

Rediscovering the lost slipper

Nicolò Isouard's comic opera *Cendrillon* to be staged at Manoel

VERONICA STIVALA

I stood – up until I researched for this article – with the majority of the Maltese who are familiar with Nicolò Isouard as a Maltese composer and that he had written some sort of opera, which is not much. But there is a reason why our knowledge of him is so limited.

The truth of the matter is that most people do not know much about him because although he was on the cusp of tasting the sweet flavours of success with his “masterpiece” opera *Cendrillon* (Cinderella) at the beginning of the 19th century, its popularity was eclipsed by an opera by his contemporary Rossini, which not only had the same name – *La Cerentola* – but even used the same libretto. Rossini's opera, however, was surfing the new waves on a board named *bel canto*, a lyrical style that music lovers have never stopped supporting and thus left its mark in the repertoire of the major opera houses around the world.

“[*Cendrillon*] was considered one of the best comic operas of the time, written by a young composer from Malta. It seems inconceivable that the opera was to fall into oblivion for more than two centuries,” laments Jean-Philippe Desrousseaux, who is directing the opera, which is being given its deserved attention at the Manoel Theatre at the end of this month.

“We have always identified with Isouard, without knowing why”

Isouard's opera went unnoticed for some 200 years and it was not until 1999 that Australian conductor Richard Bonyngue, a fervent champion of French music, took an interest in *Cendrillon* and presented it in Moscow with a live recording.

The opera is making its way to the birthplace of its composer thanks to the Manoel Theatre's artistic director Kenneth Zammit Tabona. He explains how he had been receiving quite a few requests to put up an opera. To do so, of course, requires money. Zammit Tabona worked his funding-sourcing skills extra hard, knowing that he had added clout given that it was not



Nicolò Isouard
(1775-1818)

only the 100th anniversary since Isouard's death but also because of the fact that Malta is Capital of Culture this year.

It was thanks to a consortium of French settlers in Malta who came together and joined forces to fund this opera that *Cendrillon* will finally see the light of day on the island.

“My job,” he says, “was finding the right element of putting them together and having a professionally-produced opera by Isouard at the Manoel”.

Zammit Tabona wanted to keep the Maltese links strong and was adamant to include as many Maltese performers as is humanly possible, and this is why the opera stars Claire Debono, a professional singer based in France. While Isouard was born in Malta, he left the island and moved to Paris, but as Zammit Tabona points out, there are still descendants in Malta, whom he hopes will attend the opera.

Speaking of Maltese links, Zammit Tabona believes that “we have always identified with Isouard, without knowing why”. It was thus high time for Malta to have an opera by him, especially with Malta being Capital of Culture.

The artistic director confides how he had always dreamt of having this opera and hopes to be able to put up an opera of his every year.

Desrousseaux is familiar with the Manoel Theatre, having staged *ATYS En Folie*, a satirical

puppet show at the 2017 edition of the International Baroque Festival as well as the parody of Rameau's *Hypolite et Aricie* in 2014. Both were presented by Centre Musique Baroque de Versailles. He will bring his sense of humour to this comic opera too, for one part thanks to his giving it a 1960s slant.

In his words: “*Cinderella* illustrates the conflict of universal force of forgiveness, surpassing oneself and inducing the redemption of the characters who mistreated it perfectly and uses the elements of the drama developing towards an image of ideal happiness.

“The trials of this conquest of bliss are mainly marked by the behaviour of *Cinderella*'s sisters with their aggressive and jealous behaviour. This supposedly dark aspect will scenically generate the funniest and most hilarious parts of the staging.

“Beauty, purity, blackmail, daydreams, magical effects, confrontations and rivalry, benevolence, contrasting emotions, love and happiness... all of this will be expressed by a staging that will maintain a smile throughout.”

Nicolò Isouard's *Cendrillon* will be produced at the Manoel Theatre, Valletta, on June 28 and 30. For more information and tickets, visit www.teatrumanoel.com.mt.