PACINI'S *AMAZILIA*

Charles Jernigan, April, 2025

In the 53rd Newsletter of the Donizetti Society, Alexander Weatherson published a short appreciation of Pacini's *Amazilia* as a preface to an upcoming performance of the opera by the Rubini Society with piano accompaniment. The following is a more detailed analysis looking forward to a revival of the opera with orchestra by the Bel Canto Ritrovato Festival.

Giovanni Pacini was 29 years old and had already composed 27 operas when his *Amazilia* debuted on the stage of the Teatro San Carlo on 6 July 1825. Politically, it was an opera which was intimately connected to Naples and to the ruling Bourbon family of Spanish descent, indirectly complimenting their history by improbably making the Spanish conquistadors' treatment of Native peoples in North America look positive. The story, set in sixteenth century Florida, concerns two indigenous tribes who are enemies. One, situated on the "borderlands of Florida" is led by Cabana, the other unnamed tribe, led by Miscou occupies the "hills of Luisiana," fertile territory once occupied by Cabana's people. Amazilia, a member of the Florida/Cabana tribe is in love with Zadir, the son of Miscou. With the presence of the armed Spanish conquistadors in the background, Miscou (who never appears in the opera) wishes to make a peace treaty with Cabana and unite against the Spanish, and Zadir wants to seal the treaty by marrying Amazilia. Cabana, however, wants Amazilia himself, so he is doubly opposed to any treaty. Cabana and Zadir fight to settle their dispute over Amazilia and Cabana wins. The law of the tribes condemns the loser to be burnt at the stake and Cabana is determined to carry out the punishment against the advice of his brother Orozimbo. Zadir, having evaded capture, is about to flee with Amazilia to his father Miscou when he is caught by Cabana. Just as his tragic fate seems sealed, an armed Spanish corps under Captain Alvaro arrives like a *deus ex machina*. They have made a treaty with Miscou and now they free Zadir and capture Cabana, leaving the lovers to a happy future and Cabana to grumble.

The librettist Giovanni Schmidt did not have to look far for inspiration: his own libretto for *Gli americani*, which was set to music by Giacomo Tritto (Napoli: San Carlo, 1802) was the principal source. *Gli americani,* which was revived at the San Carlo in 1805, flattered the monarchy's Spanish

heritage when Ferdinando I had ruled Naples. After a hiatus when Napoleon Bonaparte forced the Bourbons to flee to Sicily, they returned to Naples in May, 1815, after the Austrians defeated Murat at the Battle of Tolentino, restoring Ferdinando to the throne. Ten years later when Ferdinando's son Francesco assumed the throne in 1825, the old story was revived in a slightly new setting to flatter the new king and his queen, Maria Isabella of Spain. Schmidt reduced his libretto to one act, moved its locale to Florida, and it premiered as a birthday celebration for the Queen.

Aside from the usual operatic love triangle which seems as prevalent in the primitive wilds of Florida as in ancient Rome or medieval Europe, the fairly explicit moral of Schmidt's work is that the superior and beneficent European (Spanish) law triumphs over the barbarian law of the indigenous peoples ("selvaggi"). No death at the stake from the enlightened and merciful Spanish. (Schmidt conveniently forgets about the Inquisition or the Spanish liking for *auto-da-fé*s.) The Spaniards, personified in the opera by Alvaro, are all about respect for the indigenous folk while gently supplying them with European enlightenment. Presumably, Maria Isabella approved.

In fact, nothing was new about Schmidt's libretto. The original source was Jean-François Marmontel's 1777 novel *Les Incas, ou La destruction de l'empire du Pérou.* In Italy, Andrea Willi soon made part of Marmontel's story into a five-act drama called *La vergine del sole,* produced in Venice in 1780. *La vergine del sole,* set in Ecuador near Quito, concerns Cora, an Inca maiden and priestess of the Sun God, and Alonso, a Spanish nobleman, who fall in love. When a volcano erupts, destroying the Temple of the Sun, Alonso saves Cora, but she has disobeyed Inca law by leaving the sacred precinct and is condemned to death. Alonso vows to die with her, but in the end she is forgiven and more enlightened law prevails. These works provided the source material for at least eleven operas in Italy before Pacini's work and several ballets. Among the more notable composers who wrote operas on this story to various titles (*La Vergine del sole* or *Alonso e Cora* or *Idalaide* or *Gli americani*) were Giuseppe Sarti, Giacomo Tritto, Domenico Cimarosa and Giovanni Simone Mayr. Tritto produced two completely different operas on the subject—the first with a libretto by Carlo Giuseppe Lanfranchi entitled *La vergine del sole* (Napoli, 1786) and *Gli americani*, libretto by Schmidt (Napoli, 1802). Mayr's *Alonso e Cora,* which debuted at La Scala in 1803, was presented in a revised version as simply *Cora* at the San Carlo in 1815, shortly after the

