

Sinopoli: finding the progressive in Puccini

JOHN McMURRAY meets an Italian composer-conductor with strong views on music and drama

THE UNHAPPY affair of the Royal Opera's planned new production of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* — which lost its producer-designer Piero Faggioni two months ago and will now be given in Götz Friedrich's production from Hamburg — has had the effect of concentrating even more attention on the conductor, Giuseppe Sinopoli. The 36-year-old Venetian has not been a frequent visitor to Britain (a situation which will change with his appointment as principal conductor of the Philharmonia: see *CM* April 16) and the opening performance on May 3 will mark his British operatic debut.

Sinopoli's career has been an unusual one for a man regularly invited to conduct new productions of Verdi and Puccini operas in the world's major opera houses. Conventional stereotypes about fiery Italian theatricality will not do — his musical background has its roots in the Second Viennese School; his approach to opera is to treat it as serious musical drama rather than any kind of mindless display ('Even in Verdi's earlier operas rhythm, the so-called "hm-ta-ta", is dramatic pulsation, not just accompaniment as in Donizetti or Bellini,' he said at one point in our talk.)

Much of his childhood was spent in Messina in Sicily where there was very little music to be heard, and his family did not consider music to be a suitable profession. The young Sinopoli's academic abilities won him a university place to study medicine but the desire to be a musician was as strong as before. So from 1965 to 1971 he undertook the remarkable feat of studying medicine in Padua and music in Venice, travelling back and forth between the two towns daily.

After qualifying as a doctor he concentrated solely on music, and went to Vienna to study conducting with Hans Swarowsky. But it was as a composer that he began to attract public attention.

He began to be known as a conductor of modern scores, but then in 1976 conducted *Aida* at the Fenice in Venice to great acclaim. This was followed by *Tosca* and *Simon Boccanegra*, *Macbeth* in Berlin, *Aida* and *Luisa Miller* in Hamburg, and *Attila* and *Macbeth* in Vienna. Last December he turned his attention to Puccini again for a new production of *La fanciulla del West* in Berlin. His orchestral conducting career has developed at the same time with appearances with top orchestras on the continent, in Britain (his orchestral debut here was a remarkable Mahler Sixth with the London Symphony Orchestra last May) and in the United States of America.

His recording career has followed a similar pattern, beginning with modern works and now including Brahms's complete works for chorus and orchestra, and Verdi's *Nabucco*. Future plans include more Verdi (*Macbeth*,



Clive Barata

Sinopoli: unconventional

Rigoletto and *La forza del destino*), the Royal Opera's *Manon Lescaut*, and symphonies by Schubert, Schumann and Mahler.

But amid all this activity Sinopoli has retained considerable control of what he does. His concert hall repertoire, with the exception of some Verdi and some modern scores, he has restricted to six composers in whom he sees a stylistic as well as a chronological progression — Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler and Berg. In the opera house he has limited himself to two composers, Verdi and Puccini, so far. In the future lie four Richard Strauss operas (not surprisingly *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*) and Wagner, beginning with *Der fliegende Holländer* but with his sights definitely fixed on *Parsifal* ('Such an interesting work because it is not what it seems. I think it is blasphemous').

In the opera house Sinopoli insists on working on new productions (he has made an exception in the Royal Opera's case because of the difficulties it has got into) and his casts are strong — at Covent Garden his principals will be Kiri Te Kanawa, Plácido Domingo and Thomas Allen. In return he offers an unusually penetrating insight into the works he performs, and sometimes unconventional judgements.

On *Manon Lescaut* for instance: 'I think for me it is the best Puccini opera. *La Bohème* is the most beautiful but *Manon* is the best. I think that Puccini is not an Italian verismo composer, but a European composer who sometimes wrote music to verismo librettos. His music, with the exception of some things in *Tosca*, is not verismo. *Manon* is the only opera where Puccini did not have a verismo libretto.'

He is struck by the progressive nature of the piece. The music he sees looking forward in places to Debussy, Ravel and even Stravinsky; the dramaturgy he finds fascinating in its avoidance of the continuous closed forms.

'In each act there are very different sentiments, colours and also spiritual attitudes. The first act is a search — all is possible. *Manon* could love Des Grieux; Geronte could love *Manon*. But it is a very

ethic story. There is a very phrenetic desire to begin to love, to make, to live; it is a very active desire. But it is a very violent love, and people love too quickly: Des Grieux falls in love too fast, *Manon* agrees too fast. There is a kind of spring fever in the atmosphere.

'The problem for the interpreters is to find the right colour. It is like some paintings of Monet. There is not a clear line; it is cancelled by the various colours.

'And this is where there is a perfect integration between text and music, and the music fits in with the literature of its time. Nothing is real; everything is a dream or desire. And the musical drama shows this by not following an existing theatrical formula. The changes in mood and colour come from a sensitive reading of the characters, not from models.

'The first part of the second act has the 'colour' of boredom. It has a hypocritical air. It is not *Manon's* face but a mask. But the mask is not complete: the eyes are the same all through the act.

'For the conductor the beginning of this act is very slow but you must have the explosions of later on in you. The 'colour' is like a corpse beautifully dressed but putrid inside; the atmosphere is a bad smell masked by perfume. Des Grieux comes in with terrible violence into this stuffy atmosphere; he is like a very strong cold wind. This violence offers the possibility of a solution. But *Manon* is narcissistic; she is not able to love. In the last act Des Grieux continues to love, but an object that has nothing. The tragedy is that he speaks alone of her, but she speaks alone of herself.'

For Sinopoli the return of the Act II minuet played slowly at the very end of the opera is a key dramatic point: 'In Act II the minuet is Geronte's men saying "You are beautiful" to *Manon*; it comes at a moment of narcissism and passivity for *Manon*. Now it is very easy to be narcissistic when you are rich but it is very difficult to be narcissistic, as *Manon* is, in the desert. And this link avoids an episodic feel to the piece because her obvious passivity at the end was there in the second act even when things were happening around her.'

At the same time as Sinopoli's conducting career has developed he has halted his composition, although not for lack of time. In May 1981 he conducted the first performance of his opera *Lou Salomé* (based on an associate of Sigmund Freud) at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich. Since then he has thought deeply about the role of composition: 'Sometimes I think that music has reached the end of an epoch. It is a question of our times. The interior logic is lost, the reason for the music is lost.'

This search for the interior logic which is at the heart of his approach to conducting, and his feeling that it now seems to have gone from music, has caused him to stop composing. In no way does he see this as an irrevocable decision but rather as a problem to be worked out in time. For now he will be known as a conductor.