

“Libre et sereine, je veux encore chanter...”

Paolo Petazzi

“Ma le povere parole / xe lisiere come bole / de savon,/ come note de canzon”: the fragility and poetic lightness of these lines by Biagio Marin seem like a key to understanding the elusive changeability of the atmosphere and the situations in *Station thermale*. It is Vacchi's third opera and has a different character from the previous ones, from the mechanism of *Girotondo* and the tenuous, spare delicacy of the story in *Il viaggio*.

The occasion certainly played a part in determining the particular qualities of what its composer describes as a “new adventure” on his journey - a commission from the Atelier Lyrique of the Lyons Opera to mark the bicentenary of the death of Goldoni (première in Lyons on 13 November 1993). The authoress of the libretto, Myriam Tanant, is a director, Goldoni scholar and translator of numerous Italian authors. For the new work Vacchi had in mind a very turbulent opening, punctuated by a female chorus, and a more static conclusion in a richly nuanced contemplation of timbres, with the suspended lyricism of the *Settimino*, a piece

from 1992 whose pertinence to opera was sensed by the composer, and Tanant has given theatrical substance to that first intuition.

Myriam Tanant chose as her starting point an opera libretto by Goldoni, *I Bagni d'Abano* (1753), which had not been set to music, a text of limited importance and largely unknown, which for that reason left greater freedom for the new work. Moreover, being set at a spa, it provided ideas for situations which could easily be up-dated to the present day: a place where people go on diets, have baths and massages, where neurotics are treated for ailments which are largely psychosomatic, where ambiguities and neuroses, imaginary illnesses and released amorous tensions are revealed in a special light, as if by some mysterious magical process - such a place lends itself to an essentially timeless setting.

For Tanant, *I Bagni d'Abano* served as a pretext for rediscovering Goldoni's lifeblood and making it flow freely, inventing new situations in the spirit of the Venetian writer, adding characters or partially modifying those in the libretto. The additional characters, Bettina, Dorina and Sandrina, almost have the musical role of a small female chorus. Corallina recalls Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Strauss. The others

keep the names and some of the traits of Goldoni's characters; but they are portrayed in a more complex, multi-faceted way. Violante is no longer a widow, but a diva who has suffered a serious disappointment in love and thinks she has lost her voice: her part is in *Sprechgesang*, Schönbergian "spoken song", until the final aria. In *Station thermale* Riccardo becomes a music critic who, having slated her, falls in love with her; but he is also seduced by Corallina's charms. Luciano is a hypochondriac, as in Goldoni, prey to obsessive neuroses; but he is also a writer with no inspiration, in search of ideas for an opera libretto (like the Poet in *Il turco in Italia*). And Monsieur La Flour with the magic books of Pietro d'Abano does not perform the childish miracles Goldoni assigns to him; we are not even sure if it is he who causes the storm in the third act, nor by what old bond he is so closely connected to Violante, to whom he restores both her self-confidence and her power of song, leaving her to be the protagonist of the liberating finale. Rosina, in love with Marubbio, has a delicate sensibility (which creates a curious counterpoint with her profession of mas-seuse).

Myriam Tanant's libretto is characterized by its speed and mobility, its many-sided game of meetings and clashes, of reactions, ten-

sions or near-deflagrations between characters, sometimes barely hinted at; different levels are interwoven in it, and situations, characters and formal solutions from the history of opera are evoked, in a whirlwind of relationships and psychological states, with subtly contrasting points of view, and moments of comedy - open, surreal, chilling, or with a variety of ambivalent shadings: it anticipates a multiplicity of possible developments yet remains pregnantly open and suspended because nothing conclusive happens. Indeed, the third act reaches its end at a static moment of great poetic intensity: Violante, with the "magical" assistance of her unpredictably reformed friend La Flour, returns to life, to hope and to song by performing the closing aria, which continues in a new version the suspended lyricism of the *Settimino*.

The final aria obviously has a place to itself in the score of *Station thermale*, whose dramaturgical premises force Vacchi to come to terms for the first time in such a thoroughgoing way with the problem of dialogue, with the individuation of his own "conversational style". In *Girotondo* the idling mechanism counts for much more than the psychological subtleties of Schnitzler's text - Roversi's libretto actually eliminates most of the dialogue; and in the plot of *Il viaggio* the dimen-

sion of dialogue does not exist, it is completely suspended. In *Station thermale* the composer intends every syllable of the text to be understood and creates a vocal line modelled on the word, the spoken inflection, not limiting himself to simple declamation but transfiguring it into melodic patterns of flowing naturalness which are also found in the orchestral counterpoint, because the vocal line is refracted in the transparency of the instrumental part (scored for about twenty performers). The vocal part cannot in fact be traced back solely to the inflections of the spoken word: they are a point of departure, elaborated to become integrated into the rigorous grid which presides over the organization of the pitches.

