A biography of Giuditta Pasta

Dr. Paul Micio

***Giuditta Pasta – A Life on the Lyric Stage* by Kenneth Stern, Operaphile Press, 2011, 584 pages, hardcover.**

After such important biographies as those on Maria Malibran[1] Adolphe Nourrit[2], Luigi Lablache[3] and Giovanni Battista Rubini[4], English-speaking audiences can now enjoy the first in-depth study of Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865), one of the greatest operatic artists of the nineteenth century. Dr. Kenneth Stern devoted years of research to writing this biography and his labours have paid off handsomely for it is not only a work of fine scholarship but it is also beautifully written and eminently readable. Most admirable perhaps is that doing such in-depth research allowed him to make a *tabula rasa* of oft-repeated misconceptions or outright fabrications concerning the diva. Two such myths that he debunks are that Pasta was of Jewish origin and that, when preparing to create the role of Norma, she asked Bellini to change the *Casta diva* because she found it ill suited to her voice.

The author seems to have read every extant review of each one of Pasta's many performances that took place over more than two decades in several countries. He is an unbiased biographer and when he quotes contemporary criticisms, he cites both the negative as well as the overwhelmingly positive reviews she received. He also has the intelligence to know when not to bore the reader with too many of these critical citations, stating for example, "Her performances did not fail expectation; she received laudatory reviews, but as they contribute nothing new, quotation would be redundant."

The book is filled with many contemporary portraits and caricatures of the great diva in her various roles and it is unfortunate that at least a few of these could not have been reproduced in colour, although publication costs are always a consideration that all authors must face. For those who can read a score, there are also musical examples that complement the text. Another plus to Stern's book is that he gives a concise, one-paragraph plot summary of the operas in which Pasta sang. This is helpful even to very knowledgeable opera aficionados as many works are long forgotten and no longer performed.

Like her frequent colleague and devoted friend Rubini, Pasta was an indefatigable worker and looking at her schedule today gives one pause. Here is just one example that Stern gives of her grueling schedule at the height of her career (this example also shows what large sums of money she must have earned): "In just over three months (2 May - 3 August 1833) she scheduled to

appear in opera thirty-seven times in seven roles, and participate in forty-three concerts – and that excluded rehearsals, often held on the day of performance!" It is also known that she sometimes scheduled three concerts in the same day. Her greatness was such that Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Mercadante and Pacini, among others, all composed or adjusted existing works for her and a total of twenty operas were written expressly for her. These original operas were obviously custom tailored to her voice and include: *Il viaggio a Reims*, *Beatrice di Tenda*, *La sonnambula*, *Norma*, *Anna Bolena* and *Ugo, Conte di Parigi*. Interestingly, although Pasta spoke French, she never sang any French roles. She worked closely with both Bellini and Donizetti but held the genius of Bellini in higher esteem than that of the Bergamasc master. When she travelled, she carried portraits of both Bellini and Rossini.

With her mounting fame and fortune, Pasta purchased the Villa Roda[5] on Lake Como in 1827 and, at the end of 1830, she received Donizetti for several weeks so that he could work on *Anna Bolena* with her. Although there is no evidence to show that Pasta interfered with the composition of the *Casta diva*, it seems that she may have had some say say in the composition of Donizetti's breakthrough opera. According to Stern. "The reverential and accommodating composer tailored the role to her specifications, changing anything that did not suit or please her. He could not help but benefit from her acute sense of drama, and her experience and knowledge of what would work for her on stage." We should perhaps put in a cautionary word here. That Donizetti tailored the music to Pasta's voice cannot be doubted. But Donizetti already had more than 30 operas behind him and was composing to a set libretto by Felice Romani and so just how "reverential and accommodating" he was and to what extent any singer might have influenced such a musical and theatrical genius should be considered with prudence. Whatever the case, the work done on *Anna Bolena* at the Villa Roda paid off for, after the *prima assoluta* in Milan on December 26, Donizetti wrote to his wife, "Success, triumph, delirium, it seemed that the public had gone insane, everyone says they cannot remember ever being at such a triumph. I was so happy that I started to cry...[6]"

