DONIZETTI and romantic sensibility in Milan at the time of MARIA PADILLA

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The first performance of MARIA PADILLA took place on 26 December 1841, at La Scala, the scene the following 9 March 1842 of the first performance of Verdi's NABUCCO. If, perhaps arbitrarily, we take MARIA PADILLA as a representative example of one brand of Romanticism, essentially one focused upon the emotional conflicts of characters in highly charged plots, and NABUCCO, with its famous chorus, "Va pensiero sull'ali dorate", as exemplifying a different, but not unrelated, brand of Romanticism, one focused upon patriotism and unification, the political sentiments of the Risorgimento, we can explore some of the attitudes, the opinions, a whole symptomology if you will, that produced this climate of excitement that Carnival of 1841-42.

This exploration, necessarily partial and idiosyncratic, will survey a variety of evidence, from the 'pronunciamenti' of Milanese literary and social critics to the rhetoric of librettos, to test the direction of the breezes that so emphatically blew across Milan. It is important, however, to begin by acknowledging the central position played by the opera house in the social and cultural life of Milan at this period.

Writing in 1846, Carl Tenca (1813-1883) confesses in his "Delle condizioni dell' odierna letteratura in Italia" to his being troubled by the general public's "disdain" for literature as nothing more than "lifeless letters". This same general public, however, "throws itself enthusiastically into the world of the opera house, there to find readily accessible emotionalism in unrestrained effusions of grief and joy". Tenca accounts for the general public's preference for the opera house over reading as a result of recent changes in the character of the audience. "It is not easy," he laments, "to descend into this immense new vortex that the public of today comprises."

In the light of Tenca's dismay over "this immense new vortex" and its regrettable (at least in his opinion) fondness for "unrestrained effusions" as he reported in 1846, it is helpful to remember that back in 1816, the very year that Romanticism first became a topic for polemics among the Milanese 'litterati, the poet and critic Giovanni Berchet (1783-1851) had seen an increase in the audience for the arts as a sign of positive

health. Berchet begins his "Lettera semiseria di Crisostomo" by observing that:

> all men from Adam down to the shoemaker who cobbles beautiful boots have in their souls some propensity towards poetry.

This propensity he finds distributed in varying degrees among the various levels of society. He argues that the cultural health of Italy depends upon a movement away from the snobbish, inbred 'cenaclisme' of the literary coteries. Berchet claims that a poet ought to consider that

> his nation is not composed of only some two hundred persons who attend literary salons,

but that

> there are thousands and thousands of families who think, read, write, tremble, and feel all the emotions ...

Poetry addressed to the two hundred Berchet defines as classic, dismissing it as "poesia de'morti", while that addressed to the thousands of feeling families is Romantic, "poesia de' vivi".

That this expanding public existed in Milan may be substantiated by the extraordinary increase in theatrical activity there during the early years of the 19th century. When that century dawned there were but two active theaters in Milan: La Scala, dating from 1778, and the Canobbiana (later remodelled and still surviving as the Teatro Lirico), which was inaugurated in 1779. On 21 December 1800 a third theater joined the ranks when the Teatro Patriottico opened. Napoleon, the hero of the hour in the wake of his victory at Marengo, was much in evidence that evening. In 1805 the Patriottico was re-christened, becoming the Teatro dell'Accademia dei Filodrammatici, and it was there in 1834 that Verdi made his Milanese debut, conducting Haydn's "Creation".

In 1803 two more theaters opened their doors: the Santa Radegonda and the Carcano. The former opened with spoken drama, but lyric works soon appeared upon its 'cartelloni'. It was there in 1813 that 17 year old Giovanni Pacini made his debut as an operatic composer with his ANNETTA E LUCINDO. The Carcano, a larger house with 1500 seats, began its celebrated career with an opera entitled ZAIRA by Vincenzo Federici. It was there in 1813 that Paganini began his international career. And it was there during that extraordinary carnival season of 1830-31 that the first performance of ANNA BOLENA (26 December) and LA SONNAMBULA (6 March) were given.

