

Goodness triumphant

Cecilia Xuereb

Rossini's opera *LA CENERENTOLA* was last performed at the Manoel Theatre in 1992 on the occasion of the second centenary of the composer's birth. On March 5 this opera opened the Bank of Valletta Opera Festival, this year reduced to just two events, since the third event, usually a concert, had to be postponed because of the general election.

This two-act opera, described by the composer as a *dramma giocoso*, has all the elements of 19th century comic opera. Its characters are larger than life, its plot unlikely and its music bubbles like champagne.

The plot of the libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, is vaguely based on the popular children's fairy tale *Cinderella*, but Ferretti dispenses with the magic element and instead presents a story with a moral that is emphasised by the opera's subtitle *Il trionfo della bontà* — the triumph of goodness. Giovanni Dispenza, the artistic director of the production at the Manoel Theatre, wanted to give back to the opera something of the fairy tale element. So he presented it as a pop-up fairy tale book come to life.

Towards the end of the overture the curtain opened to reveal a big book, that, once the action started, was opened to reveal a picture set with the characters and cut-out props "popping out" of the background. The candy-coloured lights at various points highlighted the children's fairy tale book effect. The result, while fresh and not without a certain charm, was rather naïve, perhaps a bit too much.

Rossini's music is immediately

recognisable and not only because of its cross-references — quite a bit of this opera recalls his earlier *Barbiere di Siviglia*. The vocal writing is very florid and was intended for singers with a great agility, extension, capacity for speed and coloration as well as overall musicality. His musical line can be very daring: starting simply but soon developing into a heady, dizzy coloratura that is typical of him before returning to simplicity. Apart from the virtuoso arias for his principals, Rossini's operas include unmatched ensembles for singers who were all masters of the bravura coloratura style and most of them brilliant actors and actresses as well.

Lucia Valentini Terrani, one of the greatest Cenerentolas that opera has ever known, is reported to have once said that "it is better to do something less than perfect every now and then rather than something boring". This perhaps describes the production and the singers of the performance by the Teatro Giuseppe Borgatti di Cento at the Manoel. This was a young cast that played as a team, together pulling the strings of the plot. They were all competent singers with fine voices and acted well together. Above all they had a great sense of rhythm — an important factor for the various ensembles and patter singing that dot the opera.

The title role is written for that rare specimen — a coloratura contralto with a low voice with phenomenal agility. The singer needs to evoke extreme youth. Yet she is not as stupidly goody-goody as she might appear at first. She is a winner and in the name of justice triumphs in the end.

Giuliana Castellani was a buxom Cinderella. Being a mezzo rather than a contralto, her voice

lacked that special velvety quality that characterises the contralto and her lower register in particular tended to sound a little metallic. But her coloratura was brilliant. The way that her singing developed from the simple folk story of her first appearance (*Una volta c'era un re*) to the brilliant rondo *Nacqui nell'affanno* with which the opera ends, was superb. She had all the technical qualities and musicianship required of the role and never lapsed into sugary sentimentality. Singing alongside Castellani was tenor Alejandro Escobar as Don Ramiro. Escobar has a beautiful voice and his duet with Castellani in Act I, *Un soave non so che*, was full of tenderness and shy hesitant affection.

Ramiro's is another coloratura part that Escobar sang with great confidence. His aria *Si ritrovarla io giuro* in Act II matched Castellani's bravura in its agility and the flexibility of the voice. Contrasting these more serious moments were the bird-like tones of sopranos Simona Forni and Francesca Bruni playing the two Ugly Sisters, Tisbe and Clorinda. These characters, with their ludicrous

wigs, make-up and costumes, seemed to come straight out of panto, their voices in sharp contrast to the warmer voice of the mezzo.

Dandini, the prince's valet impersonating the prince, was played by baritone Davide Rocca. Like the two sisters, Dandini seemed more like a character in panto and his acting, though not his singing, occupied centre stage for most of the production. Another character that was larger than life and who is in fact described in the libretto as a *buffone*, was the father, played by bass Gianluca Breda, an imposing figure with a fine voice whose duet with Dandini in Act II was brilliantly comic. In contrast, Alidoro, another bass part sung by Paolo Drigo, was the rather staid philosopher who "turned the pages of the book".

La Cenerentola regales us a number of ensembles, all of which were excellently sung and directed. Apart from the duet in Act I, the love between Angelina (Cinderella) and Ramiro plays little part in the music, not even primarily their reactions to their own and other people's motives, but it is the situation that these motives bring them into that forms the basis of the opera. And these situations lead not so much to arias as to ensembles. And here, rhythms, accents, words become even more important. Rossini is a master of catching hold of the verbal rhythm of a chance phrase and turn it into music, and has great dexterity with patter and creating quick-silver sound.