Pasta was not only a great singer but, like Callas, was also one of the great *tragédiennes* of the lyric stage (she was described by one observer as "this unrivaled classical actress"). She sang repeatedly and extensively in England where she was better paid than on the Continent but her career was destined to be international and she would eventually sing in Italy, France, England, Austria, Germany, Poland, and Russia. The English, however, with their colder temperament, were not always understanding of the Italian style – or even of things French for that matter – and this cultural divide sometimes proved trying. Pasta was not originally welcomed warmly either by the administration of the King's Theatre or by the London critics. In a letter from Giuseppe Scappa, her

early teacher, he blamed this on "English ignorance, always incapable of appreciating a true artist." Rubini faced this same cultural difference but the lack of comprehension of the Italian style went beyond the singers: when Pasta sang *Anna Bolena* in 1831, *The Harmonicon* wrote vituperatively: "The overture is far below criticism ... To listen to such trash [*sic*] is being an accomplice in treason against good music." Except for Anna's final scene, the critic went on to say that "we cannot recollect one note ... that made the slightest impression on us ... the whole is devoid of originality and vigour ... and nothing but the good acting of Madame Pasta saved it from the fate from which even her admirable histrionic powers cannot long rescue it.[7]" When she sang the role again in London two years later (with no less of a cast at her side than Joséphine de Méric, Rubini and Tamburini), the work still drew mixed reviews from the critics who were not fully capable of appreciating Donizetti's gifts. Bellini was also not immune to certain English critics' vitriolic attacks, as in this review from *The Harmonicon*, after the London staging of *I Capuleti et i Montecchi*: "We will only say of this wretched work, that it is inferior even to *Norma*. Anything more would be superfluous, and a wanton waste of ink more valuable than Bellini's opera.[8]"

Stern's research affords us glimpses into the heady world of music and opera of the *bel canto* period. In April 1833, Giuditta and her husband, Giuseppe, travelled to London with Bellini for the season and they attended a performance of *La cenerentola*. Among the other extremely distinguished guests in the audience figured Malibran, Rubini, Mendelssohn, Paganini, Hummel and Vaccaj.

Like every other vocal artist past or present, no singer is completely flawless and as part of Kenneth Stern's honest appraisal of his subject, he discusses the fact that Pasta sometimes had a pitch problem. This was often grumbled about in the press and was something that became more acute as the years passed. Here is one such example from the French press of 1831: "Mme Pasta sings with infinite art and ravishing expression; the effect she produces is a marvel; it is necessary to possess all the resources of art to subdue to such a degree an audience with a voice sometimes stubborn, with a timbre often less than pleasing, which tends to flatten continually, and descends below the pitch more than once and stays there despite the entreaties of the orchestra.[9]"

It should be noted that the pitch employed in London was higher than that used on the Continent and, as Stern explains, "the lady did not have a perfect ear, it often took her a while to adjust." But there were many other qualities that made people overlook this shortcoming, principal among which was her great acting ability that allowed her to communicate emotion and to move her audience. As for her singing technique, "trilling up and down scales became a favorite embellishment, once the soprano had mastered the trill. Donizetti memorialised this in the final scene from *Anna Bolena*, with two sets of ascending scales,

