ARNALTA, MONTEVERDI AND THE INCOGNITI

Claudio Monteverdi’s last extant works for the stage, *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria* (1640) and *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642/3), bear witness to the aged composer’s remarkable ability to keep abreast of developments in the new Venetian public opera houses. These *drammi per musica* have little in common, apart from their genius of conception, with his *Orfeo* of a quarter century earlier, responding as they do to the quotidian entertainment needs of republican Venice rather than to the occasional and festive requirements of ducal Mantua. The different social context dictated a shift from *Orfeo’s* elevated pastoral/mythological world, congenial to the rarified intellectual ferment of the earliest days of opera’s inception, to historical/mythological settings more capable of reflecting the daily lives and concerns of a broader, less aristocratic audience. Gods and goddesses still play a crucial part in these late operas, especially in *Ulisse*, setting the terms and determining the outcome of human conflict, but ordinary mortals now surround the central figures, consoling and advising them, commenting upon, mirroring or even to some extent, controlling their courses of action. The shepherds and nymphs of *Orfeo*, to be sure, had performed some of these functions, but as characters they represented the Arcadian idealizations of librettist Alessandro Striggio. By contrast, Giacomo Badoaro and Francesco Busenello, the librettists, respectively, of *Ulisse* and *Poppea*, provided Monteverdi with an array of more or less realistically depicted character types - servants, confidantes, parasites, suitors - whose interactions with the leading characters, themselves realistically portrayed, afforded the composer the opportunity to bring them vividly to life in emotionally and psychologically nuanced music.

Of the many memorable secondary characters in *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, perhaps the most finely drawn is Poppea’s nurse and confidante, Arnalta. Worldly-wise, indulgently protective of her spoilt, manipulative charge and formidable when crossed, Arnalta is as self-interested as anyone else in this opera’s venal cast of schemers. She engages us, nevertheless, with her wry, at times self-deprecating sense of humour and her occasional moments of compassion for her fellow creatures. As the role is usually per-
formed by a man her character takes on added dimensions of the burlesque, which by no means detracts from her important function as an ironic commentator on the moral dissarray prevailing in the world of *Poppea*.

Busenello’s libretto for *Poppea* happens to be the first ever based on historical sources. No Arnalta figure appears, however, in Book XIV of the *Annals* of Tacitus from which Busenello derived the leading characters and the bare historical bones of the story. Neither does she appear in Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars* or in Dio Cassius’s *Roman History*. Other classical literary sources could conceivably have prompted the librettist to introduce her into his version of the events: a nurse attends the character of Poppaea in the Roman tragedy *Octavia*, sometimes attributed to Seneca, though she bears scant resemblance to Arnalta; there are nurses attendant upon heroines in Seneca’s tragedies *Phaedra* and *Medea* and in his fourth-century Greek models by Euripides; Penelope’s old nurse, Erikleia, plays a prominent role in the Ithacan section of Homer’s *Odyssey* - indeed, the character had appeared in the Badoaro-Monteverdi treatment of that story, *Ulisse*, of a few years earlier - but she and Arnalta share little in common. More likely inspirations are the various nurses, old slaves, procuresses, mothers-in-law, cooks and bawds who inhabit the comedies of Plautus and Terence, plays imitated extensively by Renaissance Italian dramatists such as Ariosto, Machiavelli, Bibbiena and Cecchi, but nowhere can there be discerned a precise literary antecedent for Busenello’s complex and characterful Arnalta. It is probably sufficient to say that Arnalta arose from a longstanding tradition of the depiction of self-important and formidable women who control access to beautiful female love-objects.

