

April 2015: Rossini's *The Marriage Contract*

In 1810 the teenage Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) decided he was ready to fly *solo* and, after having left the tutoring of Maestro Mattei at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, was eager to try his hand in the theater. The opportunity arose for him in Venice, at the Teatro Giustiniani a San Moisè, as often happens a last minute call to fill someone else's shoes (incidentally, the same will be true for *Italiana in Algeri*). Rossini's biographer Radiciotti explains that the San Moisè had just started its Fall 1810 season, having announced five *farse* by five composers (four of them premieres) and having just opened very successfully with the first one (Generali's *Adelina*, libretto by Rossi), when the composer for the fifth *farsa* (a German musician whose name nobody seems to recall) left without leaving a single note of music. The appointment of Rossini is variously attributed to the good auspices of the Morandis and of the impresario for the San Moisè, Marchese Cavalli, to whom Morandi recommended the young talent.

Maestro Giovanni Morandi (1777-1856), a composer, singing teacher and choral director, and his wife Rosa Morolli (1782-1824) were friends of the Rossini family. Rosa, as a member of the cast of the S. Moisè for that year, was to create the role of Fanni in *Cambiale*. Cavalli had already met the 14-year old Rossini when the boy had been working as an accompanist in Sinigaglia. There was there a singer, the *prima donna* Adelaide Carpani, who was Cavalli's protégé, and possibly lover. At a show when the young Rossini was accompanying, the soprano made a particularly non-felicitous improvised run, blatantly off key. Rossini couldn't help it and broke into loud laughter in front of the public. When the furious singer complained to Cavalli, Rossini was summoned to his chambers to be severely reprimanded. However, when the impresario saw how young, talented, and intelligent the accompanist was, and when the young boy mimicked for him what the singer had done, the Marchese's anger turned to sympathy and the

meeting eventually ended with Cavalli promising Rossini to help him with a contract and a libretto as soon as he felt ready to write an opera. This came to pass in 1810, evidently thanks also to the recommendation of Maestro Morandi.

The Teatro Giustiniani a San Moisè was a small theater specializing in *farse*—the perfect training ground for a budding composer. With a small company, no chorus, and a hall of manageable size, the theater had found its niche in the theatrical scene of Venice. The theater itself was to close just a few years later, in 1818, and was eventually ordered demolished by the noble Venetian Giustinian, a descendant of the founder of the theater. The genre of the *farsa* may well have been already in decline in 1810, but that didn't affect the enormous success of the young Rossini, who went on to compose another four such pieces for San Moisè: *L'inganno felice* (opened 8 January 1812), *La scala di seta* (9 May 1812), *L'occasione fa il ladro* (24 November 1812), and *Il signor Bruschino* (27 January 1813).

When Cavalli asked Rossini to compose for the 1810 season, Rossini immediately set to work, on a libretto provided by the theater, as was customary. *La cambiale di matrimonio* was a one-act piece by the theater poet Gaetano Rossi (Verona 1774-1855), an able wordsmith, among the best of the time, who had already collaborated with some of the best composers, especially with Simone Mayr. He was to write two more libretti for Rossini: *Tancredi* (1813) and *Semiramide* (1823), as well as texts for two cantatas: *La Santa Alleanza* and *Il vero omaggio* (both 1822).

The subject of *Cambiale* had most likely been chosen before the composer came into the picture, and without his input. The story wasn't new: the original play was a 1791 *La cambiale di matrimonio* in five acts by Camillo Federici, on which another libretto had been based—*Il matrimonio per lettera di cambio*, by Giuseppe Checcherini, music by Carlo Coccia (Rome 1807). Federici (really Giovanni Battista Viassolo 1749-1802) was both a prolific and successful

playwright of comedies as well as tragedies, and a judge. Though some of his plays show his adherence to the theatrical reforms of Goldoni (to the point that he was referred to as Goldoni's heir), most of his works are *commedie lagrimose*, sentimental and pathetic comedies. He does follow into Goldoni footsteps in that he puts on the scene the people who were expected to be in the audience—the sometimes illuminist bourgeoisie, with some pathetic characters from everyday life. *La cambiale* is a typical such comic play in the best Goldonian vein, which often featured an old parent or tutor (typically a *buffo* bass, representing the established societal order) trying to thwart the young pair of lovers (the soprano and tenor). Other side characters included often a confidante or maid with either a lower or a more restricted range, and at times a second *buffo*, from the Neapolitan tradition. Some necessary deception and tricks inevitably lead to the triumph of real love over arranged marriages or money considerations.