trilled on semitones." Of her many memorable performances, one of the most interesting occurred on July 3, 1828 when she sang the second act of *Semiramide* with the great castrato, Velluti, who portrayed Arsace. He was 48 years old at the time and this is the only occasion when these two great artists appeared together in opera. That same year, Pasta would perform a most unusual musical feat. She was renowned in the role of Desdemona, in Rossini's *Otello*, but she now undertook to sing the title role of the Moor (opposite Henriette Sontag's Desdemona). It is interesting to note that Rubini also sang both the title role of Otello as well as the very high florid part of Rodrigo (making use of his falsetto voice of which he was a master). The famous thespian, Sarah Siddons, had often performed the role of Othello in Shakespeare's drama and Pasta had often sung trouser roles –Tancredi (Rossini), Enrico (Mayr), Romeo (Bellini), to name just some of these roles – but the difference was that those pants parts were originally conceived to be sung by a woman. While certain critics expressed reservations or even hostility about such an undertaking, Pasta caused a sensation with the public. The *Morning Herald* effused: "The effect on the house was electric, and acknowledged by thunders of applause.[10]"

Fortunately for the history of opera, there are many extant letters written by Pasta – more than three thousand of them – and the author puts these to good use throughout the book. He speaks often of what unusually high fees she commanded and it is of more than passing interest to note that, in the early 1830s, she was being paid twice as much as Rubini and *four times* as much as the tenor Domenico Donzelli. One only regrets that, having done such exemplary research, Stern does not speak about how banking was done and how Pasta managed to transfer the large sums of money she earned internationally, both on the stage and in her innumerable private concerts. She was often given jewelry in lieu of cash payments when she sang at private concerts for royalty or the aristocracy, and this tradition was especially prevalent when she went to Russia at the end of her career after she had retired from the stage. She sang her last full opera on August 24, 1841 when she was 44 and retired definitively after her last concert, at Covent Garden, in July of 1850, at the age of 53. She died fifteen years later, in 1865, at her beloved Villa Roda, aged 68, having sung just that number of roles during her long and illustrious career.

The author provides an index and a bibliography as well as useful appendices. The copious footnotes are extremely welcome and the author has had the good sense to place these at the bottom of the page for easy reference saving one from having to flip back and forth to notes at the end of the chapter as is too often done. It is only regrettable that the list of roles Pasta sang *by composer* does not have its own separate category as it is buried behind the chronological list of the roles she sang and thus not easily found. Another small quibble is that the many illustrations are not numbered and when the author refers to them, they are

difficult to locate as they are often pages away and even located in preceding or subsequent chapters. However these few observations in no way detract from the high quality of this work which will enrich the knowledge of any opera lover.

Biography, as a literary genre, is not the easiest of formats as it can become a litany of so many dates and places, but Kenneth Stern has succeeded in creating a rich portrayal of the *bel canto* period and, at the same time, provides a clear picture of his subject that allows us to come closer to Giuditta Pasta, both as a person and as an artist. In his introduction, he writes "All fictionalization, dramatization and the usual anecdotal approach to biography have been deliberately avoided. I much prefer to let the personalities involved 'speak' for themselves." Thanks to his extensive research, Stern has been able to accomplish his goal, as in this passage that describes Pasta's nature that he gleaned from Adelaide Kemble's recollections: "She was a woman of genius, and of singular simplicity and singleness of character, working from the strongest conviction, and from the feeling of a truth which lay deep down at the very roots of her being.[11]"

