

## World premieres at the Teatro de São Carlos during its first 50 years (1793-1843)

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The notion of 'world premiere' would seem, at first sight, to be a simple, rather cut-and-dried one. Either something *is* being performed for the first time in the world, or it *isn't*. Indeed the equivalent Portuguese term, *estreia absoluta*, rather serves to emphasise the absolute nature of the occurrence. And yet, I would suggest, during the 50 years of the Teatro de São Carlos, prior to the first productions of Verdi's operas, this notion of absoluteness is, in many respects, wide of the mark. For if we make a careful examination of the operas performed there in the first 50 years of its existence, we find premieres mentioned in standard reference books of works that never existed, that *were* actually new productions of works by composers other than those to whom they have been attributed, or that were pastiches; and, of course, no mention of single or multiple numbers specially composed for insertion in this or that production of a work by the original composer or some other, numbers that actually were world premieres. In other words, the notion of a 'world premiere', should be seen as something relative, not absolute.

Let us examine the work of a sample of director-composers, both Portuguese and foreign, who operated at the São Carlos up to 1843 in the light of this notion of the 'relative premiere'.

Probably no composer has suffered more from misrepresentation in this respect than the theatre's first *maestro*, António Leal Moreira. Manuel Carlos de Brito, for the works list of the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera* found it necessary to omit three works, and therefore three premieres, listed in the 1980 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary* – *La serva riconoscente* (1798), actually a pastiche with only one new aria

by Moreira, *Os Voluntários do Tejo* (1793), which had no music as it isn't an opera at all, and *Raollo* (1793), which seems never to have existed. He also mentions material by Moreira inserted in Gazzaniga's *Il palazzo d'Osmano* for the 1795 São Carlos production. Though the libretto for the production makes no reference to this, the score at Vila Viçosa (G-Prática 22) indicates that 3 arias, 2 duets and a quartet were of Moreira's composition, and that another aria was by Bianchi. The Moreira material was presumably given its world premiere in this context.

However, the Moreira story does not end there. It was a trio of his, premiered in the 1796 São Carlos production of Gazzaniga's *Il disertor francese*, but not mentioned as such in the libretto, that led to the whole opera being falsely attributed to him at Turin in 1800 and again, later in the year, at Milan, in both cases the opera being a pastiche loosely based on Gazzaniga's work, with just the one trio by Moreira. Thus the so-called premiere of Moreira's *Il disertor francese* at Turin is a mere fiction and another of his accepted 'world premieres' bites the dust.<sup>1</sup>

Turning to Marcos Portugal, a composer-director returning to his homeland in 1800 after considerable experience of the practical realities of opera production in Italy, we find another variation on this same theme.

Again between the 1980 *Grove* and the *Opera Grove* the number of Portugal premieres at the São Carlos was reduced – *Zulema e Selino*, which Carvalhais as early as 1910, in his classic work on the composer,<sup>2</sup> had called into question was finally removed. On the other hand, we must add the premieres of a chorus and finale by him in the 1801 production of Cimarosa's *Artaserse*, an aria in the 1805 production of Pietro Carlo Guglielmi's *La distruzione di Gerusalemme* and a new duet, composed for Elisabetta Gafforini and Giuseppe Naldi, for the Lisbon premiere of his own *Le donne cambiate*. It also goes without saying that there was new material by the composer for the revised versions of *L'Argenide*, *Fernando nel Messico* and *Demofonte*, originally composed in Italy and premiered at the São Carlos respectively in 1804, 1805 and 1808, the last of these during the period of French occupation.

<sup>1</sup> For details of this whole story, see David CRANMER, *Opera in Portugal 1793-1828: a study in repertoire and its spread*, 2 vols., doctoral dissertation, University of London, 1997, Vol. I, pp. 209-11.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Pereira Peixoto d'Almeida CARVALHAIS, *Marcos Portugal na sua música dramática*, Lisbon, Typographia Castro Irmão, 1910; supplement, 1916.