In 1805 the Teatro Lentasio opened with a performance of Cimarosa's SPOSO SENZA MOGLIE. The follwoing year saw the establishment of the Teatro Fiando (or Gerolano), where one of the violinists in its orchestra, a certain Giovanni Ricordi,

would open a music publishing house two years later that would exert a great deal of influence on the course of Italian operatic history.

The next major theater to come along was the Teatro Re, getting its name not from a royal figure but from its impresario, Carlo Re. This theater opened on 18 December 1813 with the Milanese premiere of Rossini's TANCREDI. The Teatro Re offered not only operas but plays; it was there that what is generally regarded as the earliest Romantic drama in Italian, Silvio Pellico's "Francesca da Rimini" had its first performance on 18 August 1815. And it was at the Teatro Re in 1837 that the 'milanesi' first heard Donizetti's LUCIA, two years before it was given at La Scala.

This brief sketch of Milanese theatrical activity in the early part of the 19th century shows the growth of a public sufficiently numerous to patronize so many houses of entertainment. The increase, too, is an indication of the gradual urbanization of Italian society during these years. By 1840 these theaters, new and old, had come to provide a variety of arenas for the personalities, works and their producers, making Milan a place where, at least since the time of Bellini's IL PIRATA (La Scala, 27 October 1827), Romantic attitudes and values came increasingly to seem the norm rather than the exception.

Not everyone, obviously, shared Tenca's view that "this vast vortex" was distracted from higher concerns by the operatic offerings of the day. Carlo Cattaneo (1801-1869) in his "Notizie naturali e civili sulla Lombardia" (1840) argued that benefits accrued from attending the theater. He describes the changes in Milan since the end of the preceding century:

> The lonely, fearsome fortifications where condemned criminals used to be interred have become shady pathways; ill-smelling refuse has been removed from the streets... beggars, who used to display their ulcers and mutilations ostentatiously have been moved away from the entrances of churches. Gradually it has come about that one no longer sees bare feet or ragged clothing in the city. Theaters were opened, where families uncultivated for seven generations could familiarize themselves with and learn to enjoy the graces of civil life, of music and poetry. Musical genius reinforces and cultivates the judgement of our people, as when a single carnival season in one of our lesser theaters has given to the pleasure of all Europe LA SONNAMBULA and ANNA BOLENA ...

In this spirit of romantic idealism Cattaneo goes on to survey the accomplishments of the leading artists and scientists of the time. He concluded this passage by observing:

> Pupils exposed to such wisdom spread our through all the provinces, wisdom propagated among all classes, discover that fortunate excitation of

> things and ideas that surround us on all sides and beautify our imaginations.

Where Tenca looked with disapproval upon "readily accessible emotionalism", Cattaneo foresaw desirable results from "fortunate excitation". But if as Cattaneo thought that in the broad sense the opera house could "reinforce and cultivate the judgement of our people", there were those who saw it as a place where good taste could be corrupted through the capriciousness of the divas of the day.

In his critical writings Felice Romani was apt to take a dim view of Maria Malibran. In one of his skilful diatribes, he castigates the singer for substituting the final act of Vaccaj's GIULIETTA E ROMEO for the corresponding scene of Bellini's I CAPULETI E I MONTECCHI. Although Malibran had first adopted this substitution in Bologna in 1832, it was not until nearly four years later that the librettist (he had written the text for both Vaccaj's and Bellini's opera) took up his cudgels on this point, as Alexander Weatherson mentions in his "Lament for a Dead Nightingale, p160".

Nor did Malibran's untimely death make Romani's view of the diva any less dim. In a series of antitheses, he compares her to the writer, Isabella Albrizzi, who had died, prematurely like Malibran.

> ...both were profound students of the science of the Beautiful and of the arts that communicate human passions, but with differing means and ends. Albrizzi explored the beauties of nature and sought them in the works of Canova and of contemporary writers; Malibran did not see such beauties for what they were, and sought them in what was surprising and exaggerated. The former studied philosophy in the peace of the heart; the latter in storms of emotion. The former was classical in spirit; the latter totally romantic. [1.]

It should be clear that Romani's preference lay elsewhere than in the direction of the "totally romantic". In another context Romani seeks to establish some sort of middle ground for himself. "I do not like the intransigence of the ultra classicists, but neither do I like the extreme lack of restraint of the ultra romanticists." [2.]