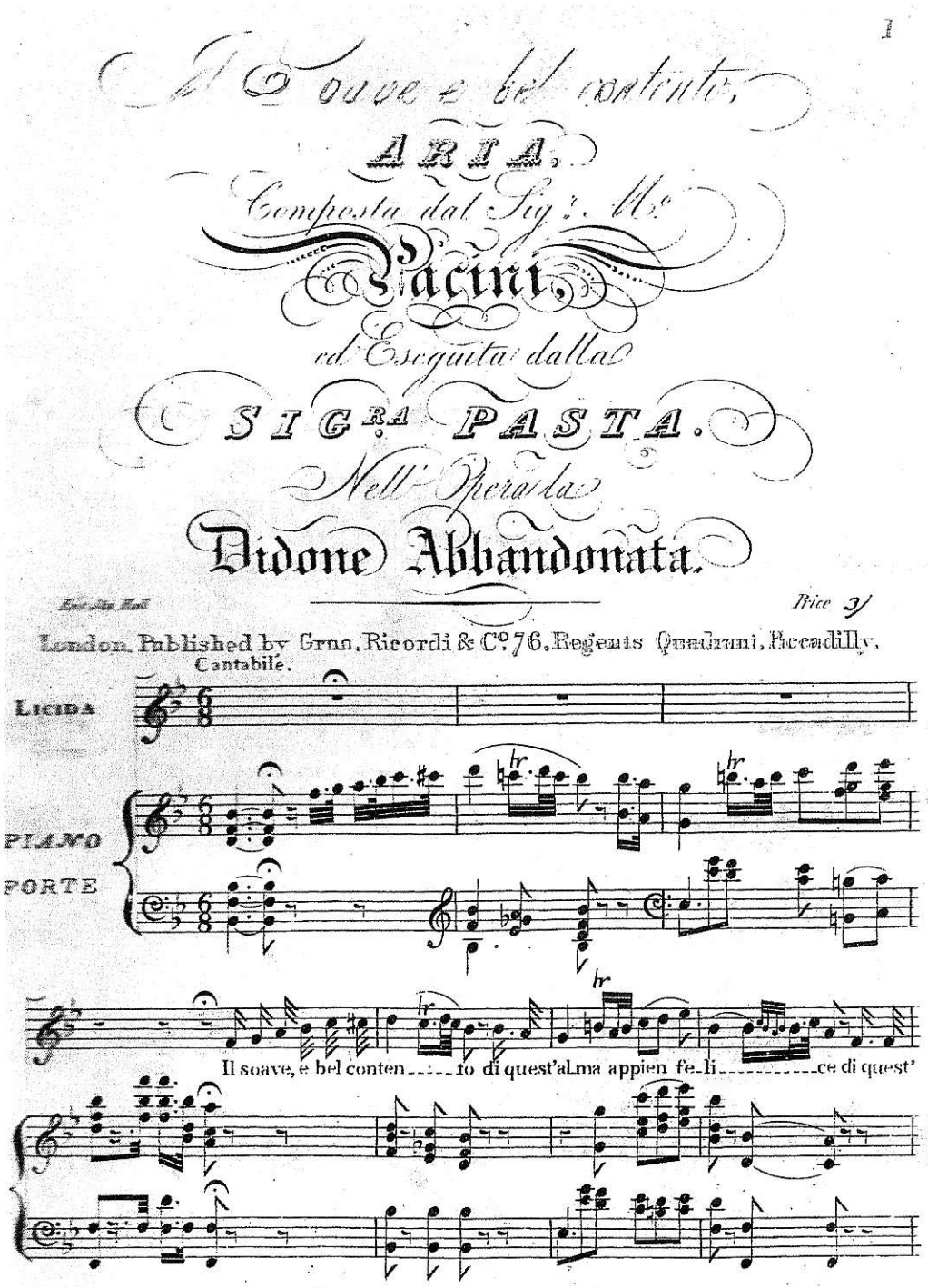
Another of Pasta's qualities was her generosity during her long career and she often donated the proceeds of performances or concerts to help others. When she was not on the road working, she retired to the Villa Roda where she lived simply and loved to garden (Pasta: "It would be so easy for me to relinquish the throne and scepter for a hoe[12]"). After the 1829 Milan season, Pasta participated in a performance of *Tancredi* at the Teatro Sociale in Como opposite Gilbert Duprez (who had not yet belted out his first high C from the chest). When both she and the impresario donated their services to benefit the poor, the elation was such that the gratitude of the people continued throughout the following day, both at her villa and on the lake where gondolas passed by with the names of her favorite arias. I think it would be fitting to conclude with a description of that event from Auguste Thurner's *Les Reines du chant* which says much about Giuditta Pasta, the euphoria that she generated and how beloved an artist she was:

