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Flavio Emilio Scogna & Frank Schwemmer

Opera composers. By Della Couling

'Talent needs to be tried and tested in a major arena, where talent is genuinely the main criterion, and criticism (by the media and one's colleagues) is motivated by concern for standards'

Music, even as opera, speaks a universal language. But to reach a wide audience, it helps to live in, or at least to have close contacts with, one of the main musical centres, not least for networking purposes. I often meet composers and see and hear their operas in what is in fact a very restricted environment: a relatively small city with perhaps one or two outlets – a chamber opera group, a local theatre that also provides opera part of the time – and I have frequently found that their musical knowledge of the outside world, and the outside world's knowledge of them, is pretty well equal, which can only be a drawback for their career and broader musical development. Although they compose alone, composers have nearly always, over the last three centuries at least, tended to congregate where the action is: Paris, Vienna and Berlin in the 19th century; Paris, London, New York and (to a certain extent) Berlin today.

Two composers I have come across recently are the Italian Flavio Emilio Scogna and the German Frank Schwemmer (see Live Reviews section in *Opera Now*, January/February

issue). Although their styles and background are different, some of the practical difficulties they face, particularly as opera composers, are virtually the same.

I was in Rome last autumn for the premiere of Scogna's *La memoria perduta*. Born in 1956

in Savona, a small seaport near Genoa, Scogna studied (composition and conducting) first in Genoa, then Bologna and finally in Rome, after which he worked with Luciano Berio for several years. In his conducting, he has concentrated to quite a degree on contemporary work by other

composers, in fact conducting very many world premieres with some of Italy's top orchestras, and he is also interested in discovering neglected work – one such was Erik Satie's *Cinema*. His own composing output has been relatively modest, and includes one opera, *Anton*, before *La memoria perduta*.

Anton is a 30-minute one-act piece for male speaker and mezzo soprano, and deals with the particularly pointless killing of Anton Webern in September 1945 by an American soldier. It begins in atonal style, moving to 12-tone, with allusions to Wagner, Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky: all except the first were, of course, more or less contemporaries of Webern and were also affected in different ways by the war. It is definitely a 'thought-piece', with little drama, the stage action beefed up by a dancer. Like *La memoria perduta*, on the fate of refugees, Scogna's overwhelming concern is the tragedy of much of human existence, particularly in our own times. Scogna actually finished composing *La memoria perduta* in 1993 and was unfortunately prescient in his choice of subject matter: enormous floods of refugees, in



Flavio Emilio Scogna: 'Scogna's overwhelming concern is the tragedy of much of human existence, particularly in our own times'

particular the many arriving in Italy by boat all along the Adriatic coast, has become a familiar sight.

Being on the side of the angels is no guarantee of quality in art, but his work is of high quality. Its fate, however, is unfortunately typical of the state of much musical activity in Italy. It was originally commissioned by the flamboyant Giampaolo Cresci, who for a brief and ultimately inglorious period ran the Rome Opera in the early 1990s. As so often in Italy, a change in management in an opera house means a wholesale rejection of the former management's plans. It is only now, in the safer hands of Francesco Emani, that the Rome Opera was able to rescue Scogna's opera and give it a production – albeit not in the opera house itself (where they were staging a co-production with the Opéra de Lille of *L'elisir d'amore* – much more to the taste of a Roman audience). The opera was staged in the characterless Brancaccio, in a lacklustre production by Pier'Alli almost totally lacking in verve, commitment and discipline (except in the pit, where Scogna himself was conducting).

Much was made in the Italian press of the courage (!) of the Rome Opera in putting on a new work, something that nowadays any self-respecting opera house does on a regular basis. But putting on a new work is meaningless if there is no informed support, and if the audience has (as far as I could see) little understanding of or interest in it. Roman audiences are notoriously indifferent, not to say badly behaved (as Scogna said to me: 'They are not intellectually curious').

My drastic advice to Scogna would be to get out, or at least to take his wares to another market. He has talent, but it needs to be tried and tested in a major arena, where talent is genuinely the main criterion, and criticism (by the media and one's colleagues) is motivated by concern for standards. As I have seen in Italy over several decades, both in prose theatre and opera, subsidies do not necessarily reach deserving causes, and even if they do, there is little compulsion to produce top-quality work – in other words, true professionalism, which is precisely what was lacking in the production (not the work itself, I stress again) of *La memoria perduta*.

It is difficult for any composer to simply up sticks; by a certain age there are nearly always domestic and professional commitments to tie one down. Scogna works mainly as conductor, but is increasingly aware that as composer he needs to widen his field of operations and find opportunities to have his work performed outside Italy. It will not be easy, but I wish him the success he deserves.