In Vacchi's music the ideals of euphony, clarity and direct communication cohabit with procedures that are extremely controlled and rigorous. In both vocal and instrumental parts, everything in their contrapuntal organization can be traced back to unitary structural principles: in this score harmonic fields of five sounds (hence the transparent diatonism) are the foundation to which all the aspects of any page are traceable. Hence the integration between vocal and instrumental: moreover the layout of the counterpoint makes voices and instruments inseparable, and instrumental rarefaction

does not diminish the determining importance and seductive power of Vacchi's fantasy in deploying timbres, of the changing colours which are among the most personal and immediately recognizable aspects of his writing. Due to its rigorous integration and the evocative quality of its timbres, the instrumental part - however sober and rarely self-sufficient it may be (although there are brief interludes) - forms a sort of comment which has decisive efficacy.

In the work's clear formal articulation the distinction between recitatives, ariosos, arias, duets and ensembles is perceptible either explicitly or allusively - a distinction made possible by flexible stylization of singing on the basis of the above-mentioned criteria. Traditional operatic forms are recognizable, even when they are broken up, interrupted or fitted one inside the other in the rapid and lightly-moving succession of situations. Violante's part in the first and second acts constitutes a special case in the relationship between voice and instruments: in several places her *Sprechgesang* is superimposed on self-sufficient instrumental writing. Another special case is the orchestra's role in the moment of timbral enchantment that accompanies the entrance of the "magician" La Flour and his part in general.

The recitation of the lines taken directly

from Goldoni's *I Bagni d'Abano* has a character of its own - in Tanant's libretto they are sung by Corallina and Marubbio during the rehearsals for the evening performance. The beginning of the melody of "La bella Giro-metta" (only the *incipit*) is taken from an aria in the first act of *Il filosofo di campagna* by Galuppi (Lesbina's choric aria). But this little borrowing from a *dramma giocoso* of 1754 (to a Goldoni text) also serves for the other fragments of *I Bagni d'Abano* quoted by Tanant, to which the same snatch of melody is repeated in a number of variants and then continued in a different guise each time.

In Violante's closing aria the voice-orchestra relationship is much more similar to that in *Il viaggio* than to that in most of *Station thermique*: the piece actually amounts to a version, with the voice added, of the *Settimino*, composed in 1992. The vocal part is integrated into this piece without causing changes: it does not double an instrument in a continual or linear way; but it feeds on the notes of this one or that one, and thus makes a new line emerge from the contrapuntal context, creating the cathartic effect of song being liberated, with a diatonic simplicity that seems to draw its intensity from an original dimension.

In the rapid and lightly-moving succession

of situations, the game - of the comic and the pathetic, of irony and involvement, of variegated and ever-changeable nuances - is played with easy naturalness, with music that often makes use of allusion and evocation, but hardly ever allows itself an actual quotation. The French atmosphere and the vaguely Art Nouveau evocations that one sometimes has the impression of picking up cannot be considered a "throwback to..." (Debussy, for example), because they appear to be evoked in a way that is consistent with the premises that have been described (rigorous unitary organization of five-sound harmonic fields, the choice of a text in French and the decision to make every word comprehensible and to model the vocal writing on the spoken word): they involve neither a game of masks nor the renunciation of Vacchi's rigour in compositional procedures which themselves derive their premises from his apprenticeship with Giacomo Manzoni and Franco Donatoni; but they pursue absolute perceptual transparency of writing.

The most immediate and intuitive aspect (or, to put it differently, the aspect that is least traceable to systematic organization) of Vacchi's relationship with sound-matter must be emphasized: his fantasy in the use of timbres, his work on sound, which with chang-

ing mobility and highly refined and personal intimations deploys diverse means of production, subtly differentiated. In *Station thermale* the seductive power of the composer's invention in shaping sound is immediately evident and assumes a precise dramaturgical function, because the shifting nuances suggest and evoke, moment by moment, the psychological state of the characters, the changeable facets of small sensations, fragile everyday sensations.

(Translation by Nigel Jamieson)



Places in memory and virtual reality

Lidia Bramani

The age we live in is characterized by continual and omnipresent theatricality.

The body beckons, struts, hides, puffs up and shrinks away in a kaleidoscopic whirl of sounds, colours, smells and forms. How can we not become involved in the overflowing symbology of the everyday, in the protean texture of a present-day city?

Enchanted and ingenuous strolls, brief moments of culinary celebration - either collective or in the solipsistic game of objects and scents in a bar or restaurant - subvert the rigid round of work and duty.