Friedrich Lippmann seeks to distinguish Romani the librettist from Romani the critic. In spite of his remarks about romanticism in his critical writing, such as those quoted above, Romani, according to Lippmann, demonstrates in his librettos "the animated romantic spirit of the times"[3] Lippmann further claims that Romani's librettos "are different from those of Romanelli, Rossi and others only in the quality of his verses." While Lippmann is thinking of Romani principally as Bellini's librettist, it is more useful to the purpose of these remarks to remember that for Donizetti Romani wrote the libretto to

LUCREZIA BORGIA, a work that marks a shift in emphasis between the earlier romantic works and those of the coming vogue for high-Romanticism that becomes a dominant force by the end of the 1830s.

The libretto to LUCREZIA BORGIA marks what is substantially the end of Romani's career as a full-time librettist; certainly, it marks the end of his active collaborations with Donizetti. Although in time Romani came to take pride in his participation in what would prove one of the most durable Italian operas of the 19th century; his reaction when the opera was new was more akin to consternation, since the work - in spite of the success of its initial run at La Scala - created such an aura of scandal that no other Italian theater would touch it for another three years and then only when the plot had been "sanitized" by re-christening the characters. Not long after the launching of LUCREZIA, Romani assumed a new career as a legitimist journalist, editing the "Gazetta" of Turin, the official government-sponsored paper of Piedmont. Romani's feelings that the directions in which Romanticism on the stage seemed headed were antipathetic to his fastidious nature is only one reason why he largely gave up his career as a theater poet. He came increasingly to resent the pressures of turning out librettos in a rush of time; his 'amour-propre' found it difficult to accept that the poet's place in the hierarchy of opera-writing was no longer what it had been in the days of Busenello and Metastasio.

By 1841 Romani's view of the usual run of opera composition had turned acerbic.

> There will always be recriminations between librettist and composers until the day when composers are persuaded that poets need just as much time, if not more, to do their work well. I am talking of good poets and not those dirtiers of pages who strew them about like weeds and who have become the disgrace of Italy.[4]

Earlier in this letter to Donizetti, Romani had spoken of his willingness to consider writing a text for Donizetti, but as had happened repeatedly since the time of LUCREZIA BORGIA, there was no libretto forthcoming.

One of the most indicative traits of the increased level of Romanticism to be found in LUCREZIA BORGIA is that the heroine becomes to a great extent the active agent in the plot. One of the clearest statements Donizetti made about active heroines is to be found in a letter of his written in January 1842 (just the period when MARIA PADILLA was having its initial performances at La Scala), in which he speaks of his hopes for salvaging LE DUC D'ALBE.

> I, too, am of the opinion that there are some changes to make in LE DUC D'ALBE: the comspiracy less dominant, the love interest warmer. All told I expect it would be very effective. Above all I have

> cherished the role of the heroine, it is possibly a new role in the theater, an active role, where almost always the heroine is passive. Here she is young, enthusiastic, loving, a Joan of Arc...[5]

Donizetti's remarks about this heroine Helene are significant because his earlier active heroines were not young and their loving was frequently embittered by vengefulness. Antonia in BELISARIO, Maria de'Rudenz, Elisabetta in ROBERTO DEVEREUX are cases in point.

The earliest of Donizetti's great active heroines is Lucrezia. Romani's libretto is reasonable faithful to Hugo's prose drama, but his awareness that the Milanese censors would not tolerate any allusion to an incestuous relationship caused him to suppress the identity of Gennaro's father (in Hugo's play he is the son of Lucrezia and her half-brother Giovanni). Nor did Romani retain the six coffins on stage for the final scene, one of the 'coups-de-theâtre' of the original Paris production of Hugo's play. Donizetti had pleaded insistently for the six coffins as he hoped (in the words of Romani's widow) "to awaken a new emotional effect with his music which would set the public to shuddering ...." [6] If Donizetti's wish for coffins was denied in LUCREZIA, ten years later he made up for their omission with the funeral cortege of Act 3 of DOM SEBASTIEN with its massive catafalque.

