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The Berlin Traviata

Sidney Cox

Martin Chusid's important catalog contains an intriguing appendix entry which until now seems to have escaped the scrutiny of Verdi detectives. In the section on "Alternate Titles for the Operas," Prof. Chusid lists a libretto for a 13 December 1860 Berlin Hofoper performance of Violetta (La Traviata). The comprimario part of Gastone has been considerable importance (at least to the performer) by the addition of two substantial solos: one interpolated after the first-act Brindisi and the other substituted for the Coro di Mattadori in the third act finale (the opera was given in four acts).

It now turns out that the new pieces (aggiunti in the Italian libretto text and Einlage in the German) are, first, the Siciliana or (better) Bolero, in the fifth act of Giovanna de Guzman and Urbano's rondo from the second act of Meyerbeer's Gli Ugonotti. In neither case does the added material bear much relationship to the action, but it gives Gastone the means to sing for his supper, as it were, and provides the performer with a couple of flashy applause-getters - not inappropriate in the convivial surroundings. The reason for this was simply to exploit the popularity of the mezzo-soprano Zelia Trebelli, who was touring northern Europe at the time with Merelli's Italian opera troupe. At this early point in her career, she had already developed a predilection for travesti parts, in which she attained great success even up to the age of 50. (In 1870, Ambroise Thomas provided her with the Gavotte, "Me voici dans son boudoir" in Act II of Mignon, which has become a fixture in the score along with the custom of casting the role of Frédéric as a contralto). Trebelli's repertoire also included Urbain in Les Huguenots. For a London performance in 1858, Meyerbeer had added the cheerful page's song "Non, vous n'avez jamais, je gage" to follow the Act II bathing scene expressly for Marietta Alboni, the contemporary and counterpart of Trebelli. Like the Mignon Gavotte, it became definitive in the opera, and it is hardly surprising that Trebelli knew the piece, albeit in the Italian translation of S. Manfredo Maggioni. What Alboni thought of having "her" number appropriated by a rival is not recorded, but she probably was not enchanted. What Verdi might have thought is more easily divined: he disapproved of "trouser" roles and he was contemptuous of Meyerbeer. There seems to be no evidence, though, that he was aware of what was going on.

The insertion of the Giovanna de Guzman piece is perhaps more excusable, the music being Verdi's own (although the choral comments are omitted). It was also probably new to Berlin, since the opera from which it was lifted does not seem to have been performed in that city before 1860 in any of its guises (Les vepres sicilienes, I vespri siciliani, etc.), according to Kaufman's chronology. The Merelli production of Traviata was also presented in Brussels, Leipzig, and Frankfurt in the first half of 1861, but Trebelli was replaced in the last-named by Barbara Marchisio, the first Preziosilla in Italy two years later.

The text of the insert aria is virtually identical to that of the Italian translation of Les vepres attributed scornfully by Budden to Ettore Caimi and printed as Giovanna de Guzman. The patriotic lament with which the verse concludes is irrelevant to the dramatic situation but, as we have seen, it is the entertainment quotient of the music which counts here.

Whether it was transposed to suit Trebelli's mezzo voice is conjectural. Her range was reputed to extend over two and a half octaves, and so she might have been able to attain the high C sharp which is required in the original key setting (only fleetingly, in coloratura). If, however, the piece were transposed a whole step down, from A minor to G minor, it would fit far better harmonically with the B flat major of the preceding Brindisi and the E flat major of the following offstage banda music.

The second addition, Urbano's "No, caso egual giammai scommetto," doubtless was performed in its original A flat major. The tessitura is wide, from G below middle C to the triple-line E flat, but, again, the latter note is touched only in coloratura and the former offers an oppure an octave higher (although Trebelli surely could render the lower G).

Trebelli's importance to an operatic production in those years being what it apparently was, it is not far-fetched to suggest that she may have performed the insert aria for Maddalena in Rigoletto which Patric Schmid discussed in the AIVS Verdi Newsletter No. 5 (June, 1978).

The Merelli company performed Rigoletto at the Berlin Hofoper on 5 November 1860 - about a month before they did Traviata - and Trebelli was...
Maddalena. Schmid points out that the added number was actually Verdi’s song "Il poveretto", published in 1847 and included in an Escudier vocal score of Rigoletto issued in late 1857 or early 1858. Trebelli could easily have known the piece, and her reputation in 1860 was certainly enough to justify an important solo for her, especially as a published score already existed. Indeed, she may well have insisted!

There remains one tantalizing matter as to the Traviata production. This writer possesses a full score of the opera, Ricordi plate numbers 21366-76, whose publication date is uncertain; Chusid places it "ca.1855," while Hopkinson claims "c.1880" and the dealer Jean-Marie Martin puts it "c.1890". David Rosen believes that the earliest of these dates is closest to the fact.

"Violetta" and a German text in red are inked in above the Italian, and the score bears heavy penciled conductor’s markings. At the end of Scene 2 (the Brindisi), the word "Einlage" is written in pencil, followed closely by two indecipherable letters. Could this score have been used for a Trebelli performance? Could another director or singer have decided to add the same or other material at this point? Someone, it is clear, did something, but we shall surely never know who or what.

There is no "Einlage" written into the score at the party scene chez Flora, but a big cut is indicated, eliminating the gypsies’ chorus and the matadors’, and proceeding directly from "giungono gli amici" to "Alfredo! Voi!". It is conceivable that some material could have been inserted to fill the space - perhaps some dances, or even another vocal number - but there is no direct evidence of this.

Trebelli went on to score triumphs in all European musical centers and, in 1883, became the first Azucena at the Metropolitan. It would be interesting to know if Gaston, Vicomte de Letorieres, ever again attained the operatic level to which la Trebelli raised him.

NOTES

1 Martin Chusid, A Catalog of Verdi's Operas (Hackensack: Joseph Boonin, 1974), p. 182. I am grateful to Prof. Chusid for his cooperation in the development of this article.

2 The libretto, in the Library of Congress collection, has the call number Schatz 10688. My thanks to Wayne D. Shirley, music specialist at the Library of Congress, for copies of the pertinent passages.

3 Thanks to David Rosen of Cornell University for the clue that led to the discovery of the Meyerbeer source. Subsequent to this, I confirmed my findings by reference to a slim volume, Trebelli: A Biographical Sketch and Reminiscences of Her Life, by Marie de Mensiaux (London: Henry Potter & Co., 1890), in which, at pages 18-19, the author deals specifically with the Berlin Traviata and names the additions. My appreciation also extends to Lenore Coral, music librarian at Cornell, and Mary Wallace Davidson, librarian of the Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music, for their kind assistance.

4 See Thomas G. Kaufman, Verdi and His Major Contemporaries: A Selected Chronology of Performance with Casts (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990), p. 417, fn. 45. "Trebelli" is an anagram for her family name of Gillebert, and her true given names were Zélie Thérèse Gloria Caroline, the whole thing finished off with the aristocratic patronymic de Beaulieu. She lived from 1838 (a single dictionary makes it 1834) until 1892.

5 See Julian Budden, The Operas of Verdi, Vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 115. "Still less will [Verdi] agree to write a trouser role for contralto. He hates transformations of this type." This did not prevent him, however, from doing so for soprano in Un ballo in maschera and Don Carlos.

6 Kaufman, Chronology, p. 419.

7 Budden, Operas, 2, p. 239. "Ettore Caimi's [libretto] is in fact one of the worst ever perpetrated." See also the first footnote.

8 Kaufman, Chronology, p. 186.