Following the ensemble conveying the astonishment of all the characters at the arrival of Cenerentola at the ball, Act I finishes with a whirlwind *stretta*, *Signora una parola*, in which the characters rue the fact that they no longer appear to be in touch with

reality — rather than enjoying the feast prepared for them they become the ingredients of a minestrone as the banquet table turns into an enormous pot into which they disappear. This built up to a resounding crescendo that looks back to the overture.

The climax of the opera, too, comes with one of these ensembles, that like the finale to Act I was excellently directed. This is the sextet in Act II (*Stete voi*), after the Prince and Dandini have taken refuge from a storm in the astonished Don Magnifico's house. The music built up on a slow *staccato* tune from which each singer broke away in turn with a florid phrase while the others kept up the steady rhythm with a constant repetition of the tune making maximum use of the words. Played front of stage with hands in harness and figures first interweaving "into a snarled knot, a tangled web" and gradually get untangled. This was a *coup de théâtre* as well as one of the musical highlights of the evening.

There was no mention in the printed programme of the chorus, who represented the members of Don Magnifico's household. In fact it tended to lack luster, though the singing was correct.

Conductor Michael Laus was in control from this point. The National Orchestra did not try to contend with the singers. The overture, the same Rossini wrote for *La Gazzetta*, and the storm interlude in Act II sparked and set the pace for the production. Otherwise it gave the necessary musical commentary to the action and support to the singers.

Overall, this was an entertaining evening but one that lacked that extra sparkle that would have made it a really exciting experience.

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Sheffield Orchestra in concert

Simon Mercieca

Sheffield University Wind Orchestra will be giving a number of concerts in Malta and Gozo during Holy Week in collaboration with the University of Malta's Mediterranean Institute.

The first concert will be held at St Augustine's church, Victoria, tomorrow at 7.30 p.m. On Tuesday at 7.30 p.m., the orchestra will perform at Cospicua parish church, and on Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the *Aula Magna* of the Old University Building, St Paul Street, Valletta. Entrance to all three concerts is free; however, those wishing to attend the Wednesday concert are asked to reserve their seat by phoning Maria Attard on 2340-2421 as seating is limited.

The concerts in Malta and Gozo have a completely different programme. The Chorus Urbanus, under the direction of John Galea, will be joining the orchestra at Cospicua and give a 15-minute solo joining the orchestra in John Williams' beautiful and moving piece *Hymn to the Fallen*. The Cospicua music programme will also feature *Lord God of Abraham* from the oratorio *Elijah* by Mendelssohn, the *Fanfare for the*

Common Man by Copland, compositions by Vaughan Williams and Cesar Frank, as well as Judith Bingham's *Bright Spirit* and Wouter Lenaerts' *Shadow of Golgotha*.

On Wednesday the orchestra will play Mendelssohn's *Overture for Harmonie, Op. 24*, Philip Ciantar's *Ghar Dalam*, Philip Sparke's *Time Remembered* and Charles Camilleri's latest work, *Il Nostro Tempo*, Respighi's *Huntingtower Ballad for Band* (1932), Peter Meechan's *Episodes and Echoes*, Tim Jackson's *Passacaglia* and George Lloyd's *The Forest of Arden*.

Accompanying the orchestra is bass singer Dominic Brown and tuba player Leslie Neish. Tuba legend Roger Bobo described Neish as "a world class, state-of-the-art tubist and a superb musician". Local musicians from the University of Malta's Music Division and the Johann School of Music will also join the orchestra.

The music collaboration between Malta and Sheffield has deep roots. Sheffield University's Music department has enjoyed a long-standing friendship and artistic relationship with Malta thanks to composer Charles Camilleri. The Music department recently commissioned Camilleri's *Il Nostro Tempo*, written



The Sheffield Wind Orchestra.

for a symphonic wind ensemble. The Sheffield orchestra gave it a world premiere last May and this will be the first time it will be performed to the public in Malta.

The enthusiasm among students generated by this event and the subsequent studio recording of Camilleri's wind works led to a band of almost 50 players committing itself to visit Malta. The orchestra will be under its artistic director Anthony Houghton.

The orchestra is a concert band having wind, brass and percussion instruments, where the audience will be listening to a particular sound which in Malta has been somewhat distorted, if not lost, since it became metamorphosed into a village-band set-up.

The programme, developed by Anthony Houghton, has taken into consideration the local ethos expected from a concert during Holy Week. Although the concerts all have a dif-

ferent element of spirituality from that to which the Maltese audience is accustomed at this time of the year, the music chosen is serious and sombre, and has made it possible for John Galea's *Chorus Urbanus* to participate in the Cospicua concert.

Dr Mercieca is director of the University of Malta's Mediterranean Institute.