During these fleeting instants of free time the vitalistic substance of our present existence is revealed to us. Emotions, appearances and exploitation of gesture and image mould the social body. Spontaneous creativity exalts sensitivity and confers a mythical and archetypal value on it. The infinite modulation of images, the here-and-now, hedonism and the rejection of an abstract "thou shalt" which has been swept away by polytheism of the imagination and in art - all connote in some way the transverse contem-

poraneity of the world today.

Art, then, no longer has pretensions to reaching beyond what is offered to the senses, but penetrates the soft and shadowy tapestry of their perceptions. The juxtaposition of wild imagery, archaic elements and current forms results in that contradictory cocktail of oppositions, conflicts and disorder that we are in the habit of calling post-modern.

In Fabio Vacchi's artistic development there is a dark and deep core that would appear to be light years away from what we usually mean by postmodern. The words of a conversation that accompanied a leisurely perusal of the score of *Station thermale* sketch the outline of his recent experiences: the invaluable teaching of Giacomo Manzoni, his respect for colleagues like Adriano Guarneri, his deep friendship - broken off by the grief of a loss he has still not accepted - with Luigi Nono. His enthusiasm for the music of Berio, Sciarrino, Donatoni and others. It is in the ideological struggle and the search for new expressive outlets in the seventies and eighties that he recognizes his roots - and yet these cardinal points have pushed him towards a very different type of modernity, far from the avant-garde and close to the circularity of the postmodern.

But postmodernism as found in *Station ther-*

male has nothing in common with the equidistant eclecticism that drifts into abstention or lack of commitment. Capturing the utopia of the everyday and becoming the poet of the delicacy of instants and tiny spaces forces reason to vibrate, to feel and to find within itself the power to break up the game of ethical indifference. Social ties become emotional ones. A way of being is thus developed in which what we experience with others becomes primary and essential.

A symbiotic bond can be felt - an almost morbid or in any case hypersensitive one - between word and musical symbol. This is true for each single term and small motif-cell, and also for the ever-widening arches of narrative and of phraseological development of sound-matter.

Goldoni - who interpreted social fabric that is mobile and forward-looking as a negation of stasis - is suspended between Tanant's poetry and Vacchi's style. The spasmodic study of the French language's inflections and musical secrets took up months of work, bringing to the surface an archetypal, ancestral value contained deep within its words and sounds. Historical knowledge and an acceptance of man's natural biological and psychological limits define the conscious contours of poetic writing that is fascinating, culturally adept.

The highly theatrical score of *Station thermale* - amusing, flowing and finely-constructed - strikes deep into the heart of our "modernity", bringing to mind certain beautiful passages from Foucault's *Usage des plaisirs* or Michel Maffesoli's aesthetic theories. In short, the ecology of today's world is transmitted artistically through respect for the naturalness of sound-matter and its relationship with our, equally natural, way of perceiving it. And what Vacchi metabolizes from the past is animated by an utterly modern sensibility, since his style is the most logical consequence of the premises set by the avant-garde - with the difference that modernity no longer consists of new gestures but of its own vibrant substance.

Station thermale is a work full of subtle shadings and quotation marks, in which each character is defined by his relation to the others, just as each musical cell is grafted onto the others. This can be perceived both theatrically and musically. Iridescent sound-magic accompanies the game of allusion and alienation from historical forms of opera (declamation, recitative, arioso, aria), while a sort of musical virtual reality takes shape, suggested by the shadows projected by the key sounds into a parallel dimension. This highly personal style of writing, characteristic of many of Vacchi's works, subversively

distorts traditional melodic and harmonic functions. Echoes and stylistic cross-references are mirrored in an extremely up-to-date dimension of sonic reality. There is in the air an ideal and distant image of opera which, becoming concrete in the Goldonian game, is split in two between past and present, between “dramma giocoso” and cinematic montage. In formal terms the work pursues the fanciful and visionary elaboration of small fragments extracted from time to time from a unitary material. Each character is defined by the image he offers and by which he is conditioned in an infinite chain. Subjectivity opens up to empathy and sympathy with the other person’s point of view, breaking down the oppressive wall of consumerism of images and fantasy. Moving in and out of eighteenth-century situations - some more explicit than others - Vacchi’s writing is stylized in its melodic characterization and abstract contrapuntal texture. At the end of this uninterrupted flow of situations that are varied, surprising, ironic, without a moment’s pause or tiredness, we have experienced - thanks to the emotion evoked by music and drama - what Deleuze describes as correspondence between “the contours of the material and the contours of the soul”.

(Translation by Nigel Jamieson)





Synopsis

A day at a present-day spa

ACT ONE, morning

The curtain rises on the massage room and thermal baths of the spa. Women's hours.

The women are bantering back and forth about their health, their bodies, love, life and men while they soak in the baths or are massaged by Rosina, a young masseuse, who is at a loss to satisfy all their demands. Three of them, Dorina, Sandrina and Bettina, have come here to forget about everyday life for a few days, pamper themselves, have a good time in the evening, and maybe - who knows? - find love.