The high-Romantic traits of LUCREZIA reach their climax in the final scene, where in a moving aria the mother tries to persuade her son to drink an antidote to the poison accidentally administered to him. The heightened tensions here drastically modify the character of the text. If, as Lippmann claims, it is the quality of Romani's individual verses that set Romani above his contemporaries, rather than his choice of subjects, then it seems here that the author of such famous phrases as "Son geloso del zeffieretto" and "Ah, bello, a me ritorna" has undergone a striking modification when we encounter the jagged caesuras of

> Bevi, bevi, il rio veleno,
> Ah! t'affretta, deh! t'affretta a prevenir.
> Il tempo vola, deh! cedi, cedi,
> Deh, t'affretta il veleno a prevenir!

This aria may be taken as an illustration of Tenca's phrase "the unrestrained effusion". Here it is not the choppy lines of the text, but the groundswell of emotion supplied by the impetuous arch of the melody that makes Lucrezia's "M'odi, ah m'odi" a moving experience.

It was the second "edition" of LUCREZIA BORGIA at La Scala, a series of 41 performances that began on 11 January 1840, that really launched the work on its hugely successful career. If the climate of carnival 1833-34 when LUCREZIA first appeared was in some ways not quite ready for that opera, the warming trend of high-Romanticism, in six years, turned what had been a scandalous success into a wholehearted triumph. Although

Donzetti had left Italy for Paris in the fall of 1838 - and would remain there, except for a brief visit to Milan in the summer of 1840, until his return in the fall of 1841 for MARIA PADILLA - his absence in the pursuit of greater celebrity served to make his operas, particularly the high-Romantic ones, the focal point of the repertory at this period.

Although LUCIA had been introduced to Milan at the Teatro Re in 1837, it was not until its introduction at La Scala on 1 April 1839 that the opera achieved a triumphant success in Milan. Interestingly enough, it was not the Lucia (Adelaide Kemble), but the Edgardo of Napoleone Moriani that aroused the highest degree of 'fanatismo' at the opening performance. The Milanese correspondent for "Teatri, arti e letteratura"describes the tenor in this vein:

> Now what is there to say about the final scene as sung by Moriani? To depict truly the sensation, the effect, the universal enthusiasm that he aroused from the audience is impossible because the suavity of his singing and the appropriateness of his acting contributed equally to stirring even the coldest souls to frenzy. [7]

The Italian encyclopedia "Spettacolo"in its article on Moriani quotes, without identifying him, another critic of the period who gives a graphic description of the tenor's carryings-on in the tomb scene, his convulsive struggles and gaspings. If to our late-20th century sensibilities such a style of acting seems overdone and melodramatic in the extreme, to the public of 140 years ago it apparently seemed moving and true, for, when the critics of "Teatri", quoted above, sought a noun to characterize Moriani's acting he chose "appropriateness". In some quarters there has grown up the mistaken impression that these operas of the bel canto period were merely concerts in costume, but the critical reports and the illustrations of the period make frequent reference to the intensity of the acting in these melodramas.

If LUCIA - with its passive heroine, and PIA DE'TOLOMEI, introduced at the end of the Spring season of 1839 to give Moriani a chance to enact another death scene - do not accord with our arbitrary criterion of the active-heroine as the tell-tale symptom of high-Romanticism, certainly these two operas manifest many traits of sentimental Romanticism. On 21 September 1839, the Milanese 'prima' of ROBERTO DEVEREUX, which would enjoy a run of 38 performances that autumn, brought a high-Romantic work to wide favour.

The librettist for ROBERTO DEVEREUX was Cammarano, who provided Donizetti with some of his most characteristic high-Romantic heroines. Cammarano possessed two attributes that made him the outstanding purveyor of this sort of opera text. Above and beyond his skill at defining self-apparent situations on stage, those in which the conflict is clear and seems inevitable, he had the knack of giving his characters an appropriate sense of

personality (if not, perhaps, always a marked degree of individuality). His second attribute was his ability to encapsulate a whole situation in a single vivid line that contains some memorable hyperbole. Elisabetta in ROBERTO DEVEREUX is, in my opinion, Cammarano's finest representative of the active heroine, for the conflict between her jealous pride and her eagerness to love and be loved in return creates a figure that is, at the same time, sympathetic and awesome. None of the other operatic representations of Queen Elizabeth I possess the majesty and complexity of this one.

