

OPERA ADVANCES IN ITALY

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TWO operas had their baptism recently and on the same night, that have stirred the rather stagnant waters which have engulfed the Italian musical theatre for some time. One is the work of a musician known to everyone for his intense activity as composer and performer, Alfredo Casella. The other is the experiment of a young man, Antonio Veretti who certainly cannot boast the wide, varied experience of Casella and still less his reputation but who already shows he has a clear knowledge of the goal towards which he is striving.

If Brahms waited until he was forty-four to publish his first symphony, Casella has not shown greater haste in attacking the problem, distinctly more difficult, of opera. For many years Casella has been swayed by extreme repugnance toward a musical genre which Italian musicians cultivated almost exclusively until the first years of our century, often justifying the ridicule and invective of the young intellectuals of that time. Today Casella is a "great convert" and comes preaching and practising the return to opera: not to music drama in which he discerns—more or less skillfully disguised—the remains of the Wagnerian esthetic, nor, of course, to realistic drama, but to shrill melodrama "whose fundamental reason for existence," as Casella himself recently asserted, "will be (neither more nor less than in the symphony) music; music alone shall make its law whatever be the form of the opera." To the declamation of musical drama he opposes cantabile—melody "that conquers any words." For the realistic subject he substitutes the fantastic, as more suitable to transformation into music and to its free development. Carlo Gozzi's *La Donna Serpente* gave him a convenient scenario in which the tragic accompanies the comic, the earthly the supernatural. Ferruccio Busoni had already entertained a similar ideal, writing *Turandot* from another tale of Gozzi's. But he

understood perfectly that Gozzi's happy fusion of the fantastic and the real, which Goethe and many others after him had admired, becomes very difficult in a musical design, and he had preferred the Goethian fantastic quality to any other more noble.

One of the imperfections of Casella's opera, in my opinion, is precisely this defective fusion of the two basic elements; for the music has not completed the miracle. The scenic trick—and there is more than one in the play of circumstances which places in contrast fairies and princes, magicians and soldiers—remains a trick because it does not find the favorable atmosphere for acceptance as *sub specie poesiae*. While Wagner's, or even Rimsky-Korsakoff's scenic objectification is grotesque, imperfect, the music transports us into a magic world where everything is credible.

The music of Casella is, I believe, of too earthly origin to be capable of great flight; it is more at ease among the masks than among the fairies. The concise and elegant speech of Albrigor, Tartagil, Alditruif and Pantul (the Caucasian names of the four classic Italian masks Brighella, Tartaglia, Truffaldino and Pantalone) and the racy musical transposition of their spirit and their gestures make one regret that Casella does not completely abandon himself to the real world of pure comedy with a delightful and "flowing" music, to use his own expression, as a Scarlatti or a Rossini of our time might write it.

These considerations also recall the historical conflict between instrumental and vocal styles in opera. Casella has now attained maturity and personal quality in the instrumental style. Pages like the *Sinfonia*, between the prologue and the first act, and the prelude to the third act may be considered perfect according to his own esthetic. One may dispute the intention but not the realization of the formal balance, the play of the cadences, the zest of the detail; the *Sinfonia* couples richness of decoration with clearness of design, agility of movement with solidity of structure. In the prelude to the last act, on the other hand, we again find that emotion which is peculiar to Casella and recalls the period of *A notte alta*: an emotion cold as a winter landscape, without gesture but full of desperate anguish; the emotion, it may be said, of a man who cannot or does not wish to express

emotion and forces himself to appear impassive: gray tones predominating in both the clearer and the darker colors, and a slight glittering here and there as of steel. Casella here may be recognized a mile away: pleased or not pleased, one cannot deny either style or artistic coherence to these pages.

The vocal style on the other hand does not seem so personal. Casella has cultivated it relatively little in the past, probably through natural disposition. In the *Donna Serpente*, at all times (with rare exception) when the inspiration must be vocal, the removal from a world that the personality of the musician rules and controls to one in which he seeks to lean on others is clearly noticeable. No longer a personal style, aggressively his own, but diverse styles "in the manner of" Casella.

But if the opera as a whole does not reveal that full control of the operatic craft which it is proper to expect from such a musician as Casella, it again confirms his singular talent and masterly capacity for artifice.



The author of the opera *Il Favorito del Re*, Antonio Veretti, is little past thirty; his one preceding opera, *Il Medico Volante*, has for some years been highly regarded by an important group, but as yet has not been presented. He too talks of the return to melodrama and declares his preference for fixed forms and the predominance of song. But by good fortune—his and ours—he often forgets these postulates and permits himself to feel, in a sufficiently personal way, the operatic needs of our time. The *Favorito del Re* cannot receive higher praise in my opinion than this: that it is at the same time European and Italian, that it enters the international operatic movement still possessing the savor of Italian sensibility. Veretti has not deemed it necessary to shut his eyes and ears and to take refuge in that provincialism which has once again been hailed by another Italian composer as a most precious quality; whenever he does confine himself to his desire to disinter old melodramatic forms, with intentions more or less polemic, he falls into the commonplace.

The plot of the comedy comes from a story out of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and recounts the stratagems contrived by

two young married people, overburdened with debt, to fleece the king and queen whose favorites they are. First one then the other shams dead and, weeping, they attain their object. When all is disclosed the royal couple pardons them, diverted by the ingenious swindle. The subject is pleasing but a little thin for three acts, and towards the end interest flags at the symmetrical repetition of the situation. However the musician knows how to recapture his audience with an unexpected theatrical instinct which, though it needs to be refined by experience, augurs well. Veretti has not a particularly rich musical imagination but with small means succeeds in creating atmosphere, delineating characters and presenting the dramatic situation in adequate relief. His opera deserves a good place beside the other experiments of *Oper der Zeit*, from Krenek to Milhaud, from Weill to Max Brand.

Special mention must be made here of the mise-en-scène by Guido Salvini with the collaboration in costume designing of Titina Rota. This is the first Italian mise-en-scène of the Scala which suits our modern taste and is perfectly adapted to the spirit of opera. It is not all perfect, but the ensemble is lively, pleasing, and combines balance with boldness in a manner to which we have long been unaccustomed.