Federici's *La cambiale di matrimonio* follows exactly this pattern, with two young lovers, thwarted both by the girl's greedy father, who wants to sell her as merchandise to a rich Canadian, after having tried to give her away to a rich local (who also happens to be the uncle of the young man the girl loves), and by the girl's lover's lower social status and poverty (till the uncle leaves him everything, that is). In the play the rich Canadian Fitz Young (Rossi's and Rossini's Slook) is presented as a good and simple character, within the illuminist prototype of the "good savage." In the first libretto by Checcherini the story is streamlined and distilled into two acts, changing names and locales (the action moves from London to Amsterdam and the Canadian Fitz Young becomes the Paraguayan Tom Fitz-Jungh) and greatly enhancing the comedic element, to the detriment of the sentimental. Rossi, while further condensing the story into one single act, to fit it into the S. Moisè's customary duration—up to an hour and a half, takes both Checcherini and Federici as his sources, and restores the original sentiments of Federici's play. This work is all the most striking,

for Rossi manages to include extremely comic moments (especially the duets between the two *buffi* Slook and Mill, and the scene where Fannì and Edoardo threaten the poor American) as well as lyrical and sentimental ones (such as the duet of the two lovers or Fannì's moving aria).

Nicola de Grecis, the famous buffo bass who created the role of Slook, had also created the role of Slook's counterpart in Coccia's opera in Rome. Thus de Grecis may well have been the one who suggested the story to Rossi. In the absence of other means of dissemination, it was the itinerant artists (singers, players, but also impresarios) who brought the news of operas and libretti from elsewhere.

Rossini thus composed his second major work (*Demetrio e Polibio* had been composed by 1808, though it wasn't performed until 1813) in haste, with a very tight deadline. His future history shows that this was to be his standard *modus operandi*. The only movement that he did not completely compose anew was the *Sinfonia*, for which he took a piece in E-flat he had composed in 1809 while a student in Bologna, and slightly modified it to rectify some juvenile errors. This *Sinfonia* will later also function as the overture for *Adelaide di Borgogna* (1817). When rehearsals started, however, trouble started too: the singers immediately complained that the accompaniment was too thick and complex, that it covered the voices, and that they had to strain to be heard. The young composer went home and wept bitterly. Maestro Morandi allegedly offered to help, made some cuts, and lightened up the orchestral texture. There is, however, no proof of this since neither the autograph manuscript nor any other portion of discarded work survive.

La cambiale di matrimonio went on stage at the S. Moisè on 3 November 1810, in a double bill with Foppa and Farinelli's *Non precipitare i giudizi*. The reception of the inaugural work of the eighteen-year-old composer must have been good, for it was performed 12 times there, and reprised later and elsewhere around Italy and in Vienna. Both works were seen again on 6

November. Then on November 14th, 15th, 17th, 19th, 22nd, 23rd, 24th, 28th, 29th, and December 1st *La cambiale* was paired with Rossi and Generali's *Adelina*. Unfortunately there was no review of the performance, probably because the reviewer of the *Quotidiano Veneto*, which announced the performances and usually reviewed them, was not sure what to make of this novice and was reserving his judgment for later. He eventually came around and showered Rossini with praise with his later works.

The manuscript pertaining to the 16-20 April 1820 reprise of the *farsa* at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples (in a double bill with one act of *Il turco in Italia*) is the only one of the dozen or so surviving, to display significant and tantalizing variants. Not only it contains only five musical numbers (Nos. 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8), with no *sinfonia*, or recitatives (routinely replaced at the Teatro Nuovo by spoken dialogue, often in dialect), but it has a different beginning for No. 3 and a different ending for the finale (whether they are by Rossini or not is speculation, but both are simpler and somewhat more repetitive). More interestingly, though, in several places Mill's Italian words have been crossed out and replaced with corresponding, hilarious, Neapolitan expressions. Rossini was in residence in Naples at the time of this show, but it isn't known whether he had a hand or any kind of input in the revisions. What is sure is that this score presents an unusual and unique window into the practices of a semi-dialectal tradition in Naples.