But if Marcos Portugal did compose new material for existing operas, he, like many other composers, also borrowed from himself for supposedly new works. Thus, the overture to *La morte di Semiramide* was actually composed for *La madre virtuosa* in 1798, three years before the premiere of *Semiramide*.<sup>3</sup> In another instance, we have a case of self-borrowing but with substantial changes. Probably at the instigation of the soprano Angelica Catalani, the composer produced a considerably revised version of his aria 'Frenar vorrei le lagrime' for her. The original version had been premiered in the composer's setting of *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi*, given at Ferrara in 1798. Catalani had heard this aria regularly in Cimarosa's better-known work of the same name, for she had sung in three Italian productions where it had been added, prior to her coming to Lisbon. The new version of the aria received its first performance at the São Carlos in 1804 in the new, revised, production of Portugal's *La Zaira*. Catalani went on to insert a slightly cut version of the revised aria in the 1806-7 London production of *La morte di Semiramide*.

Between 1803 and 1807, when Valentino Fioravanti shared the musical direction of the São Carlos with Marcos Portugal, he wrote a number of new operas. Among those usually cited, and yet to be expunged from the *Grove* dictionaries is *La figlia d'un padre*, which seems to be a fabrication on the part of Fonseca Benevides, in his classic work on this theatre.<sup>4</sup> Fioravanti did, however, write new material for Trento's *Gli assassini* and for Paisiello's *L'inganno felice*, both in 1804, as well as revising his own *Il villano in angustie* in 1805, originally performed in Naples in 1801.

Fioravanti also had a hand in the pastiche *Nardone e Nannetta*, attributed to Gardi in the 1806 São Carlos libretto and indeed based on the latter's opera *La pianella persa*. The work was put together around the Mombelli family – Domenico, the father, his two daughters, Ester and Anna, and the family friend Ludovico Olivieri. These same four performed a version of the work in Parma in 1810, where the libretto attributes the work to Fioravanti. Incidentally, substantial material by Domenico Mombelli was premiered at the São Carlos in 1804, inserted into Andreozzi's *La morte di Saulle*.

<sup>3</sup> This is clear from the autograph score at the Lisbon National Library (callmark: MM 4816 A 1-2).

<sup>4</sup> Francisco da Fonseca BENEVIDES, *O Real Theatro de São Carlos de Lisboa*, 2 vols., Lisbon, Typographia Castro e Irmão, 1883 / Lisbon, Typographia e Litographia de Ricardo de Souza e Salles, 1902.

None of the operas attributed by Benevides to António José do Rego, maestro at the São Carlos for the 1807/1808 season is actually by him. *Alessandro in Efeso* is a fiction, *Il conte di Saldanha* and *Il trionfo d'Emilia* are pastiches which he directed in 1807. While the libretto of the latter does state that the music was by Rego and others, in the former there is no reason to suppose he contributed any music at all. Thus the amount of music by Rego premiered at the São Carlos was very limited. There was, however, an aria by him premiered in Grétry's *La caravana del Cairo* in 1807 and a chorus by him in Rossini's *L'inganno felice* in 1817.

Referring to Rossini brings us to the question of premieres by absentee composers. Fortunately, it is not necessary to put into question the 1826 premiere of Rossini's *Adina*, nor for that matter the 1819 premiere of Generali's *Idomeneo*, though the possibility that the latter was a pastiche is a real one. There are, however, two fictitious world premieres by absentee composers, which, because they persist in *Grove*, I would like to put to rest once and for all. *Gli amanti della dote*, attributed in the 1794 São Carlos libretto to Pietro Guglielmi, was actually Silvestre Palma's work of that name. We are dealing here with a misprint – almost uniquely, we possess the manuscript libretto submitted for approval by the Royal Board of Censors (*Real Mesa Censoria*),<sup>5</sup> where Palma's name is given and this is confirmed by a surviving theatre bill for the production<sup>6</sup> – the misprint came about because the work was performed in a double bill with a pastiche based on Guglielmi. As for *La finta ammalata*, anonymous in the 1796 São Carlos libretto, but attributed by Benevides, and others ever since, to Cimarosa, it is in fact a pastiche of Vittorio Trento's opera of this name.