Arnalta, most plausibly, derives from the *commedia dell’arte* but again the evidence is speculative. Nino Pirrotta posits a kind of competitive cross-fertilization between the *commedia* actors and the itinerant groups of Roman singers touring Italian centres both before and after the 1637 opening of Venice’s Teatro San Cassiano, public opera’s birthplace. He claims that the *commedia* actors, or *commici*, by their increasing inclusion of song and music in their performances, had created many of the conditions necessary for the public’s acceptance of opera. As proof of the *commici*’s musical accomplishments, Pirrotta cites the famous instance of the Fedeli troupe’s star actress Virginia Andreini and her last-minute substitution into the title role of Monteverdi’s *Arianna* (1608) - an extraordinary triumph by all accounts. He suggests that the opera companies borrowed from the practices of the *commedia*, which apparently by that time “embraced the whole field of dramatic activity”, and that this borrowing would have included an appro-
prias atop of comic roles, some of which were later to evolve into standard operatic characters such as the fearful, foolish and hungry manservant (cf. Leporello in *Don Giovanni*) and the old matron or nurse - a “former courtesan in retirement” - more often than not sung by a tenor (Pirrotta 318, 320). Lorenzo Bianconi perceives the “margin presumably allowed for clownish improvisation” inherent in such roles as a factor which would relate them to the “familiar tradition” of the *commedia dell’arte* (Bianconi 209). He proposes, moreover, the existence of actor-singers specialized in particular roles (a professional imperative fundamental to the *commici*) whose individual talents whetted public appetite for such characters as Arnalta, whom he describes as the first in a long line of the “shrewd and lustful elderly woman . . . sung as a caricature role by specialized ‘transvestite’ tenors” (208).

Whether or not Busenello created Arnalta with a transvestite tenor in mind, Monteverdi, a “connoisseur of singers” as Denis Arnold calls him (Arnold 333), must surely have written her music for such a specialized singer. He clearly had already done so for at least one type of comic virtuoso, witness his creation, with librettist Badoaro, of the gluttonous, stammering parasite Iro in *Il ritorno d’Ulisse*. A Homeric character with strong Plautine and *commedia* traits, Iro requires a skilled performer capable of convulsing the audience with an extended, parodic rendition of an operatic lament (of which those of Penelope and Ulisse in the opera’s first act are two legitimate and accomplished specimens.) Appropriating the high-flown language and violent monodic shifts of the lament, composer and librettist lampoon the genre by having the wretched man cry out against being abandoned, not by a lover, but by his food supply: “hor m’abbate la fame, dal cibo abbandonato” (“now hunger attacks me, abandoned by my food”) (*Ulisse* II ix). Evidence to suggest that Monteverdi composed Arnalta for a specific singer, or at least type of singer presents itself in her soliloquy before Poppea’s coronation. Though not such a showstopping star turn as Iro’s lament, it nevertheless demands a familiarity with a range of Monteverdian tricks of the trade in order for the singer to parody them with conviction: the *guerriero* fanfares of “Hoggi sarà Poppea di Roma imperatrice”; the repeated “et io” phrases ironically echoing standard characteristics of lament; the dazzlingly hubristic ornamentation which the cadence on “matrona” implicitly requires; the rapid changes in the vocal line as she alternates between triumph and mischief, gleefully enacting the sycophantic attention she anticipates from her former peers (*Poppea* III vi). Not just any tenor in a dress would have the vocal resources and brazen comic talent for playing the
house to pull this off while still maintaining the character’s essential integrity.6

Both Busenello and Badoaro were members of the Accademia degli Incogniti,7 a salon-like group of elite Venetians who, among other artistic pursuits, promoted the development of public opera in Venice and counted within their circle many of its early librettists. Although Bianconi characterizes them somewhat moralizingly as “a club of libertine intellectuals” prone to “bitter philosophical scepticism”, he credits the Incogniti with a better grasp than their contemporaries of the broader intellectual parameters now guiding the “somewhat irregular but highly fashionable” new form of dramatic entertainment. (Bianconi 188). While expounding classical and neoclassical theory to justify the poetic or dramatic intent of their works, they were of a revisionist bent and tended equally to question it. Badoaro, for example, put ancient authority in its place when he claimed “In every age the road of invention has been shown to be open, and we have no other obligation in regard to the precepts of the ancients than to know them” (qtd. Rosand 59). Busenello questioned the source materials themselves: “according to good doctrine it is permissible for poets not only to alter stories but even history.” And he asserted, aphoristically, the importance of modern inspiration: “He who writes satisfies his own fancy” (qtd. Rosand 60-61). For many Incogniti librettists a grasp of the highly fashionable seems to have held sway over the dramaturgically ideal. Giulio Strozzi defended the happy ending of his tragedy Erotilla thus:

