sounds Italian, this is immediately self-evident, the instrumentation evokes Greece, with a delicacy and sophistication that is well-shaped, as well as a colouring that is often astringent and invariably original.

It is more than obvious that an opera like this is the absolute antithesis of Verdian compression and concentration, extravagance and expansiveness are its *modus vivendi*, instead of a grave theatrical contraction everything is over-the-top, intensive, predictable-and-unpredictable both at the same time, lavish, multi-layered with no holds-barred, vocal music of a bold contour that commands attention and rewards with a generosity that owes nothing at all to calculation or conventional skills. An exceptional operatic experience is at hand for anyone with the initiative to seek it out.

Synopsis

Act 1 Marathon

In the Theatre of Dionysos the Athenians celebrate the 10th anniversary of their victory over the Persians at Marathon. Among the people we see FEDIMA with her small son - she is a young Persian girl from Susa who fell in love with a handsome Macedonian soldier, ALEXANDER, she followed him to Greece but he deserted her, since then she wanders the countryside with their child as an actress and dancer, searching for her unfaithful lover.

Trumpets announce the entrance of TEMISTOCLES. Greece sees him as her future saviour from the imminent second invasion by the Persian King Xerxes. An Athenian herald tells Temistocles that a messenger from Xerxes requests admission. In fact the messenger is Alexander (Fedima's lover and an old acquaintance of Temistocles) heading the Persian envoys. He politely announces to the Athenians that Xerxes sends proposals of peace which Temistocles however rejects with the statement that Greeks prefer rather to die than become slaves. The hero's daughter MIRTO though is attracted by Alexander's good looks and wonders why people will not listen to him. Temistocles follows the rules of Greek hospitality however and invites Alexander to his house. While the Persian

envoys retire Temistocles appeals to the Athenians to decide on the offer of Xerxes - they ask him to ask the oracle at Delphi for a final decision.

Act 2 The Traitor

In her home Mirto dreams of the handsome Alexander. When she hears that a woman covered with a heavy veil and with a child on her hand is asking to see her. It is Fedima. The young Persian woman tells her story concluding that now her troubles are over as she will see the man she seeks - the Macedonian envoy Alexander who is now dining in Temistocles' house. For a moment Mirto is too upset to reign in her temper and proudly tells Fedima to keep her place. Then she relents and shows pity about Fedima's troubles and assures her (falsely) that the man she loves is not here - possibly she is mistaken, talking about a different person? Fedima at once realises the truth ("*You love him!*")

Mirto shows her the door but Fedima refuses to leave and there is a struggle. At this noise Temistocles and his guests rush in while Fedima quickly covers her face. Temistocles asks his daughter what all this shouting is about and she tells him that this unknown lady claims to know the delegate of the Persians and wants to see him. At this moment Fedima uncovers her face to Alexander, saying "*Here I am. Recognize the mother of your child!*". An introspective quartet ensues expressing the conflicting emotions of all the participants. Alexander asks father and daughter to leave him alone with Fedima, then he coolly recommends she forgets about him, he has no intention of sacrificing his career for a courtesan and dancer, offering her gold for the child's upbringing. Fedima realises that all is lost - he does not love her any more. In desperation she pulls out a dagger and tries to kill the child, Alexander can barely stop her, then she faints. Hearing her cries Temistocles and Mirto rush in and demand an explanation. Alexander tells them that this young woman lost her husband during the Capture of Milotos, that the man was a friend and died in his arms - he had just told the widow of her husband's death! Moved by pity Temistocles and Mirto decide to take Fedima into their care as she slowly returns to her senses.

Outside the chorus urges the Athenian delegates to start on their road to Delphi.

Act 3 The Oracle

The priests of the Oracle are chanting a Hymn to the Night. The Athenians with Temistocles, Mirto with Fedima among them arrive to hear the Pythian priestess foresee the rescue of Athens from the Persians.

Act 4 Salamis

Back in Temistocles house in Athens. After an aria of self-reproach by Fedima, Temistocles himself enters. He tells her that she alone can save the Athenians; she is Persian and has free access to the enemy camp, in the guise of a slave she can approach Xerxes and tell him that the Greeks have lost all hope and intend to sail away. She should urge the king to attack the departing Greeks and thereby take revenge for his defeat at Marathon. Out of gratitude to Temistocles for having taken her in and giving her son a home Fedima agrees. Her life is theirs and she only asks Temistocles to protect her child should anything go wrong. The hero promises to be a father to the young boy.

There is a scene-change and we see the Athenian citizens pretending to leave the city taking farewell of their homes, hearths and altars, in feigned fear of attack. Themistocles cheers them up by telling them that even if the barbarians could destroy their Athens, the city would be reborn from the sea as victory is certain. In the Persian camp Fedima is led to Xerxes. She plays her role perfectly and the king is convinced that all the chaos that he witnesses from afar is due to the hasty flight of the Greeks from their city. He orders Athens to be fired and leaves his tent with his officers. Only Alexander remains in the shadows. He has overheard. He stealthily approaches Fedima from behind and stabs her with a dagger - she is a viper that bites the breast that fed her. Mortally wounded, the young woman assures him that she did not betray Themistocles, on the contrary it was Themistocles who sent her here. Seized with horror Alexander realises what he has set in motion. As the Greeks spring their trap upon the unsuspecting Persians he whispers to Fedima that the same grave will cover them both and stabs himself with his dagger. Overjoyed by their triumph the Greeks celebrate their victory. Among the revellers are Themistocles and Mirto who holds Fedima's son by the hand. They discover Alexander's body and find Fedima *in extremis*, the boy throws himself on his mother while Mirto takes the dying woman in her arms. With her last breath Fedima tells her son that now at last she is happy as she will join her beloved. The boy has found another father in Themistocles.

(Synopsis by Georgios Leotsakos)