Almost all of the examples I have given so far have involved productions prior to the 1st French Invasion of Portugal, of 1807-8, a period which at the São Carlos still belongs aesthetically to the 18th rather than the 19th century.

If we turn to the 1820s, we find no reference in the São Carlos libretti to new arias by the *maestro*-composers Carlo Coccia in the first half of the decade, nor Saverio Mercadante in the second half. We should not, however, be seduced by this into thinking that the practices we have

<sup>5</sup> Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, R[eal] M[esa] C[ensória], *caixa* 322, doc. 2211. The relevant page with the attribution is reproduced in D. CRANMER, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> In the Fundo do Teatro de São Carlos, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa.

observed did not persist. After all, as we have already noted, the six numbers by Leal Moreira in Gazzaniga's *Il palazzo d'Osmano* were not mentioned in the libretto and if we did not possess the Vila Viçosa manuscript, we would be none the wiser.

It is this we should bear in mind as we consider Mercadante's *Gabriella di Vergy*. The libretto of the 1828 São Carlos world premiere tells us that the music was entirely new except the duet and *rondò* finale of the 2nd act, which were by Carafa. The libretto text retains a good deal from Carafa's opera of the same name, so that if we compare it with that of Mercadante's revision of the opera at Genoa in 1832, we find that the composer must have made very substantial revisions there. We would suppose, then, that much of Mercadante's second version of *Gabriella di Vergy* constituted a world premiere when performed at Genoa. It happens, however, that a largely autograph, though partially incomplete, score survives in the São Carlos archives, now on deposit at the Biblioteca Nacional.<sup>7</sup> From this material we discover that the text of the 1828 libretto bears little resemblance to the text Mercadante actually used in Lisbon, which was essentially already that of the so-called Genoese version, in other words the later revision was relatively slight. It should be stated in defence of the Lisbon libretto's veracity, that though the text it gives is so different from what the composer actually set, it is correct in what it attributes to Carafa. Bearing in mind Philip Gossett's observation<sup>8</sup> that it was a regular compositional practice first to establish the vocal part, so that it could be copied for distribution to the singers, and then to work out the orchestration, this is clearly what happened with *Gabriella di Vergy*. In much of the score, the vocal line and words are in the hand of a copyist, while all around it the orchestral tissue is in the composer's.

The unreliability of libretti to tell us exactly what was or was not new in a given production, supposedly world premiere or not, should lead us to continue to be suspicious still later in the century too. As well as the world premieres of operas by Francesco Schira and Luis Mirò recognised as having taken place at the São Carlos in the 1830s, Mirò also had a world premiere of a cavatina and *rondò* which he inserted in Donizetti's *Il furioso nell'isola di San Domingo* for the 1835 São Carlos production.

<sup>7</sup> Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional, Fundo do Teatro de São Carlos.

<sup>8</sup> See Philip GOSSETT, «Verdi the craftsman», below, p. 93.

It is hard to tell how isolated an occurrence this was, for by this date the practice of introducing extraneous material was certainly on the wane. This was for several reasons. In the first place, the rigid recitative/aria distinction had gradually been broken down, beginning with Rossini's Neapolitan operas in the second decade of the century, making it increasingly difficult in practical terms to effect a join. Furthermore, the increased attention paid to the dramatic import of the word text made substitution, at least, simply make less sense. However, it is also at this time that the notion of an 'untouchable' operatic canon emerges, above all through Rossini's great hits, which because they were simply so well-known, could not be touched without risking furore from the audience. In due course too, later in the century, the printing of vocal scores of whole operas, as distinct from individual numbers, came to provide a readily available fixed version. In spite of these changes, with their tendency to establish a single definitive version, we should, nevertheless, be wary of assuming that by the 1840s an opera was immutable. Even after Verdi's operas began to be performed in Lisbon, there may have been some world premieres hidden in unexpected places, though we no longer have any concrete evidence for it.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This article is a slightly altered version of a paper given at the Verdi Symposium, Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, Lisbon, in December 2001, in commemoration of the centenary of Verdi's death.