

June 13, 2019 – Gioachino Rossini's *Aureliano in Palmira*

On this week's edition of the WCPE Opera House I'm pleased to present Gioachino Rossini's *Aureliano in Palmira*. First heard the day after Christmas 1813, it was preceded by three of the composer's earliest successes: *Il Signor Bruschino*, *Tancredi*, and *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Rossini was so pleased with the Overture that he recycled it the following year in *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*, and it achieved lasting fame in 1816 in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. The libretto of *Aureliano in Palmira* has generally been attributed to Giuseppe Felice Romani, and the story centers on the rivalry between the Roman Emperor Aureliano and Prince Arsace of Persia over the beautiful Queen Zenobia of Palmyra.

Act I: Zenobia (soprano **Denia Mazzola**), Arsace (contralto **Luciana D'Intino** in a "trouser" role), and the priests offer sacrifices in the Temple of **Isis** and pray for their deliverance from the approaching Roman army, led by Emperor Aureliano (tenor **Ezio Di Cesare**). Oraspe (tenor **Ferrero Poggi**), a Palmyran general, enters to the strains of martial music and announces that the Roman army is at the gates of Palmyra. Arsace pledges his Persian troops to defend the city. After a dramatic battle, the Persians are defeated and the Romans celebrate their victory. Aureliano arrives and addresses Arsace, now a prisoner. He responds to the Emperor with dignity and affirms his love for Zenobia, saying he is prepared to die for her. Zenobia has hidden the kingdom's treasures in the vaults beneath the palace. She decides to make a last stand with her troops to save the city. She asks Aureliano for a truce so that she can obtain the liberty of the prisoners, including Arsace. When Aureliano refuses to free the prisoners, she asks to see Arsace for a last time. Aureliano promises to free Arsace on condition that the Persian prince abandons Zenobia. Arsace refuses and is sentenced to death. The Roman and Palmyran armies prepare for a final battle.

Act II: Palmyra has now been conquered by the Romans. Aureliano enters Zenobia's palace and offers his love to her, which she refuses. Meanwhile, General Oraspe frees Arsace, who then flees to the hills by the Euphrates River, where he is sheltered by a group of shepherds. Arsace's soldiers tell him that Zenobia has been taken prisoner. Arsace sets off to free her and launch a new attack against the Romans with the Palmyran troops. In the palace, Aureliano proposes to Zenobia that they reign together over Palmyra. She refuses. Later that night, Arsace and Zenobia meet again in the moonlight and embrace. When they are discovered by the Roman troops, they ask to be executed. Although he secretly admires their courage and devotion to each other, Aureliano decrees that Zenobia and Arsace will end their days in separate cells. Publia (mezzosoprano **Nicoletta Ciliento**), daughter of the Roman general Valeriano and secretly in love with Arsace, begs Aureliano to take pity on the Persian prince. The second scene takes place in a large chamber of Zenobia's palace. The leaders and priests of the defeated Palmyrans are gathered in supplication before Aureliano. Oraspe, Arsace and Zenobia are led into the chamber in chains. Aureliano has a change of heart and frees Zenobia and Arsace, allowing them to reign jointly over Palmyra provided they swear loyalty to the Roman Empire. They agree and the opera ends with them praising Aureliano for his generosity.

Giacomo Zani conducts the Orchestra Lirico-Sinfonica del Teatro del Giglio di Lucca and the Artisti del Coro Associati in this 1992 Nuova Era recording.

Romanian tenor **Bogdan Mihai** sings the act one aria “Cara patria, il mondo trema” at the 2011 Martine Franca Belcanto Festival in Valle D’Itria:
<https://youtu.be/VYdVVnsWcMM>.

As a bonus, we’ll hear arias from Rossini’s *Zelmira*, *La Donna del Lago*, and *Le Siège de Corinthe* sung by **Rockwell Blake**, **Marilyn Horne**, and **Samuel Ramey**.

Please join us next Thursday, June 20th, for an encore broadcast of Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca*, hosted by the late **Al Ruocchio** (1937-2007). **Leontyne Price** sings the title role, **Plácido Domingo** is the painter Cavaradossi, and **Sherrill Milnes** is the despicable Roman police chief Baron Scarpia in this 1972 recording.

The WCPE Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o’clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We’re streamed online at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, or you can listen on our Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the WCPE Opera House