A *farsa* is a short comic opera, which replicates in a condensed fashion the typical structure of a comic opera—two acts with ensembles concluding each, as Stefano Castelvechi eloquently argued. The central concertato takes the dramatic function as well as the place of the first act finale, where it fulfills four conditions: it is central, it is larger, it is unique, and it has some kind of dramatic culmination in terms of tension and complication. Bruno Cagli, eminent Rossini scholar, describes the standard form of a *farsa*, which happens to fit *La cambiale* perfectly:

- Sinfonia
- No. 1 Introduzione in three parts: allegro, cantabile, allegro, with a duet followed by a short cavatina and a trio (here “Non c’è il vecchio sussurrone” with Clarina, Mill, and Norton)
- No. 2 Duet (here “Tornami a dir che m’ami” for the two lovers Fannì and Edoardo)
- No. 3 Aria (here “Grazie! Grazie! Troppo presto” for Slook, and ensemble)
- No. 4 Concertato (here the trio “Darei per sì bel fondo” with Fannì, Edoardo and Slook)
- No. 5 Aria (here the aria *di sorbetto* “Anch’io son giovane” of Clarina)
- Nos. 6 and 7, a duet and an aria (here No. 6 the duet “Dite presto, dove sta” between Slook and Mill, followed by No. 7, Fannì’s aria “Come tacer, come frenare i palpiti”)
- No. 8 Finale, in at least three parts, ending with a stretta for all characters (here “Porterò così il cappello” with everyone)

The first cast, in Venice at S. Moisè, on 3 November 1810, included the singers of the theater’s troupe, two of whom have already been mentioned:

Tobia Mill, English merchant: Luigi Raffanelli (*primo buffo*)
 Slook, Canadian businessman: Nicola de Grecis (*primo buffo*)
 Fannì, Mill’s daughter: Rosa Morandi (*prima donna—soprano*)
 Edoardo Milfort, Fannì’s lover: Tommaso Ricci (*primo mezzo carattere—tenore*)
 Norton, Mill’s bookkeeper: Domenico Remolini (*secondo buffo*)
 Clarina, Fannì’s maid: Clementina Lanari (*seconda donna—mezzo soprano*)

The opera is certainly a youthful work, chronologically speaking, but the style of the mature master is already apparent. His talent for perfect proportions, the ease of composing and magical simplicity of the writing, the freshness and the comic verve are all already budding in this teenage work. The youthfulness can perhaps be glimpsed in the superficiality of some ideas, and in the melodies, crescendi, and in the instrumental themes of limited scope. All numbers are sort of micro-organisms that the young composer adapts to the particular dramatic situation, always with

at least adequate results, often much better than adequate. One shining example of the composer's innate talent is in the Aria for Slook (No. 3), which combines short, interchangeable, and comic little motives with more lyrical phrases (for example at "Flemma dunque, ed incomincio") and comically repeated fragments, to portray the contrasting emotions and character of the various people—the goodly and calm Canadian versus the excitement of the others (the "pertichini"). The resulting opera exudes freshness, comic verve, some short-lived pathos (in Fannì and in Clarina especially), and is an absolute delight that deserves far more attention than it usually receives.

The first half of the program includes five pieces by Wolfgang Amadé Mozart, who died the year before Rossini was born, shortly before turning 36. The Viennese composer's speed and facility in composing is very similar to the Pesarese master's, though his earliest compositions date from his sixth or seventh year of age. Mozart was a consummate master composer for the theater and for the voice, as he was for all media. On the program there are four vocal pieces, composed at different times in his life. The aria "Con un vezzo all'italiana" comes from a comic opera, *La finta giardiniera* which the teenage composer wrote for the old court theater in Munich. It was supposed to be premiered at the end of 1774 but it was pushed to January of the next year to allow for more rehearsal time, according to Mozart's father. All the other pieces are from his last decade, which he spent in Vienna, trying to make a living as a freelance musician. The contredanses K. 106 were composed at the end of Mozart's life, in 1790, despite what the low catalog number might suggest. A contredanse was the most popular French 18th-century dance, very upbeat, introduced to Louis XIV's court in the 1680s from Britain. "Dite almeno, in che mancai" is an ensemble on text by Giovanni Bertati which Mozart wrote to be inserted in the opera *La villanella rapita* by Francesco Bianchi when it was performed at the Vienna Burgtheater in 1785. The aria for soprano "Nehmt meinen Dank" was written in 1782 by Mozart for his sister-in-law Aloisia Lange, Constanze's

sister. Finally, the aria “Per questa bella mano,” composed in 1791, is peculiar in that it has an obbligato double-bass part, extremely difficult, but perfectly appropriate to accompany the bass solo voice. He originally wrote it for bass F.X. Gerl and double-bass player F. Pischelberger. It is still very widely performed, in part because of the very few virtuoso pieces for the large instrument.

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