It is true that, according to the rules of Aristotle such tragedies seem less perfect, but in accordance with the taste of the day, which is the rule of all rules, they are received with greater enthusiasm and listened to with greater patience. (qtd. Rosand 61)

Neither Busenello nor Badoaro chose to reconcile such characters as Arnalta and Iro with proscriptive rules against the mixing of comedy and tragedy. After all Arnalta’s mistress, Poppea, mounts to Nero’s throne by a route strewn with adultery, banishment and death, and comic Iro promptly goes off to kill himself at the end of his lament. Strozzi’s “rule of all rules” and the primacy of a poet’s individual invention determined whether they included comic or domestic characters in their ground-breaking librettos. Venetian audiences evidently delighted in them, and the canny writers were no doubt aware that, as much as any artistic concern, the new enterprise of public opera required public approval for its continued solvency.

This is not to say that Arnalta, by some mercenary measure, represents
merely an expedient or gratuitous role designed for a singer whose colourful performance might help fatten box-office receipts. Iro in Ulisse, however, with not much more than his lament to accomplish could be classified as such, in spite of his justification as a Homeric character. While he serves legitimate dramatic functions, not the least of which is to distract the audience from the gruesome business of Ulisse’s slaughter of the suitors, the role operates primarily as a crowd-pleaser, and contemporary reports substantiate this. Arnalta, on the other hand, is closely integrated into Poppea, her comedy arising from her participation in the opera’s dramatic action. True, she solicits the audience’s approval directly in confidential asides, but they constitute moments when Busenello and Monteverdi reveal further facets of her profile thus developing, as they do with all the important figures of the opera, a dynamic, psychologically complex character.

Penelope’s ancient nurse Ericlea, by way of contrast, has little to sing during Ulisse until her Act II xi soliloquy, which in itself constitutes a well-observed and musically engaging study of a woman torn between love of her mistress and obedience to her lord. But, as with Iro, there is the sense that it is dramatically expedient for Badoaro to include her in the action at this point, that is to say a new voice is needed here to maintain interest. Were we more privy to her relationships with Penelope and Ulisse we might empathize more deeply with her struggle, however minor its role in the story. Badoaro, arguably a lesser librettist than the talented Busenello, ought perhaps to have felt greater obligation to the precepts of the ancients and paided attention to Aristotle’s on the unity of action laid out in Book VIII of his Poetics.8

The Incogniti’s flouting of classical rules is but one manifestation of a latitudinal view of life espoused in their writings. As Ellen Rosand assesses it the Incogniti “defended, on principle, the validity of multiple points of view, multiple interpretations. Equivocation and ambivalence were fundamental to their stand on all matters” (Rosand 38). Indeed there are few operas with as equivocal a message as L’incoronazione di Poppea. While vaunting the triumph of power and erotic love, by ironic implication it also condemns it. Prompted by the Tacitist approach to history prevalent among Venetian thinkers of the time, one that criticizes the deeds of princes through subtle, indirect means rather than overt, condemnatory judgments, Busenello presents at the opera’s end a highly ambiguous image of the self-centred lovers Nero and Poppea swooning in each others arms in transports of love. The sensuous music of the duet (probably not composed by Monteverdi) supports this image with melting phrases.9 Were I to suggest that, to register the
full impact of the image, one should mentally substitute for the two figures those of Hitler and Eva Braun I would be more than overstating the case but, roughly, it is a similar depth of mordant ambiguity that Busenello invites us to contemplate.10 I will further demonstrate this ironic doubleness of vision when I deal more closely with Arnalta’s music, especially her Act III lullaby “Oblivion soave”.

Arnalta, as a literary creation of Busenello,11 is inseparable from Monteverdi’s musical portraiture, and so we will attempt to demonstrate how well the moment to moment flexibility of his musical means supports and elaborates Busenello’s text, fleshing out her character and deepening her connection to the central implications of the opera as a whole.