Cammarano capitalizes on the lack of restraint that Romani claimed not to like in "ultra romanticists". And it is this lack of restraint, this sense of emotion propelled beyond rational limits, that animates Cammarano's hyperboles. In Act 2 of ROBERTO DEVEREUX, when Nottingham, still unaware of the relationship between his wife Sara and Roberto, pleads for his friend's life with the adamant queen, she silences Nottingham with a single rhetorical flourish: "In questo core è scolta. La sua condanna!" The hyperbole contained in the verb, which comes from 'scolpire', to carve, exactly conveys the queen's granitic resolve at this moment.

An even more impressive example of Cammarano's capitalizing upon 'sfrenatezze' (to adapt Romani's word for lack of restraint) occurs in the lines with which Elisabetta starts the stretta of the finale to Act 2. Roberto's involvement with Sara has been exposed, and the furious Elisabetta has seen her worst suspicions apparently confirmed. As an example of the idiom of high-Romanticism, I find these lines irresistible:

> Va, la morte sul capo ti pende,
> Sul tuo nome l'infamia discende...
> Tal sepolcro t'appresta il mio sdegno,
> Che non fia chi pianto lo scaldi;
> Con la polve di vili ribaldi
> La tua polve confusa ne andra!

(Death hangs over your head; dishonor descends over your name! My wrath readies a tomb for you that no amount of grief may warm! Your dust shall be inextricably mixed with the dust of vile wretches!)

If we turn for a moment to another libretto that Cammarano wrote for Donizetti, we shall find in it what may well epitomize the whole 'raison-d'être' of high-Romantic melodrama. The passage occurs in the final scene, when Maria de Rudenz, another active heroine, stabbed, but not quite fatally yet, by Corrado, confronts her almost-murderer and reports that she has slain Matilde, Corrado's fiancee. Dying in earnest now, she justifies herself in these terms:

> Non ha legge, nè confine
> Oltraggiato, immenso amor.
> Quest'ingrato, l'onor mio
> Ricovrì di negro velo...

Ei m'ha tolta vita... e cielo...
Quest'ingrato... io l'amo ancor!

(Immense love scorned knows neither laws nor limits. This ingrate stained my honor. He has robbed me of life... of heaven... This ingrate... I love him still!)

MARIA DE RUDENZ, as the details from the plot may suggest, may stand as the quintessential high-Romantic opera. When it was first given at Venice in 1838, it survived only for two performances. The libretto came in for a good deal of criticism:

> As to the libretto, it is a lamentable example of the new school of drama. If one seeks for new effects, one is rewarded with absurdity; if one seeks for tender compassion, for pitiful alteration of fortune, crowned with a happy denouement, one finds instead the most painful sentiments and a horrible catastrophe. Suffice to say that of the five principal characters, three die, and one of them twice. That is, Maria de Rudenz herself emerges half-dead, half-alive from her tomb to terrify the bystanders and to kill, at her leisure, her rival... [9]

It is easy enough to see which quarter of the compass this critic comes from, with his nostalgic talk of "tender compassion, pitiful alteration of fortune, crowned by a happy denouement." He prefers works with what by then were old-fashioned plots, something in the order of OTTO MESI IN DUE ORE. The initial failure of MARIA DE RUDENZ at the Fenice did not, as we know, spell the end of that opera; after a hiatus of two years it began to be performed and was received with respect in a number of Italian theaters. MARIA DE RUDENZ was a work that appeared a few years ahead of its time, but that it was accepted in due course confirms the existence of an audience for these high-Romantic works.