triumphant return of Ferdinando after the Battle of Tolentino. An opera on the subject by Francesco Bianchi with a libretto by Giuseppe Maria Foppa (Venezia, 1786) had already introduced a character named Amazili, who is the friend/companion of Cora.

In the Schmidt/Tritto opera *Gli americani* the love affair is still between a Spaniard (named Gonzalvo) and an indigenous maiden, but now she is named Amazilia. The name comes from a completely different character in Marmontel's 1777 novel. In *Les Incas…* Amazili is an Inca maiden held captive by the cruel Spanish conquistadors who want to outdo Cortez in Mexico by conquering the Inca Empire in Peru; Amazili and her beloved Télasco provide the means by which the Spanish plan to get to Orozimbo, the Inca leader. (Ironically, Marmontel's novel is a scathing indictment of the cruelty of the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas.) In Schmidt/Tritto, however, Cabana is Amazilia's father and Orozimbo is her brother. "Cora" has assumed *comprimaria* duty as her "confidente." Gonzalvo is the son of Arias Davila, a Castilian general.

Writing for Pacini almost twenty-five years later, Schmidt changed some of the character names, moved the story north to Florida, placed the conflict between two native tribes and in a complete turnaround from the Marmontel original has the now benevolent Spanish conquistadors arrive in the nick of time to settle the dispute. By this time it is obvious that the story first staged in *La vergine del sole* has been strongly influenced by René de Chateaubriand's *Atala ou Les amours de deux sauvages dans le désert*, published in 1801 and set among indigenous tribes in Florida. Pacini, in fact, had composed an *Atala* (Padova, 1813), based on Chateaubriand's novella, which narrates the tragic love between two Native Americans, Chactas and Atala (Chactas' grandfather is named Miscou, a name borrowed for one of the tribal chieftans in *Amazilia*).

The story of *Amazilia* may have been "vecchio come Noè" (as Bellini wrote when refusing to set a libretto for *Cesare in Egitto,* a title already composed by Pacini), but it suited the conservative Bourbon monarchy of Naples and the Two Sicilies. Tritto's 1786 opera had premiered there when Ferdinando ruled and it was remade as *Gli americani* in 1803 not long after Ferdinando's return to Naples after the French had briefly forced him to flee to Palermo during the Parthenopean Republic. Napoleon's forces sent him scurrying off to Sicily more definitively in 1806 and when he returned



triumphantly in 1815 Mayr's *Cora,* based on the same story, celebrated the Bourbon restoration.

A decade later when Ferdinando died and his son Francesco I ascended the throne, Pacini and Schmidt's new opera—completely contrary to its ultimate source—celebrated Spanish mercy and enlightenment once again. It was a great success on the night of 6 July 1825, with a stellar cast which included Luigi Lablache (Cabana), Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle (Amazilia) and Giovanni David (Zadir). It was revived in Napoli the following year and played in Milano at La

Lablache as Cabana

Scala in November, 1826; Roma in 1828; Palermo in 1829; and Messina in 1832. In his *Memorie artistiche* Pacini tells us that the impresario Barbaja brought it to Vienna in 1826, and for that revival Pacini completed two additional numbers which lengthened the opera enough to justify a two act version.

Musically, the opera is in Pacini's earlier style, which, as he himself often admitted, was closely imitative of Rossini. There are 9 musical numbers in the one act version with two additional ones in the two act opera.

