

Opera in a wildlife sanctuary

The churchyard of Saint Peter in Westleton in Suffolk is carefully kept as a wildlife sanctuary. There, the first weekend in July saw the nursery web spiders standing guard over their eggs which are about to hatch inside the protection of the nursery web. They are well camouflaged, so you have to look for themⁱ.



There was a wide variety of other wildlife, including, for this weekend only, singers and instrumentalists from EEMF under the inspiring direction of Philip Thorby. Simple *ritornelli* were given shape, direction, energy and purpose. So were the musicians.

The group was brought together by the administrative genies of Selene and Ellen over two long weekends in June and July to perform Francesca Caccini'sⁱⁱ opera 'La liberazione di RUGGIERO dall' isola di Alcina' to an appreciative audience in the church on the Sunday afternoon.

The libretto by Saracinelli mostlyⁱⁱⁱ reworks a small part of Ariosto's long epic poem *Orlando furioso*^{iv}. Ruggiero is a Saracen warrior in the army of Charlemagne, betrothed to the English warrior maiden Bradamante (not in the opera). He falls under the spell of the sorceress Alcina and enjoys an idyllic existence until Melissa reminds him of his duties as soldier and lover. He tells Alcina to be gone. She is upset, sets fire to the sea and leaves. The opera ends with a chorus in praise of faithfulness.

The opera was commissioned in 1625 by the Archduchess Maria Maddalena of Austria^v regent ruler of Tuscany. The occasion was the visit to Florence of Sigismund, Crown Prince of Poland^{vi}. The venue was the Archduchess' villa in Florence, the *Poggio Imperiale*.

The political background of the opera is the subject of many theses and essays, including a recent book by Suzanne G. Cusick^{vii}. There was a separate 'ladies' court and the Florentine establishment was not accustomed to women in power, particularly two powerful women ruling jointly^{viii}.

Conversations among the cast touched on the possibility that Christina, Maria Maddalena and Sigismund somehow represent Melissa, Alcina and Ruggiero^{ix}; that there was a lesbian relationship^x; that the ladies of the court were thinking about a future wife for their eligible guest^{xi}.



All this was lost on the audience, to whom it was beautiful music but barely a story. They were given a synopsis of the plot but had little in the way of markers to tell them how it progressed. As an example, there was much discussion in rehearsal of the possibility of foliage to mark the enchanted plants (Alcina's collection of former lovers and a few of their ladies) in the scene known as 'much grumbling in the herbaceous border'. In the event, stage management was minimal and there was neither time nor space to decorate the plants or remove the greenery when they morphed smoothly into monsters.

It could not have improved the music, which was wonderful. Philip has the gift of taking a simple page of dots, pointing out the important bits and transforming it into real music with shape, energy and vigour. Francesca Caccini, daughter of Giulio and the world's first professional female composer, provided an intensely dramatic score interpreting Saracinelli's text. Philip gave it life.



In this endeavour he directed the talents of Ellen Sarewitz (Alcina) and Geoff and Jackie Huntingford (Ruggiero and Melissa) over two long hard weekends. The rest of us can only marvel at the amount of work they must have put in and praise the excellent results. Bit parts (one and a half weekends) were Nick Webb (Neptune, Water spirit, Enchanted plant, Monster), Robin Rigby (River Vistula, Water spirit, Shepherd, Enchanted plant, Astolfo), Adrienne Martin and Mary Earl (Water spirits, Damosels attendant on Alcina, Sirens) and Kate Cullen (Damosel, Siren, Messenger, Unenchanted lady). And the chorus (one weekend) of damosels, enchanted plants and monsters: Sarah Murphy, Melanie Pike, Nina Robinson, Wayne Plummer, Robert Johnson.



The instrumentalists joined on the final day: strings, recorders, cornets, sackbutts and a curtal. They played to the very high standard that EEMF members have come to expect, always responsive to Philip's incisive interpretation of the rhythm.



All of which would have collapsed at the first huff and puff without the dedication, skill and sheer hard work of the continuo: Anne Jordan (bass viol), Mike Ashley (chitarrone), Anne Graf (harp) and Philip (harpsichord and regal). They provided solid support through two weekends from the first breath to the last and we could have done nothing without them. In addition, we had a fascinating insight into the world of figured bass via the near constant muttering of phrases like '6 4 5 3' and '11 sharp 13'.

Our thanks to the local team, Nicholas and Mandy who organised the Village hall and laid on two excellent lunches and tea and coffee whenever needed. Thanks to Selene and Ellen, the organisers. Thanks to Anne who translated the libretto from fairly dark Italian to a good approximation of English, deliberately keeping the original word order. Most of all, thanks to Philip who provided the musical intelligence that made it all possible, scarcely paused for food or drink through two long weekends and prepared the music before we even started.



We hope the spiders enjoyed it.

ⁱ More at <http://www.arachnology.org.uk/family-Pisauridae.html?site=X0000>

ⁱⁱ Daughter of the celebrated Giulio Caccini, she was the world's first professional woman composer and highest paid musician at the medici court. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesca_Caccini

ⁱⁱⁱ With two scenes borrowed from Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. See article by Warren Stewart: <http://blog.magnificatbaroque.com/2009/09/07/a-librettists-choices-saracinni-and-la-liberazione-di-ruggiero/>

^{iv} *Orlando furioso* is 46 *cantos* of at least 80 *stanzas* each of very difficult Italian. It tells of the imaginary adventures of Roland, Charlemagne's nephew (who in real life was wiped out with the army's rearguard at the pass of Roncesvalles in 778AD) in a landscape populated with nearly everything mythology can offer. The opera is based on cantos 6 - 8. Synopsis and translated text at <http://omac1.org/Orlando/>

^v Maria Maddalena was the widow of Grand Duke Cosimo II of Tuscany. She was joint regent for her son, the 15 year old Ferdinando II, with her mother-in-law Christina of Lorraine.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Maddalena_of_Austria

^{vi} He became King Władysław IV of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1632, as well as being Tsar elect of Russia since 1610 (when he was 15. His father disapproved and he never became Tsar).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C5%82adys%C5%82aw_IV_Vasa

^{vii} Suzanne G. Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court, Music and the Circulation of Power*, The University of Chicago Press, 2009:

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/presssite/metadata/epl?mode=synopsis&bookkey=273522>

^{viii} The other regent was Christina of Lorraine, mother of Cosimo II and grandmother of Ferdinando II.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christina_of_Lorraine

^{ix} A diplomatic disaster, given the way Melissa treats the others.

^x ... of course ...

^{xi} The Archduchess may have considered matching him to her own daughter, or to a daughter of King Charles I of England, who married Henrietta Maria of France, a Medici cousin, a few weeks before the opera was performed. In fact, he started to look for a wife in 1634, after he rose to the throne. He sent an emissary to England: King Charles eldest daughter was 3, he was 39. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_de%27_Medici