Tommaso Traetta - Ifigenia in Tauride (2014)

1. Acte 1 2. Acte 2 3. Acte 3 Ifigenia - Aleksandra Zamojska (soprano) Oreste - Artem Krutko (countertenor) Toante - Francisco Fernández-Rueda (tenor) Pilade - Irina Simmes (soprano) Dori - Rinnat Moriah (soprano) Chor des Theaters Heidelberg Lautten Compagney Berlin Wolfgang Katschner – director Markgrafentheater in Erlangen, 16 July 2014
Recording of a live concert broadcast by BR-Klassik on 16 July.

Along with Christoph Gluck, Niccolò Jommelli, and Gian Francesco de Majo, Tommaso Traetta (1727-1779) is traditionally considered one of the operatic reformers of the second half of the eighteenth century. Make no mistake, however: Traetta is as much a part of the old guard of operatic composition as he is forward-looking. Perhaps a better way to describe his musical output is rather ‘experimental’. Born near Bari, Traetta studied with Nicola Porpora and Francesco Durante, before writing his first opera, Farnace, for Naples in 1751. To audiences today he might best be known, if at all, for Antigona, first performed in St Petersburg in 1772, and recorded on the Decca label by Christophe Rousset and Les Talens Lyriques. In musicological terms, however, he is primarily remembered in modern times for his activity at the court of Parma, where, in collaboration with the librettists Carlo Innocenzo Frugoni and Jacopo Sanvitale, he produced four works (Ippolito ed Aricia [1759], I Tindaridi [1760], Le Feste d’Imeneo [1760],and Enea e Lavinia [1761]) based on French tragédies en musique and opéra-ballets by Jean-Philippe Rameau and Antoine Dauvergne. These works are generally marked by an increased presence of the chorus, a greater proportion of recitatives accompanied by the orchestra, and ballets integrated into the action, all features which are the trademarks of French opera of the time. In some cases, the dance music is even lifted directly from the French works by which they are inspired. The French influences notwithstanding, it should be remembered that these are still conceived of in the opera seria mould, which is essentially what Traetta still aimed for, as is evident in his many returns to conventional serious opera – such as Siroe, Re di Persia for Munich in 1767 or Lucio Vero for St Petersburg in 1774 ¬– alongside attempts at ‘reform’.

Ifigenia in Tauride , though written for Vienna some time after Traetta's sojourn in Parma, in 1763, can also be considered to be a 'Parma opera', although not without a fair share of opera seria conventions. It was hugely popular, being performed across Europe in the years after its creation, and even made its way to Eszterháza, where Joseph Haydn conducted it and added two arias of his own. The libretto, written by Marco Coltellini, is inspired by the myths of the Oresteia cycle: following the murder of his mother Clytemnestra by his own hand, Oreste and his friend Pilade have arrived in Tauris, the land where, unbeknownst to either of them, Oreste's sister Ifigenia, previously thought to be dead, is being held captive by the tyrannical king Toante. Their mission is to steal the statue of Minerva known as the Palladium. However, the people of the island are known to sacrifice foreigners to the goddess, and Oreste falls into their hands shortly after the opera begins. Ifigenia, who is now a priestess of Minerva, hesitates when she must sacrifice Oreste, setting in motion the plot leading to Oreste and Pilade fulfilling their mission along with the help of Dori, another priestess of Minerva, and ultimately with Ifigenia putting an end to Toante's reign. Traetta's music is indeed wonderful: he is capable of writing arias ranging from the brilliant, such as Pilade's opening aria 'Stelle irate, il caro amico', to the beautiful cantabile melody of Ifigenia's 'So, che pietà de' miseri', all while still maintaining a certain elegant froideur. French elements come through once again, such as Oreste's sleep scene (a staple plot device of the tragédie en musique) in which he is tormented by the Furies ('Dormi Oreste') and the marked presence of the chorus in various guises. But still Ifigenia in Tauride has the feeling of an opera seria: there are arie di furia (all represented by Toante), an exit-duet of the kind typically reserved for the main pair of lovers ('Il mio destin non piangere'), though here subverted as it is given to Ifigenia and Dori, and, of course, a healthy dose of secco recitative, though indeed the number of accompanied recitatives is much higher than normal.

It is exciting that other works of Traetta, besides Antigona –which has recently been revived – are beginning to be explored: there is much exquisite music to be found within his oeuvre, and to have it performed in such a venue is delightful. It is simply a pity that this particular performance, with so much potential, felt lacking in terms of energy and sparkle which could have given it just that added edge and hence turned a simply adequate evening into an enchanting one. --- Lynton Boshoff, bsecs.org.uk

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