In the evening, each gondola became illuminated, and this was, I assure you, a magnificent and touching spectacle of this ardent demonstration of an entire population in favor of an artist. The lights, the fireworks reflecting on the water, the star-filled sky, the acclamations neither for a prince or potentate, but a lady, great for her heart and great for her talent; the harmonies of an orchestra reverberated by the echoes, this perfumed atmosphere of intoxicating feeling, all that formed a tableau that I never will forget.[13]

[1] Howard Bushnell, *Maria Malibran*, Penn State, 1979 ; April Fitzlyon, *Maria Malibran: Diva of the Romantic Age*, Souvenir Press, 1987.

[2] Henry Pleasants, *The Great Tenor Tragedy – The Last Days of Adolphe Nourrit as Told (mostly) by Himself*, Amadeus Press, 1995.
[3] Clarissa Lablache Cheer, *The Great Lablache - Nineteenth Century Operatic Superstar*, Xlibris, 2009.
[4] Dan H. Marek, *Giovanni Battista Rubini and the Bel Canto Tenors*, Scarecrow Press, 2013.
[5] The Villa Roda was sold by Giuditta Pasta's descendants in 1904 and then immediately demolished to make way for a newer building.
[6] Gaetano Donizetti, letter from December 1830, cited in Stern, *Giuditta Pasta*, p. 303.
[7] *The Harmonicon*, 1831, p. 206, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 322.
[8] *The Harmonicon*, 1833, p. 183, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 384.
[9] Castil-Blaze, in the *Journal des débats*, October 28, 1831, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 331.
[10] The *Morning Herald*, May 30, 1828, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 266.
[11] Adelaide Kemble, *Past Hours*, London, 1880, 2 vol., I: 210-216, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 434.
[12] Giuditta Pasta to her mother, Rachele Negri, letter of October 14-15, 1831, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 330.
[13] Auguste Thurner, *Les Reines du chant*, Paris, 1883, p. 121, in Stern, *ibid.*, p. 286.





Frequent palpitation:

Rivalry and its shaky consequences

Alexander Weatherson

Niobe (1826) is remembered, if at all, far more for its struggle between two legendary throats than for its near-fabulous score. Giovanni Pacini's exotic *dramma eroico-mitologico* hit the boards in Naples - if that is a suitable way to describe its stellar first appearance - at the heart of the *pause* that lay between the departure of Rossini and his de facto heirs Donizetti and Bellini. The principal actors in the standoff being Giuditta Pasta and Giovanni Battista Rubini - two shooting stars in the operatic firmament to be seen and heard on the same horizon - if not quite *together* - at least in full flight in the glamorous lyrical package devised for the southern metropolis by the indefatigable *catanese* composer.

With its roles tailored to top voices[1] *Niobe* set out to exploit the cut-throat rivalries of the Gods as related by Homer - thus propelling Pacini momentarily one step ahead of his earthly competitors. But even if the shrewd maestro would have known that rivalry could pay dividends it seems improbable he could have foreseen that his trademark cabaletta *I tuoi frequenti palpiti* would feature for so long and so effortlessly in the operatic arena. Envy and conflict may have bestowed celestial kudos upon *Niobe* but it was down-to-earth vocal rat-racing that won it a constantly recurring presence on the stages of Europe.

The precedent was long-standing and in no way bestowed by heaven. Two earlier sacred throats had won applause by borrowing each other's bravura moments and both these celebrities had given lessons to Pasta (in 1815). At the turn of the century the incredible cross-dressing primadonna assoluta Angelica Catalani made a point of shamelessly expropriating the best pieces written for her co-stars - male or female - and so in fact did her famous vis-à-vis, the supreme sopranista castrato Luigi Marchesi.[2]