(1) A "cheerful sinfonia"[1] complete with crescendo.
(2) Introduzione, Coro e Cavatina for Cabana. The opening chorus and cantabile ("Tutto annunzia quella gloria") are pure Rossini; the cabaletta ("Paventi il perfido") is vigorous, catchy and already looks forward to early Verdi. We see almost right away why Pacini was called the "maestro delle cabalette."
(3) Zadir's Scena e Cavatina, "set very high for the voice" (Weatherson). The cantabile ("Come mai calmer le pene") is akin to one of Rossini's lesser essays in the genre, but once again the catchy cabaletta ("Io ti vidi, t'adorai") takes off; it was well known enough for Giuliani to compose a set

[1] Alexander Weatherson, "Pacini's *Amazilia*, A Transatlantic Choice," Donizetti Society Newsletter, 53 (May, 1991), 3-4.

of variations on the tune soon after its composition—and for the Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini to comment on his love for Giuliani's version.
(4) Duetto for Amazilia and Zadir ("Se non ti muove, o caro") in which the lovers lament their situation. The duet is very Rossinian in format with three parts. The middle andante section is the most attractive.
(5) Scena e coro "Vi regga, vi guida". The families worry about the coming battles.
(6) Terzetto ("Frena quel labbro audace"). This trio forms a kind of mid-opera finale in the one act version and it brings Act 1 to a close in the two act version. It closely hews to the Rossini formula: allegro-adagio-allegro with fairly formulaic music, although the adagio ("Oh ciel! veggio svanita") is attractive.
(6A) Duet ("Tu sprezzar gli affetti miei"). Act 2 in the two act version begins with a very fine duet for Cabana and Amazilia. Less Rossinian than some of the music, the bass line is dignified while Amazilia's vocal line is more florid. This seems to be Pacini composing in his own voice rather then Rossini's.
(6B) The second number which Pacini added for the two act version is an extended scene for Zadir with chorus. The aria itself ("Affanno spietato") is more free form than usual and very expressive while the cabaletta is up to Pacini's reputation in the genre.
(7) Now we are back to music found in both versions with the pretty women's chorus "Di pace la speme." An extended recitative between Orozimbo and his daughter Mila is uninteresting musically, but it sets up the rescue finale by the benevolent Spanish. Mila expresses horror that the loser of the Cabana/Zadir fight will go to the stake and says that things are different in Europe: "Oh how different are the European customs from ours! No prisoner would ever go to the stake [there]." Orozimbo backs her up with his own experience of having been vanquished by "strong Alonso" on the battlefield, and was not only spared his life, but retained his liberty.
(8) This is the big number for Amazilia with extended recitative, aria with chorus and slow cabaletta. It is certainly the best music in the opera. The aria ("Ah! non fia mai ver") is a lovely andante, full of passion and sorrow as she learns that Zadir has lost his battle with Cabana. The slow cabaletta ("Parmi vederlo") is unusual and in the Rossinian mold, but in the manner of the more mature scores like *Maometto Secondo* and its remake as *Le siège de Corinthe.* It is both highly lyrical and very florid in its development.
(9) The Finale begins with a lengthy orchestral introduction which seems to portend tragedy, as does Amazilia's cantabile "Dove sei, mio dolce

amore." She thinks she sees Zadir, but she is hallucinating. But then he does appear and in quick succession the lovers start to flee and are captured by Cabana only to confront the arrival of the Spanish under Alvaro. He takes Cabana prisoner and unites the lovers as quickly as you can say "vaudeville finale." The opera ends in another trio with *pertichini* for Alvaro and the chorus ("Mio core, ah! sì, ti sento"). The Spanish and Alvaro sing, "Tutto cangiò d'aspetto," and that was never truer. The music sounds as if Rossini himself wrote it for one of his comedies.

As important as *Amazilia* was in cementing Pacini's position with the Bourbon monarchs of Naples (where the opera house adjoins the palace), his next opera, *L'ultimo giorno di Pompeii,* not only accorded with Bourbon policies, but also provided the greatest triumph of the first part of his artistic career. The monarchy had been instrumental in the excavation of Pompeii starting with Carlo I and continuing under Ferdinando (and during the Napoleonic period). By 1825, Pompeii had become a tourist draw, as foreign visitors returned to Naples after Murat's defeat. The astonishing discoveries were used by the monarchy to project the cultural and historical importance of the Kingdom, and Pacini's new opera mined the interest in Pompeii with a spectacular production featuring the eruption of Vesuvius onstage.

Il Bel Canto Ritrovato festival, concentrating this year on Pacini as the "main composer," will revive *Amazilia* at the Teatro della Fortuna in Fano on 23 August, 2025, the two-hundredth anniversary of the opera's premiere.