



## THE NEWSLETTER No.120

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The fact is, we have heard every note of Rossini. Bellini and Verdi. An exaggeration? Not really. Do we have a crisis on our hands? Not at all. The primo Ottocento remains virgin territory. We stand on a treasure trove, which is more than any other musical entity can boast. Indeed, a wilful neglect enforced upon us by opera houses, record companies and a surfeit of absurd pundits has come to roost, the continent of Europe commands such a resource of forgotten music from this overlooked epoch that we can happily anticipate trophies galore from Scandinavia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Greece and the Balkans, Spain and so on and on, with an incredibly long and rewarding series of finds in Germany, Italy and France. We will be kept busy for a very long time. In the interim there are gaps to be filled. The cantata culture of the first years of the nineteenth century was an odd phenomenon. A mirror-image I dare say of the Biedermeier song-cycle beyond the Alps, the cantata of the primo Ottocento was effectively a bridge between stage and salon, and vice-versa. Italian *au fond* – but in no way exclusively so – the cantata was for many years a second line of attack for many composers. At first a church specific, its fleeting usage for honorific occasions imposed both a surface glitter and a very brief existence. The chronology of the S. Carlo in Naples lists festive cantatas of all kinds, for every kind of royal occasion – for every footfall and farewell, embarkation, debarkation, birthday, name-day, marriage contract, consummation, conception and baby delivery – by the most prominent maestri on the circuit, replete with flattery, hymns, invocations, *cori*, ballets, *corrifei*, flag waving spectacle and *arie* by the greatest artists of the day. These cantatas have music that needs to be heard. Composers of the generation of Donizetti, Coccia and Pacini et al poured a fleeting fantasy into royal ephemera of this kind, sometimes uncovering the first inkling of operatic thought in evolution. On the other side of the social coin the lay coronation of a new diva could launch a cantata of adulation intended for the display of her voice – usually in the form of a vocal sequence of contrasting moods strung together like a necklace of gems, a lyrical sprint that crossed the footlights if not quite effortlessly into the salon. Such cantatas were at once quirky and testing, stretching vocal possibilities to the limit yet remaining to this day a tantalising witness to past glories. There were cantatas for every voice

evoking popular legends, nostalgia, fantasies upon modish literary themes - indeed musical patches often more purple than the pen could provide and unashamed evidence of enjoyable if self-indulgent romantic wallowing. There was always a strain of apolitical insouciance to the cantata cult that was truly refreshing: Carlo Coccia wrote cantatas successively for the birth of the King of Rome; for Napoleon as Emperor; for the entry of the allies into Paris to celebrate Napoleon's defeat; for the return of the Grand Duke of Tuscany after enforced exile; in praise of the Emperor Francesco I of Austria (three cantatas); for the birthday of Ferdinando I the Two Sicilies; in praise of the King of Portugal (just before he fled to Brazil) which Iberian non sequitur could be twinned with a Te Deum for the Queen Regent of Spain, a Requiem Mass for Carlo Alberto of Savoy and a cantata to mark the coronation of Vittorio-Emanuele II as King of Italy (unperformed), the whole displaying an impressive versatility on the part of the Neapolitan maestro combined with a perfectly cynical view of those at the top. Felice Romani wrote cantata texts for Federico Ricci. We need to hear such cantatas. The sporadic forays of Opera Rara into this repertoire seem to have dried up [their *La Potenza d'Amore* of 1999 featured cantatas by Paër, Rossini, Mercadante and Carafa among other delectable items] and the ball is now in courts much further afield: the Mayr Gesellschaft of Ingolstadt regularly releases discoveries from this lost world [see *Ariadne*, *Aristea* etc] and the brilliant ensemble I Virtuosi ambulanti is today in the process of continuous revival [see Weigl etc]. There is every hope of a really fruitful revelation in the years to come.

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