To turn, at last, to MARIA PADILLA, which had its prima at La Scala some three months before NABUCCO, the past few years have seen the gradual re-emergence of this work from its eclipse by Verdi's great success, and now it can be seen as one of the finest of Donizetti's high-Romantic operas. Donizetti informed his brother-in-law Vasselli that although his name did not appear upon the libretto, he was, in fact, its co-author [9]. The libretto, officially credited to Gaetano Rossi, shows the influence of Donizetti's exposure to Paris, not merely in its choice of subject - from a homonymous play by Ancelot - but in the conflict between emotion and reason, and, particularly, in the way conflicting emotions are treated simultaneously rather than seriatim, the latter the case, as Lippmann interestingly points out, with NORMA [10]. Unlike the admittedly over-drawn figure of Maria de Rudenz, fascinating epitome that she is, Maria Padilla seems much more recognizably human, her internal conflict no less tragic. (The switch to a happy ending was

insisted upon by the censors and was no part of Donizetti's original intention for the plot.)

The role of Maria Padilla was the occasion for the Milanese debut of soprano Sofia Lowe, today best remembered as the first Elvira in ERNANI. Here is the reaction of one critic to her debut as Maria, and it is significant, I believe, that the critic devotes more space to her acting than to her singing:

> La Lowe was a sufficiently happy choice. This lady has much intelligence, great facility in overcoming the most challenging difficulties of singing and possesses an extensive range. Generous with gestures, with movement, and with a mobile countenance, she labors to produce an impression with her acting, but I believe she would accomplish her purpose better if she reflected that even in grief and in moments of desperation the feminine face and form should avoid expressions and poses that strike others as displeasing. [11]

The high point of MARIA PADILLA and one of the finest scenes Donizetti ever composed is that of the Act 3 duet for Maria and her father Don Ruiz, a scene in which our sympathies are actively engaged by both characters. Distressed by his deranged condition, Maria seeks to comfort him, but at the same time remorseful because she feels partly responsible for his state. She tries to make him aware that Don Pedro has promised to legitimize her position and make her queen. The mention of the king's name fills Don Ruiz with an intolerable sense of shame, at the same time rousing him to impotent fury. The failure to communicate of these two characters, whose underlying affection is palpable but short-circuited by circumstance, can move an audience to tears. The critics of the first performance were quick to recognize the quality of this passage:

> This duet is one of the most stupendous musical compositions of the modern Italian school. Passion, melancholy and desperation are depicted therein with vigorous and powerful colors. It is one of the most deeply felt and most happily expressed scenes of all opera. Dementia that struggles against anguish, the curse that vainly attempted to repulse forgiveness, the tears and remorse, rendered agonizing because of the madness of the aged and dishonored father, all this has found overwhelming accents in the potent imagination of Donizetti. [12]

In this duet the romantic sentiment of the time, as communicated by the composer and as accepted by his volatile public, finds a touchstone. Three months later, the high-Romantic afflatus would find a new impetus in Verdi's NABUCCO. The character of Abigaille is clearly in the tradition of the active, motivating heroines, but now the personal drama becomes eclipsed at crucial points by public, political concerns. If high-Romantic

melodrama helped water the soil for Risorgimento sensibility, the balance of the decade of the 1840s would become increasingly oriented in the direction indicated by NABUCCO.



'Don Ruiz burns Maria Padilla's precious avowal of marriage' - a scene, not from Donizetti's opera, but from the play by François Ancelot (Paris 1838) on which the opera is based. In the latter, Don Ruiz merely tears and tramples on the document.

NOTES

1. "Teatri, arti e letteratura"(Bologna) of 10 November 1836.
2. Branca, "Felice Romani, Critica letteraria" 2 vols (Torino-Firenze-Roma, 1883), article no. 216. (Quoted in Adamo & Lippmann, "Bellini" (Torino, 1981)p.358
3. Adamo & Lippmann, loc cit.
4. Z. A31 (Romani to Donizetti), p.890.
5. S.D.1, 88 (Donizetti to Accursi), pp.79-80.
6. Branca, "Felice Romani ed i piu riputati maestri di musica del suo tempo" (Torino-Firenze-Roma, 1882)
7. "Teatri, arti e letteratura" (Bologna) of 18 April 1839.
8. "Teatri, arti e letteratura" (Bologna) of 15 February 1838.
9. Z. 373 (Donizetti to Toto), dated 29 September 1841, p.554.
10. Adamo & Lippmann, op cit.,pp.335-37 & 412-14.
11. "Teatri, arti e letteratura" (Bologna) of 13 January 1842.
12. Idem.