NOTES ON THE PIANO PERFORMANCE VERSION

Eric Thomas Knechtges

The primary sources for this particular reconstruction of *Il Pesceballo* are the published libretto by Francis James Child (edited by Dale Cockrell) and the recitatives and chorus parts by John Knowles Paine (uncovered by Mary Ellen Brown). Cockrell’s edition of Child’s libretto includes Child’s own marginal notes about the proper operatic works to use for setting the new lyrics for each number. Cockrell’s edition also includes reproductions of suggested arrangements of these operatic works that one might use in a reconstruction of *Il Pesceballo*. While these materials were sufficient to recreate most of the work, some musical information was still missing. Wherever possible, I have deferred to the sources available to me; in other circumstances, I took the liberty of providing my best musical solution. While the reasons for most minor alterations are readily apparent (e.g., adding a note to accommodate an extra syllable), the following describes the more substantial adaptations I made during the reconstruction process.

Overture:
This is my own pastiche composition, using thematic material from the folk song “The Lone Fish-Ball.”

Scene I:
Paine’s extant chorus parts include only treble and bass parts. It was unclear whether just two parts (i.e., the women’s and men’s parts, respectively) were rendered in performance, or whether parts for the inner voices have been lost. In any event, I deemed it appropriate to expand the chorus to the traditional SATB arrangement. Paine’s treble and bass parts became the soprano and bass parts of the chorus, and the inner voices were added by referencing the scores provided in Dale Cockrell’s edition of *Il Pesceballo* and by following basic principles of choral arranging and voice-leading.

Scene II:
In most cases in this work, Paine’s arrangements of the recitatives serve to provide smooth modulations from one number to the next. However, in this case, no such recitative existed, and I felt that the key change from A major to B-flat major was simply too jarring; the original most likely included some transitional material. Thus, in this instance, I replaced the introduction to “Ecco tra nubi” (originally “Ecco ridente” from Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*) with stylistically appropriate modulatory material whose motifs connect to the succeeding cavatina. I chose an arrangement of “Ecco ridente” that follows the original Rossini score more faithfully than did Cockrell’s choice.

In the subsequent recitative, as with all such pieces in this work, Paine provided single-staff sketches of chords, melodic material, or figured bass to accompany the recitatives. I have realized these in keyboard style.
Scene IV:
It became apparent, in attempting to set Child’s text to Rossini’s “Non piú mesta,” that the initial stanza could not begin at the indicated place in Cockrell’s score. Often, when this aria is performed as a stand-alone concert piece, it is preceded by an excerpt of “Nacqui all'affanno, al pianto”; based on similarities of rhyme scheme and accent placement when this excerpt is compared to Child’s text, I determined that this was the probable case here as well.

What remained unclear was how I should set the last two lines of Child’s text (beginning “Risoluta son io fra poco”). At the point where these important words could conceivably enter the aria, the vocal line is so florid that they would hardly be understood (Rossini’s original aria never changes text, so this problem does not arise). Consequently, I moved the original vocal line to the accompaniment and moved the initial section of chorus’s soprano line to the voice part: this solution seemed appropriate, given Rossini’s textual strategies in the original aria (there, the chorus entrance is marked by new text). Beginning at the “marcato” indication, however, I have composed a stylistically appropriate melody in order to provide a more coherent presentation of the last two lines of text, concluding with a suitable coloratura cadenza.

Scene V:
In this duet, I included no more verses than Child’s text provided, then omitted the remaining verses of music and proceeded directly to the coda.

Scene VI:
Once again, based on rhyme scheme and verbal accentuation, it was unclear how the last line of this text was set: the text ends before the music does! Thus, I made a cut in the most musically appropriate place I could find, with the ultimate aim of creating a coherent harmonic progression and phrase structure in the final version.

Scene VII:
The introduction and chorus parts to the canzone popolare are taken directly from the arrangement of “The Lone Fish-Ball” in Charles Herbert Levermore’s The Abridged Academy Songbook for Use in Schools and Colleges. Based on similarity of key, it is likely that this exact arrangement may have been used. As a side note, this publication lends credence to the conclusion that Paine may have originally penned four chorus parts: Paine’s treble and bass parts to this song are the same as the soprano and bass parts in Levermore’s publication. I have adapted the accompaniment here in order to make it stylistically congruent with the rest of the opera.

A number of minor adjustments had to be made in the “catalog aria” in order to accommodate the text; the most significant is a rhythmic alteration in order to set “novanta per trè” correctly. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Child’s text choice of “novanta per trè” (ninety [lire] for three), as a stand-in for Mozart and La Ponte’s “mille e trè,” changes the original story of the Fish-Ball slightly: it is perhaps far more grievous to order only one fish-ball when one must normally order three instead of two!
Scene IX:
The number of rests in the beginning of Paine’s chorus parts seems to indicate that the
lines of Il Cameriere and Lo Straniero were sung simultaneously. From a dramatic
standpoint, this simply does not make sense: the texts are too dissimilar in too many places.
Thus, I have separated the two soloists into their own verses, retaining their original
pitches. The chorus parts in the coda, which double the left hand of the accompaniment,
were provided by Paine.

Scene X:
Child’s notes indicate that the text of this cavatina, which is identical to that in Scene VI,
was set to different music. At first, I believed this to be unlikely: the rhyme scheme of
Child’s text did not match the rhyme scheme in Donizetti’s music. However, from a
dramatic standpoint, it is a perfect fit in this position. I lowered the music to G major, thus
allowing the final half-cadence on the A major chord (annexed to Donizetti’s original) to
function as a dominant to the tonality of the subsequent number.

The chorus number provided some interesting problems with respect to setting text: La
Padrona’s part here is a combination of two parts in Donizetti’s original music. The
hammer-stroke high A’s in the soprano solo in the codetta are my own addition, in order
to bring out that text against the chorus.

Scene XI:
Cockrell’s edition, for whatever reason, did not provide a suggested accompaniment for
this aria from Donizetti’s La Favorita; thus, the accompaniment printed is transcribed from
the standard Ricordi edition piano reduction. For Il Cameriere’s iteration of the aria, I
deemed that the range, while appropriate for La Padrona’s soprano and Lo Straniero’s
tenor, was too high for Il Cameriere’s baritone. Lowering it by an octave, however, seemed
inappropriate, since G2 tends not to be a note that most baritones can project. A key
change so close to the end of the opera, much less within a single number, also seemed
unsuitable. Thus, I retained most of the basic contour and function of the aria, but I shifted
the pitches to an analogous tessitura to the previous soprano and tenor iterations.

The published libretto’s indentation indicates that the last two lines of the opera might have
been a recitative; however, there were no indication’s in Paine’s recitatives or chorus parts
that this was the case. Additionally, from a dramatic standpoint it seemed completely
unsatisfactory to end an opera on any sort of recitative. Thus, following the end of Il
Cameriere’s verse, I have composed an idiomatic conclusion to the opera.

I believe that a successful performance of this opera requires a good deal of tongue-in-
cheek humor; at all levels, the opera is a clever satirical commentary on haughty traditions.
Any modern performance should keep this goal in mind.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


