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## Wolf-Ferrari: Il campiello / Opera di Firenze, 25th September 2014

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The popularity of opera buffa in Italy had already dramatically decreased in the first part of the nineteenth century; Rossini himself was not commissioned another opera buffa after *La Cenerentola* (1817) in his native country. This genre experienced its true zenith in the first decade of the century, when an army of composers and librettists worked indefatigably in a still eighteenth century climate before being swept away by the “Cyclone” of Pesaro. There is an underground thread linking this period to the late 1800s and the early twentieth century: librettos based on Goldoni’s body of work. A fair number of operas were adapted from his comedies even after 1843, the year of *Don Pasquale*, traditionally considered as opera buffa’s last bloom.



After a forty-year search for the right “non-tragic” libretto Verdi, with Boito’s complicity, returned to comic opera with *Falstaff*, which for decades was to be viewed as an inescapable model for all those intending to tackle this genre. If it is true that he ultimately and inevitably turned to Shakespeare, it is also necessary to remember that the name of Goldoni often emerged in Verdi’s correspondence, with particular regard to the comedy *Il bugiardo* (The liar). After *Falstaff*, a flood of comic operas burst onto the Italian stages: if the most important title is undoubtedly Mascagni’s *Le maschere*, a number of operas based directly on Goldoni acquired some popularity, particularly *Le baruffe chiozzotte* (1893) by Tomaso Benvenuti and Gaetano Coronaro’s *Un curioso incidente* (1903). The best and longest lasting results were yielded however by **Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari**:

Venetian by birth, the Italian German composer had Goldoni in his DNA. Although he wrote five Goldoni operas, only two thrived in the years preceding World War Two, only to barely survive at the fringe of the standard repertory thereafter: *I quattro rusteghi* (1906) and *Il campiello* (1936). Wolf-Ferrari's bigger fortune in Germany on the other hand would need a whole separate essay. The libretto of *Il campiello* follows Goldoni closely, despite inevitable cuts: as in the case of *I quattro rusteghi*, both the play and the opera are mainly in Venetian dialect, and this time Goldoni's text is itself in verse. The plot as such is slenderer than in the earlier opera, being mainly a pretext for a delightful, richly satirical kaleidoscope of interacting characters – all in the unchanging setting of the small Venetian square to which the title refers. The frequenters of this square are mostly members of a close-knit working-class community, which is nevertheless repeatedly torn by short-lived strife. Again as in *I quattro rusteghi*, the locals are contrasted with an aristocratic "outsider", who uses standard Italian; but Cavaliere Astolfi (baritone) no longer has riches commensurate with his rank – which does not prevent him from inviting everyone to meals, and from courting Gasparina (soprano), a prim young lady with a lisp (an affectation she uses in her attempts to imitate the upper class) whom he eventually takes back to Naples with him. Other important characters include Luçieta and Gnese (sopranos), who also get their share of the Cavaliere's attentions, despite their commitments to local boyfriends Anzoleto (bass) and Zorzeto (tenor). Older women include the grotesque travesty roles of Dona Cate and Dona Pasqua, who themselves try, somewhat improbably, to find a husband (and here Wolf-Ferrari employs an expedient, that of entrusting roles of old lustful women to tenors, dating back to seventeenth century opera).

Most of the best musical and dramatic qualities of *I quattro rusteghi* are again present in *Il campiello*, perhaps less fresh and more predictable than the earlier opera, although there are signs, in the ferocious quarrel scene that explodes in Act III, that Wolf-Ferrari was willing, if and when the dramatic situation warranted it, to use tougher 20th-century dissonances than one normally associates with him: parts of that "titanic" fight could comfortably come from an opera such as Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The pervading atmosphere – however, between the moments of strife, and only superficially disturbed by them – is of a profound yet childlike serenity.