When Arnalta first appears (I iv) she warns Poppea that her “ambraccimenti” (“embraces”) with Nero will be her ruin since his wife Ottavia has perceived their affair. She sings in a sober free recitative mode, her rising concern depicted in a rhythmically sequenced chromatic ascent on the short, worried phrases of “ond’io pavento e temo / ch’ogni giorno, ogni punto / sia di tua vita il giorno, il punto estremo” (“I am full of fear and worry / that every day, every hour / might be your last day, your last hour.”) Throughout the scene, however, Poppea repeatedly interrupts Arnalta’s prudent advice with phrases from the end of the previous scene in which she rejoiced at her prospects, confident in the support of the two reigning deities of the opera: “no, no, non temo no di noia alcuna, / per me guereggia Amor, e la Fortuna” (“no, no, I fear no harm, Love and Fortune are fighting for me”), creating a refrain of resistance, if you will. Undeterred, Arnalta continues to warn Poppea against Nero, of the irresponsibility of kings in love affairs and of the potential loss of more than just her reputation. Frustrated at her advice being shouted down she drops the free recitative mode and resorts to a wheedling little measured arioso, “Mira, mira Poppea,” conjuring up for her endangered charge a beautiful grassy meadow where lurks a “serpente.” Abruptly she breaks the pastoral mood with a triadic guerriero passage on “de le tempeste” as if to assert once and for all her disapproval. Poppea tries to silence her with both her refrain phrases in succession, the second being her own triumphant guerriero music. At this point Arnalta loses her patience, knowing that she cannot win the battle. She spits out her words as through grimly clenched teeth, one syllable per note, in a manner akin to the genere guerriero: “Ben chei paza, se credi, che ti possano far contenta e salva / un garzon cieco, et una donna calva.” (“You’re quite mad if you think that you can be made happy and safe by a blind boy [i.e. Amor] and a bald woman [i.e. Fortuna].”) Repudiating Poppea’s guardian deities she sweeps
out, figuratively slamming the door - the music cuts out abruptly in mid-
phrase - the perfect image of a wise servant whose voice of reason has been
utterly overridden by a willful mistress.

This particular scene is one of several in *Poppea* where Monteverdi has
rendered Busenello’s libretto more dramatically life-like by breaking up long
stretches of text with interruptions or by intercutting the characters’ lines.¹²
His interspersal throughout the scene of a short, bustling ritornello likewise
demonstrates Monteverdi’s keen dramatic instinct, briskly underlining
Arnalta’s efficiency as a servant. While realistic stage business may not have
been a feature of seventeenth century stage practice, the little musical inter-
jections certainly offer the modern performer scope for comic physical elab-
oration of Arnalta’s edgy state of mind.

Monteverdi again captures Arnalta’s amusing no-nonsense efficiency in a
later scene when Poppea awakens to find her former lover Ottone, disguised
as Drusilla, about to kill her (II xiv).¹³ Arnalta springs into action, raising the
household and sending them after the cross-dressed intruder with a burst of
rapid-fire guerriero and concitato singing. The effect is not unlike a cartoon
version (if such could be said to exist) of the military passages
of Monteverdi’s “Gira il nemico insidioso” or *il Combattimento*.¹¹ Her energetic
ability to grab the moment stands in distinct contrast to the other nurse-fig-
ure of the opera, Ottavia’s nutrice. This dispirited creature declares herself
“un cimiterio andante” (“a walking cemetery”) (II x), thus setting herself up
as the butt of the valetto’s ageist gibes. Redoubtable Arnalta never falls vic-
tim to this typical fate of seventeenth century opera nurses (See Leopold
211), indeed she is quite willing to admit she looks like an ancient Sibyl pro-
vided everyone blatantly flatters her as “bella donna, e fresca ancora” (III vi).
Her star is on the rise with Poppea’s impending coronation and she knows it.
To illustrate her new-found complacency Monteverdi gives her a suitably
grandiose ascending passage in her final soliloquy: “ascenderò delle
grandezze i gradi” (“I shall ascend the steps of the great”) (III vi).

