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A Gasparini Renaissance

GIUSEPPE PENNISI experiences 'Il Bajazet'

In their histories of music, only a limited number of musicologists discuss Francesco Gasparini (1661-1727). Yet Handel considered him to have been his mentor and J S Bach wrote an appreciation of him. Gasparini was the teacher of musicians such as Benedetto Marcello, Joachim Quantz and Domenico Scarlatti. He was also the composer of over sixty operas staged successfully in Italy and elsewhere (including His Majesty's Theatre in London) in the eighteenth century. Several of them had various versions to suit the needs of specific locations and audience. He also wrote fine church music. More significantly, he was an innovator and an anticipator: in his later operas, the libretto is not a pretext for a series of tripartite arias with *da capo*, but the action is well thought out dramaturgically, compact and full of special effects. Also, he introduced melodic and rhythmic features that became standard in operas of the next generations. He used a small orchestra not only to support impervious vocalizing by bari-tenors (tenors who could descend to a very low register), sopranos, mezzos, and especially castrati (following the customs of the times) but also for special solos or arias accompanied only by a single instrument.

Only a limited number of music lovers have heard of Opera Barga, an unusual festival started some fifty years ago by a British couple and the Glyndebourne chorus master. Barga is a small but delightful walled village at the top of a Tuscan hill. The village features, along with a huge and impressive seventh century cathedral, a small (260 seat) nineteenth century theatre with three tiers of boxes. Most likely, eighteenth century operas were performed in theatres of a similar size; the dimensions and the acoustics of the architecture are such that young voices do not have to strain themselves. In the last forty eight years, all Vivaldi's major operas have been performed in Barga, along with many other unusual offers (from the Italian and international baroque repertory along with some modern

works).

It is a low-cost but high quality venture, financed almost entirely privately, mostly by the local villagers. A few years ago, the founders' son, Nicholas Hunt, took over the management of the enterprise.

This year, Gasparini's *Il Bajazet* (on a libretto by Agostino Piovene and Ippolito Zanelli) had its first modern performances on 10 and 11 July 2014. I attended the second performance. The production will most likely be in Lucca and Pisa next Fall, and may travel to Germany and the UK. In the audience (half Italian and half international, including some from the foreign 'colony' residing in Tuscany most of the year) were reviewers from major German and British music magazines. Francesco Gasparini wrote three different versions of *Il Bajazet*. This production used the second version (for Reggio Emilia) because it is one of Gasparini's few scores which have been well preserved — with the exception of the initial symphony, â€˜borrowed', for this staging, from Gasparini's *Amleto*, after Shakespeare's tragedy.

I was as astounded as I was in 1984, thirty years ago, for the modern premiere of Gioacchini Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims*, then recovered from the Paris Opéra's dusty archives. I sensed that I was listening to an absolute masterpiece. The plot is a basic love-and-war baroque affair, but the main characters have a psychological development, there is plenty of action (in a performance lasting four hours, including two intermissions) and, for an eighteenth century opera, a wealth of musical innovation.



The Auser Musici ensemble at OperaBarga in Tuscany. Photo © 2014 Rudy Pessina. Click on the image for higher resolution

The orchestra, Auser Musici conducted by Carlo Ipata, is a baroque complex based in Pisa that operates all over Europe and has already eighteen records for major houses: *Il Bajazet* will reach the record stores next September. The ensemble is young — ten women and six men — and

plays period instruments. They kept the balance between stage and pit extremely well, and gave the right musical colors to the development of the drama, rightly underscoring important arias such as 'Ti sento, si' by the mezzo and 'Forte e lieto' by the bari-tenor.



Raffaele Pè as Leone, Ewa Gubanska as Irene, Filippo Mineccia as Tamerlano, Antonio Giovannini as Andronico, Leonardo De Lisi as Baajzet and Giuseppina Bridelli as Asteria in Act 3 of 'Il Bajazet'. Photo © 2014 Rudy Pessina. Click on the image for higher resolution

The stage sets by Nicolas Bovey are essential: a few platforms and painted drops depicted the various places where the plot evolves (a prison, the main hall of a Royal Palace, grand apartments, gardens). The costumes (by Gianluca Falaschi) are simple but effective. Paola Rota's stage direction places emphasis on realistic, not stylized, acting.



Filippo Mineccia as Tamerlano and Antonio Giovannini as Andronico in Act I of 'Il Bajazet'.
Photo © 2014 Rudy Pessina. Click on the image for higher resolution

The voices had been selected through competitive auditions held at the Verdi Theatre in Pisa. About a hundred singers sat for auditions. The female protagonist (Irene) was the Polish mezzo Ewa Gubańska, who was the winner of the prestigious Handel Singing Competition. The bari-tenor Leonardo De Lisi was Bajazet. The soprano Giuseppina Bridelli has the highly dramatic role of his daughter Asteria, both prisoners of Tamerlane. The scores requires three countertenors for parts originally conceived for castrati. They are Filippo Mineccia (Tamerlane), Antonio Giovannini (Andronico, Asteria's lover) and Raffaele Pè (Leone, a general loyal to Bajazet). In secondary roles were Benedetta Mazzucato and Giorgia Cinciripi. The vocal ensemble was superb. Ewa Gubańska, Leonardo De Lisi, Filippo Mineccia and Antonio Giovannini deserve a special mention.



The full company at the end of the performance of 'Il Bajazet'. Photo © 2014 Rudy Pessina. Click on the image for higher resolution

I felt that I was listening to the start of a Gasparini Renaissance.

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