Conductor **Francesco Cilluffo** at the helm of the Orchestra del Maggio Musicale expressed such delicate balance with dexterity, bursting out verve and zest, with an impressive colour palette and remarkable rhythmic pulse: he held the dramatic tension always alive with no signs of slackening and in the above mentioned Act III fight the sound was unfailingly neat and precise. Cilluffo also succeeded in the hardest task, that of keeping orchestra and stage always together without the slightest smudge. Musicologist Giorgio Vigolo hit the target when describing Wolf-Ferrari's writing as "the harmonic and melodic vibration of Venetian speech", and as a matter of fact the composer's vocal music, despite having a lot in common with the Puccinian "conversational singing", differentiates itself from it under several aspects, often verging towards the "patter" of the old opera buffa; moreover, his melodies frequently begin innocently, with a series of repeated notes or a simple triad only to move with seeming inevitability in an unexpected melodic or harmonic direction. *Il campiello* is an ensemble work, where single characters are entrusted with melodic cells of some significance that however rarely expand into old-fashioned set pieces. Singers are required to possess less bravura skills than infallible pitch and rhythmic sense: just one hesitancy and the whole scene will break into pieces. The Opera di Firenze has gathered a cast formed by singers of varying experience, some with fresher instruments than others, but all sharing the same flawless musicianship. **Alessandra Marianelli** (Gasparina), has a creamy, round, well trained voice, with an unerring pitch (the high B that introduces her in her initial arioso was just beautiful), and she was able to find the right solution for what is perhaps the hardest vocal hurdle of the opera, that of clearly communicating to the audience the bizarre diction of her character. Excellent was also **Diana Mian**, a Luçeta with a meatier sound than Gasparina's, as dictated by the tradition, considering that Luçeta is the most impetuous and hot-headed of the three girls: her two very exposed high Cs of the phrase "aliegra magnarò che son novizza" were quite impressive. **Barbara Bagnesi**, again following tradition (Gnese is the ingénue of the group, is a soprano leggero with a well produced sound, and for the record she was the only singer to receive an applause during the performance after her Act I soliloquy. Veteran *Patrizia Orciani* (Orsola) revealed herself to be a true comedienne. I would like to highlight the fact that the creators of these roles were big shots such as, respectively, Mafalda Favero, Iris Adami Corradetti, Margherita Carosio and Giulia Tess. Taking inspiration from a well-known seventeenth century practice, Wolf Ferrari wrote the roles of the two other old ladies for two tenors: **Luca Canonici** (Dona Pasqua) was able to maintain, even while engaging in the most frenetic slapstick, a higher vocal composure than **Cristiano Olivieri** (Dona Cate), who manifested in a few occasions some problems above the stave, a venial sin in such a role, widely compensated by his complete stage commitment. **Alessandro Scotto di Luzio**, a leggero tenor with a light-weight but ringing top, brought to the role of Zorzeto all the necessary vocal freshness and physique du rôle; **Filippo Morace** (Anzoleto) counterbalanced him with a dark bass and burly demeanour. Wolf-Ferrari accompanies every appearance of the character of Fabrizio with the presence of low brasses, and so it is the orchestration itself that suggests the need of a more threatening black timbre than the one offered by **Luca Dell'Amico**. The pivot role of the opera is after all Cavalier Astolfi, which **Clemente Antonio Daliotti** sang with an evenly produced baritone, considerable temperament and crisp diction.



That *Il campiello* has long been a most neglected work (with the partial exception of the Veneto region and Trieste, where it appears with some regularity) is witnessed by the fact that this was its Florence premiere. One of the opera's flaws is perhaps its being set, for all of its three acts, in the same place, with the visual monotony this can imply. Stage director **Leo Muscato** had the idea to place the three acts in different periods: the first act in 1756, the year of Goldoni's comedy; the second act in 1936, when Wolf-Ferrari's opera was premiered; by this time most of the audience had already presumed that the third act would take place in 2014. It was nevertheless fun to observe the small and big changes occurring from one act to the next: the locanda (inn) becomes a bed and breakfast, the well is now sealed, the osteria becomes a café with garish neon signs, and so on. Obviously the costumes change as well, and so the fil rouge linking the whole opera is the presence, during the three preludes, of Goldoni himself, who wanders about the stage with a surprised, if not downright baffled look. Highly effective as well as funny was the finale when, after a most melanchonic "Bondi, Venezia cara" sung by Ms. Marianelli with a fine legato, all the characters squeezed themselves behind Gasparina who, before leaving the city for good, takes a very modern "selfie" of the all group. All in all it was a most entertaining and pleasing production, made even more enjoyable by the attractive costumes of **Silvia Aymonimo** and **Tiziano Santi's** sets.

"Quanta pace dà quest musica!", a listener is said to have exclaimed when the work was in rehearsal in 1936, and leaving the opera house this was exactly the feeling that I, and hopefully the rest of the audience, fully experienced.

Nicola Lischi

5 stars