From outside can be heard sounds of preparation for a party and rehearsals for a short opera to be performed this evening; they recognize the voice of Marubbio, a masseur whose ambition is to become a singer, and it cheers them up.

A girl called Lisetta makes fun of their excitement and their ideas on love and passion, and tells them she is here as companion to a famous singer who is going through an emotional and artistic crisis because she believes she has lost her voice. The singer, Violante,

arrives, but she can't stand the atmosphere of the spa - too overwrought, in her opinion - and expresses the desire to escape.

All the women gradually leave the room. Only Rosina remains to clean out the tubs; she complains about her situation: she would like to go away, travel, really live... Marubbio comes in and tells her he is in love with her, but Rosina is unsure of herself and rejects him. Marubbio has no time to insist as he must go and give a massage to a hypochondriac writer, Luciano. Rosina leaves too, taking the towels with her.

Luciano arrives, bemoaning the fact that he has to write a libretto but has no inspiration. Corallina, a young singer, appears at the window Rosina has left open: she spies on Luciano, ridicules him and seduces him. She invites him to join her in the garden. He accepts but is unable to get away because of the arrival of Riccardo, a journalist who wants to confide in him: although in the past he has written bad reviews of Violante's performances, he has now fallen in love with her after meeting her at the spa. Luciano, however, is not listening as he is equally caught up in his own obsessions. The result is a comic duet.

Piroto, Luciano's brilliant and carefree young secretary, turns up and interrupts them. He would much rather flirt with the women and have a good time than worry about the

libretto.

Gradually all the other men arrive and take up position in the baths or on the massage table, talking about the women. The first act thus ends with a male chorus symmetrical to the female one at the beginning.

ACT TWO, late afternoon

The curtain rises on the garden of the spa. On one side some extras are getting the stage ready for the evening's show; on the other Luciano is unsuccessfully trying to write.

A servant carries in numerous suitcases. Violante is leaving. Lisetta tries to persuade her to stay, but Violante firmly refuses because she can stand neither the prevailing atmosphere nor the vocalizing of Corallina, who has arrived in the meantime for the rehearsal. While Violante goes off to announce her decision to the management, Lisetta frets because, in spite of her ideas about love, she has fallen in love with Piroto and is afraid she will have to leave without seeing him again: he disappeared after lunch. Luciano is also looking for him: without Piroto he cannot write.

Riccardo, captivated by Corallina's voice as she rehearses, is upset because he doesn't know which way to turn - not least since Violante refuses to listen to him.

Lisetta suddenly realizes that Violante's cat has disappeared. To her great delight, their departure must be postponed; distress and agitation are transformed into merriment, in slightly mad interventions by each of the characters.

Luciano can no longer stand the diet he is on and dreams of delicious desserts. Rosina is talking about her fear of cats when Bettina arrives, happy to have had a tennis lesson with Marubbio; Sandrina and Dorina turn up as well, having been gambling at the casino with Piroto. Lisetta explodes at Piroto.

Suddenly the atmosphere changes, and a mysterious character arrives bearing Violante's cat: he is actually the spa's entertainer and is also a bit of a magician. He relates that he learned his art from an ancient tome written by a wise man who had discovered the secrets of beauty, health and the stars. Everyone is fascinated by his story.

Violante recognizes him: they grew up together, perhaps they are even brother and sister. They are moved at being reunited after such a long time. As they share memories of their childhood, the magician reminds Violante of all she taught him, and of her past courage. In a way that might seem rather cruel, he shows her that time flies swiftly and urges her to react.

Stung, Violante decides to remain.

ACT THREE, evening

The curtain rises as Rosina is arranging chairs in front of the small stage for the performance. She sings of her relief that the season is almost over and her desire to get away.

Gradually all the characters arrive for the performance of a short eighteenth-century opera sung by Corallina and Marubbio, whose dream of going on stage has at last come true.

Riccardo is more and more torn by his desire for the two women. Dorina and Sandrina hope the opera won't last too long because they want to get back to the casino, and Bettina can't wait to go dancing with Marubbio. Luciano hopes that he will be able to write better tomorrow than he has today. Reconciled, Lisetta and Piroto whisper sweet nothings.

The opera begins, and the magician waits until Violante has arrived before unleashing a storm that causes everyone to run away. He offers the stage to Violante on condition that she sing. After a moment's confusion, she starts to try her voice, then sings with ever-increasing confidence.

After listening for a while, the magician goes off with Corallina who has come looking for him. He leaves the finale to Violante: what better gift could he have offered her than the rediscovery of hope?

(Translation by Nigel Jamieson)

