

# *A half-baked classic, lovingly reheated*

DITLEV RINDOM

Ferdinando Paer's *Agnese* has left no great "hit" to posterity; certainly no individual number that you might find on a Callas or Caballé rarities disc, or in a Juan Diego Florez bel canto recital. But there are very good reasons for paying attention to Paer's now largely forgotten opera. Premiered in Parma in 1809, *Agnese* was a huge immediate success and quickly appeared in London, Vienna, Paris and Milan before largely disappearing from the stage a few decades later.

As an early nineteenth-century *semiseria*, it occupies a significant role in any history of the period around 1800 (or more prosaically, between Mozart and Rossini). And in terms of plot, this is an opera that offers a genuinely tantalising prospect.

Paer's work is once again an Italian opera all about madness and unrequited love, but this time the victim isn't a soprano (despite the opera's title): the drama instead centres upon a deluded baritone.

*Agnese* uses a libretto by Luigi Buonavoglio to tell an intriguing tale about the healing powers of music and fantasy. The title character abandoned her father Uberto seven years earlier in order to elope with her lover Ernesto. Now her husband appears to have betrayed her, and Agnese is wandering through the woods with her young daughter, hoping to ask for her father's forgiveness. She meets Uberto unexpectedly, but discovers that he has been driven mad by her departure.

Together with Don Pasquale (the director of the mental hospital) and the maid Vespina, she pursues a plan to restore his sanity. By recreating his home in the hospital and pretending nothing has happened, and by Agnese singing songs from their shared past, they manage to bring Uberto out of his mental disturbance. Ernesto eventually returns to ask Agnese for her compassion, and the work concludes with a joyful return to earlier family unity.

Paer demonstrates a secure melodic gift, that comes especially to the fore in Act Two

María Rey-Joly y  
Edgardo Rocha  
© 2019 by  
Edoardo Piva



**Turín, domingo,  
17 de marzo de  
2019.** Teatro  
Regio. Sunday 17  
March 2019.

Ferdinando Paer, *Agnese*. Leo Muscato, director. Silvia Aymonino, costumes. Federica Parolini, set designs. Alessandro Verazzi, lighting. María Rey-Joly (*Agnese*), Edgardo Rocha (*Ernesto*), Markus Werba (*Uberto*), Filippo Morace (*Don Pasquale*), Giulia Della Peruta (*Vespina*), Andrea Giovannini (*Don Girolamo*), Lucia Cirillo (*Carlotta*), Federico Benetti (*Il custode dei pazzi*), Sofía La Cara (*figlia di Agnese*). Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro Regio. Carlo Caputo, continuo. Diego Fasolis, conductor.



Filippo Morace, Giulia Della Peruta y el Coro del Teatro Regio. © 2019 by 2019 by Edoardo Piva.

(which features a scene of an improvvisatrice that clearly foreshadows Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*). Orchestral writing is often punchy, and the libretto's novelty goes some way towards explaining *Agnese's* contemporary fame. The reasons for the opera's neglect are also obvious, however. *Agnese* is poorly paced, with the plot frequently difficult to follow and far too many musical episodes that disturb or delay crucial action. This problem was perhaps exacerbated by the otherwise reasonable desire on this occasion to

include music written by Paer for later revivals. As became clear as the performance progressed, Paer's communicative range is also quite limited. Most numbers progressed in a bland major key *moderato meno mosso*, with little effort to develop distinct characters or moods through varied music. Although orchestration could be effective, woodwind obligatos soon became predictable and did little to nuance the action. It's ultimately not surprising, therefore, that works by Rossini (and then Donizetti and Bellini) should have cast Paer into the footnotes: theatrically, *Agnese* is limp, and its most effective devices were developed more successfully by following generations.



Giulia Della Peruta, Filippo Morace y Andrea Giovannini. © 2019 by 2019 by Edoardo Piva.



Markus Werba y María Rey-Joly. © 2019 by 2019 by Edoardo Piva.

This doesn't mean that individual numbers might not enjoyably be revived for adventurous and gifted singers. The Turin production fielded a fine cast of performers, all of whom had impressive stand-out moments that might have shone even more brightly in a more musically varied format. In the title role, María Rey-Joly initially sounded clotted, but warmed up to reveal an ultra-secure top register, good coloratura and sensitive phrasing. Edgardo Rocha coped well with the tricky and ungrateful part of Ernesto, above all in the taxing second act aria with its succession of top

Cs. As *Vespina*, Giulia Della Peruta entertained in the soubrette antics, and showed she was capable of far more in the fireworks of her final aria. Equally strong was Filippo Morace as

Don Pasquale, offering secure vocalism in an awkward role. Best of all, though, was Markus Werba as Uberto: his excellent legato, secure tone and poignant acting were the rightly at the centre and helped give the opera some dramatic purpose.

Leo Muscato's staging played with the idea of the medical cabinet, with individual rooms opening and closing like boxes of pills. At the same time, the designs referenced the packaging for luxury cosmetics and chocolates, as though mental illness might be resolved with just a spoonful of sugar, or perhaps a helping of Paer's music. Silvia Aymonino's costumes supported this sense of playful artifice: designs slipped neatly between the early nineteenth century and a much later period (the programme note suggests Agnese's wild red hair was inspired by Nicole Kidman).



*Agnese*, escena final. Producción de Leo Muscato. © 2019 by 2019 by Edoardo Piva.

The key to the entire show, however, was Diego Fasolis's energetic conducting, pushing the drama forward even when Paer couldn't resist slowing it down. From the driving overture to the final chorus, the orchestra sounded committed, well-prepared and well balanced, in a work they are unlikely to perform again. With fine contributions from the chorus and a decent attendance from the audience, this was a worthwhile endeavour executed with flair.