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Maybe it is the Shakespearian influence, or maybe it is the extraordinary impact that the third act had internationally, but Rossini's *Otello* proved to be one of the composer's most dynamic serious operas. It was also one of the first to be rediscovered in the so-called "Rossini Renaissance", whose importance to the operatic world can never be emphasised enough. Naturally, the reference to Shakespeare has a double edge to it. It is a well-known fact that when Lord Byron saw *Otello* in Venice in February 1818, he condemned the opera because it was not faithful to Shakespeare: he could not believe that Rossini and his librettist had replaced the fateful handkerchief of the original with a *billet-doux*. Today, we know very well that the aesthetic rejection of operas such as Rossini's *Otello* (or Verdi's *Macbeth*) because they do not mirror exactly the sacred Shakespearian model is a debatable viewpoint and – fortunately – a thing of the past. Even when there does exist a strong bond with the literary source, it is certainly not on the basis of its fidelity to the original that the derived opera should be judged. Orson Welles' version of *Othello* is a wonderful film despite – and perhaps because of – its considerable detachment from the original plot. Actually, the substitution of the handkerchief with a letter comes from the actual primary source used by the marquis Francesco Berio di Salsa for his libretto: *Othello ou le More de Venise*, a tragedy in five acts by Jean-François Ducis (1792), which carries an appendix with "*un dénouement heureux qu'on peut substituer au dénouement funeste*" [a happy ending which can substitute the fateful ending]. At this point, we must make a digression. When Rossini's *Otello* was performed in Naples in 1816, it closed with the murder of Desdemona and the suicide of the Moor – the "*dénouement funeste*". However, a few years later, the opera was again performed, this time at Rome's Teatro Argentina, during the carnival season of 1820, and in this production, Rossini introduced the "*dénouement heureux*", according to a common practice of the day (see, for example, the "double finale" of *Tancredi*). Should we see this variation as further proof of the "classical", or anti-romantic spirit of the "restoration" composer, who – in accordance with a well-known critical stereotype – is wholly unconcerned with the reasons of the "drama"?

Actually, *Otello* is definitely a progressive drama – and not merely because of the third act. The cabaletta of the duet between Otello and Jago ("*L'ira d'avverso fato*") in the second act is proof enough. Here is a case that, despite its fame, is no less significant. If we listen carefully to the opening of this piece, we realise that the idea of "*Si, vendetta, tremenda vendetta*" in Verdi's *Rigoletto* undoubtedly has its origins here, thirty-five years earlier. But that is not all. If we return to the third act, what can be more romantic than the voice of a gondolier in the distance? He sings the words from Dante's account of the tale of Paolo and Francesca: "There is no greater sorrow than to be mindful of the happy time in misery". The resulting effect of consuming nostalgia appears all the more remarkable when we realise – as Marco

Grondona has noted – that here Rossini uses the opening notes of the Funeral March from Beethoven's *Eroica*. We also know from a precious communication between Rossini and Ignaz Moscheles that the decision to use Dante's lines was indeed Rossini's: "I owe much to Dante; I have learnt more music from reading Dante than from all my proper music lessons. I wanted at all costs to include Dante's lines in my *Otello* – you know, the lines of the gondolier. It was no use my librettist telling me that gondoliers never sing Dante, at most Tasso. I told him that I was better informed than he, because I had lived in Venice and he had not – I needed Dante". Rossini's intransigence in this instance is not only an indication of the importance he attributed to this point of the drama, but it shows the changing relationship between the librettist and the composer, a change that was to reach final completion in Verdi's day.

So, even Rossini is definitely opening up to the new demands made of musical drama in the romantic age. However, it is difficult to deny the conventional side to his genius. This apparent contradiction between the conventional and the dramatic is (for us) a false problem, accustomed as we are to the opposition of "opera" and "drama" that for far too long has maintained the stereotype of the anti-romantic and anti-dramatic Rossini. If we take one of the more conventional pieces of the score, the Finale of the first act, we find a moment of rare dramatic effect that would be captured by Eugène Delacroix, one of the most representative of French romantic painters. It is the moment in which Elmiro curses his daughter on a "melodramatic" diminished seventh chord, which is followed by the *tableau* of the *concertato di stupore* ("Incerta l'anima"). Delacroix was inspired by this moment to paint his famous picture *Desdemona cursed by her father*. And I do not think it is necessary to underline the centrality of the paternal curse in romantic melodrama. Of course, the Finale is a conventional construction, but what is important is the dramatic use Rossini made of it. From a purely formal point of view, we have the usual closed structure: a Finale in C major with the *concertato di stupore* in A flat major (as in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* or *Semiramide*). But it is necessary to go beyond the anatomical/morphological aspect in order to highlight and to understand the dramatic construction. It will then become obvious that Rossini conceived his operas, especially his Neapolitan operas, with an eye to drama.

(Traduzione di Chris Owen)

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