It is a tribute to the Busenello-Monteverdi partnership that so much is
suggested about Arnalta with so little. In all, she has scarcely one hundred
lines of text. This expressive compression is most evident in the soliloquy
she delivers after eavesdropping upon Poppea’s heartless rejection of Ottone
(II xi).¹⁵ In a mere eight lines Monteverdi, exploiting Busenello’s text to the
full, reveals at least four new qualities of Arnalta’s character by means of a
variety of musical gestures. First, taking up the mode of Ottone’s lamenting
recitative, she reveals for two lines a “compassion” for the “infelice ragazzino”
(“unhappy youth”); then, in a one-line volley of guerriero she expresses
scorn for Poppea’s lack of judgment, returning abruptly to a lamenting recitative on the next line to decry Poppea’s lack of “pietà.” Suddenly she switches to a giocoso song-like mode in which she confesses to us, with a certain coy pride, that in her younger days she did not make her lovers weep but kept them all happy with her “compassion.” Her suggestive reiterations of the word “contentavo” (“I made happy”) make for a little racy fun when we realize that the sexual aspect of Arnalta’s generous “compassion” could just as easily be brought into play with Ottone right then and there, were she so lucky. Her personality is thus momentarily glimpsed in the light of the stock character of the libidinous aging matron who chases younger men (See Pirrotta 320), burlesquely compounded here with the homoerotic overtones implicit in the fact that the part is performed by a male. In a few deft strokes composer and librettist have broadened significantly the scope of Arnalta’s stage persona: her frank, transvestite sexuality both reflects, and is a comic foil to, the amorous preoccupations of the leading characters; her humane approach to life throws into relief its utter lack in those leading characters, including her self-absorbed mistress, a mistress, however, to whom she is devoted and upon whose dubious fortunes Arnalta is quite happy to rise.

Multiple implications, essential to the spirit of the Incogniti, suffuse Arnalta’s most significant music, her slumber scene aria “Oblivion soave” (“Sweet oblivion”) (II xii). A beautiful, long-breathed cantabile melody floating upon a gently rocking accompaniment, Arnalta sings Poppea to sleep with it as though she were a vulnerable, innocent child, which in some ways she is, if a rather spoiled one. The image presented is ironic and double: the child-like Poppea (her name means ‘doll’) is also a very knowing, sexually active woman, ambitious for nothing less than the crown. Arnalta eulogizes her eyes as sweet and gentle (“care e gradite”) but calls them “thieving” at the same time. Those “occhi ladri”, of course, have stolen Nero from his wife, causing a shock-wave of grief, pain and murderous jealousy to damage or threaten the lives of several people, including her own. The loving tenderness of the aria lulls us, however, into feeling Poppea is worth protecting.

But there lurks a suggestion of sorrow in the lullaby. The repeated three-note descending figure at the end of each strophe imparts almost a keening sound to the melody. It is as if Arnalta, with her deep suspicion of the court, instinctively foresees what the contemporary audience would have known from Tacitus, but Busenello, the ironic Incognito, chose to leave out. Three years after their wedding, Nero, in a fit of rage, kicked Poppea to death. This
particularly trenchant irony is key to an appreciation of the moral dimensions of the seemingly amoral opera. While celebrating the victory of erotic love it warns, too, of its fatal transitoriness.

In a further double association, no doubt relished by the libertine iconoclasts of the Incogniti, the stage picture presented by “Oblivion soave” hovers on the brink of the ludicrous, even the grotesque. Graphically, it is the image of an old drag queen singing a whore to sleep, a whore who is about to become the Empress of Rome - “dell’universe genti / unica Imperatrice” (1v). The vocal line teeters on this bathetic edge too. Set in the high range of the tenor voice where there is a danger of distortion, the beautiful reiterated three-note descending figure threatens to sound ‘woozy’ or monotonously hypnotic. The listener is compelled to ask whether this is a musical joke or simply the most quietly ravishing music of the opera. Or is it both? Why should a comic secondary character and not the heroine be accorded such an honour? Is this an oblique denunciation of the glory that was Rome?

Questions and ambiguities swirl around the dreamlike “Oblivion soave”, defying easy resolution. It is possible to say that the Tacitist Busenello, aided by his incomparable composer, Monteverdi, both citizens of a Venice suffering through economic and political decline, a republic menaced by the imperial interests of princes secular and sacred, is poking bitter fun at a past empire, one of the greatest ever, whose fortunes were to fall, and to fall calamitously. It is simplest to say, however, that in an opera where sleek, luxuriant erotic love is seen to triumph heartlessly, and at great cost, over loyalty and order, Arnalta expresses here a deeply devoted love for Poppea which - like the self-sacrificing Drusilla’s for Ottone and the patient Penelope’s for Ulisse - with all its humble pains and imperfections, its lack of glamour and supercharged sensations or ecstasies, is finally the truest, safest love, the love that should conquer all.

NOTES

1 Arnalta bears a certain similarity to the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet: her indulgent love of a young charge, who is having a passionate and dangerous affair, her worldly yet homespun wisdom, and so on. Shakespeare took his inspiration from Arthur Brooke’s narrative poem based on the story of Matteo Bandello (1554), and from Luigi Grotto’s tragedy La Hadriana published in Venice in 1586. The valetto’s teasing of Ottavia’s nutrice (Poppea II x) is somewhat reminiscent of Mercutio’s treatment of Juliet’s nurse in Romeo and Juliet (II iv).

2 Allardyce Nicholl presents evidence that the non-masked servietta role Franceschina was frequently played by female impersonators in Commedia dell’arte companies of the
late sixteenth, early seventeenth century (e.g. Battista de Treviso of the Geloso company in 1577, and Ottavio Bernardini of the Uniti company in 1614.) In The World of Harlequin: a critical study of the Commedia dell'Arte (Cambridge: CU Press, 1963) 96.

3 Bianconi is careful to qualify how speculative these theories remain, given the dearth of primary sources to substantiate them.

4 Silke Leopold (145) considers this parodic treatment of a serious genre to be “progressive”, looking forward to the opera buffa send-ups of opera seria, but it could just as easily represent an already established practice from the parallel realm of the commizi.

5 Guerriero, the warlike musical gestures Monteverdi developed in his dramatic cantata Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda (1621) and various other madrigals in his Madrigali guerrieri e amorosi (1638).

6 Alexander Oliver in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s 1979 filmed version of Poppea manages this quite handily.

7 Founded and directed by the Venetian patrician Giovanni Francesco Loredano (1604-1661), whose works translated into English include The Life of Adam (1640).

8 “... the plot of a play, being the representation of an action, must present it as a unified whole; and its various incidents must be so arranged that if any one of them is differently placed or taken away the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted. For if the presence or absence of something makes no apparent difference, it is no real part of the whole.”

9 Francesco Sacrati is the most likely composer of the non-Monteverdean parts of Poppea. See Alan Curtis, “Poppea impastacciata or, Who Wrote the Music to L’incoronazione (1643)?” in Journal of the American Musicological Society XLII (1989) 25-54. Arnalta, it would appear, is completely the work of Monteverdi.

10 Peter N. Miller presents an investigation of Tacitist historiography (i.e. history treated in the mode of Roman historian Tacitus) and its influence on the Incogniti in chapter 2 of The Song of the Soul, co-authored with Iain Fenlon (London: Royal Musical Association, 1992) [pp.]. Miller quotes William James Bouwsma’s description of the techniques of Venetian historian Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623) as encapsulating the Venetian historiographic style of the first half of the seventeenth century. I reproduce it here, in part, as an aid to understanding Busenello’s philosophical stance in Poppea.

Instead of committing himself by making explicit judgments on events, he frequently preferred to express his views through a variety of indirect, often insidious rhetorical devices ... Instead of distributing blame or (more rarely) praise, he liked to allow an interpretation to emerge dramatically, through a confrontation between antithetical positions, which he skillfully manipulated to reveal the venality, hypocrisy, irresponsibility, irrationality, or mere folly of one side or the other and at times of both. (The Song of the Soul 15)

11 Patrick J. Smith considers Francesco Busenello to be the most neglected of the major librettists, and the first great one (Smith 28-41).

12 The others are the “Tornerai?” scene between Poppea and Nero (I iii) and the sty-chomythic quarrel between Seneca and Nero (I ix).

13 Busenello inexplicably plays down the fact that, historically, Ottone was Poppea’s husband, not merely her (former) lover. The harsher implications thus redounding upon Nero, Poppea and Drusilla were, perhaps, too much for even an Incognito to tolerate.

14 Concitato: ‘agitated’ style whereby anger or excitement is expressed by the rapid reiteration of sixteen notes on one tone. See John Whenham’s discussion of the technique in his “The Later Madrigals and Madrigal-books” (Arnold 243-6).

15 The soliloquy is unaccountably missing in the Hickox recording.
WORKS CITED


DISCOGRAPHY


VIDEO