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[1] *Niobe*, dramma eroico-mitologico in due atti. Libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola. Sources: 1) *Homer Iliade XXIV*. 2) Gaetano Gioja *Niobe o sia La vendetta di Latone* (ballo spettacolo o pantomimico in sei atti) Florence 1825. 1st Performance: Real Teatro di San Carlo, Naples 19 November 1826. Cast: *Luigi Lablache* (Anfione), *Giuditta Pasta* (Niobe), *Almerinda Manzocchi* (Learco), *Carolina Ungher* (Asteria), *Giovan Battista Rubini* (Licida), *Antonio Orlandini* (Arcandro), *Gaetano Chizzola* (Adrasto), *Eloisa Manzocchi* (Doride), *Giacomo Fortini* (Demetrio), *Michele Benedetti* (Vulcano), *"N.N"* (Diana)
Autograph I-Nc MS I-PEA Mr F-Pn (fragments)

[2] This lyrical toing-and-froing began with *La Lodoïska* by Simon Mayr (at Venice in 1797) and was repeated in *Lauso e Lidia* by the same composer in the same city in 1798

Can anyone then be surprised that Pasta should hoist the same flag - just one small step towards the transgender casting of our day. Once *Niobe* was launched the diva of the title-role did not hesitate to appropriate the wildly applauded *aria con cabaletta* written expressly for the asteroid with the stratospheric voice[3] boldly interpolating his purloined trophy into any opera needing a fillip, whatever the plot, whatever the composer, and whatever its context the author had clearly intended. [4]

But was it a comparable performance? It was not. To begin with she did not sing it in the same key but fell abjectly upon the downwards transposition then mandatory for Rubini's published music. The treetops were all lopped.

According to an anonymous writer, in later life she gave the following egocentric account of her performance of this expropriated aria (without mention of Rubini naturally enough):

> *"I found in Niobe an aria, 'Il soave e bel contento' which suited my voice in every respect, but which I had hitherto been obliged to omit as a long trill opens the quick movement. I simply told the conductor of the orchestra to suspend the instruments as I wished to introduce a long cadenza. When I came to the passage in question I stood in the middle of the stage, and commenced a shake in a low key, gradually increasing in power, finally diminishing, and ending in a cadenza which perfectly linked it to the aria. For a minute or two there was a dead silence, then the musicians laid down their instruments, while both orchestra and public applauded me to the echo."*[5]

She does not say which opera was blessed by this bizarre spectacle and there is no sign of any such circus antics in the printed vocal score, maybe she felt obliged to omit a long trill but Pacini felt obliged to do the same thing - the aria is full of trills and runs but nothing

[3] Rubini, impolitely no doubt, did not return the compliment, he never sang any of *her* music but relentlessly inserted his fabulous aria into as many operas as possible for the next fifteen years, playing havoc with quite as many plots as Pasta but invariably singing it in the correct key. His interpolation of the aria into *La straniera* in 1832 would certainly have given Bellini palpitations

[4] This began promptly as witnessed by the printed vocal score accompanying this text when it was inserted into Mercadante's *Didone abbandonata* where not by any stretch of imagination could it be deemed appropriate - only exceeding this triumphal feat when she sang *Il soave e bel contento* as the *aria di sortita* for Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* at the Kärntnerthortheater in Vienna in 1830. Bellini would be a permanent target:: Pacini's Asteria in *Niobe* - Carolina Ungher - used Rubini's cabaletta to replace "Ah bello a me ritorna" in *Norma* at Rome in 1835 but Pasta's selfie had already gone viral when an *Il pirata*, in Paris in 1832, starring her formidable antagonist Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, emerged updated with a jaunty *I tuoi frequenti palpiti* for the tragically bereft Imogene, not merely to ensure a higher percentage of applause but to upstage her Italian rival

[5] Quoted in part online in"Music of Yesterday"

suggesting such a shaky *messa di voce* all too reminiscent of the comic exercises made notorious by Angelica Catalani in Mayr's ill-treated farsa *Che originali.*[6]

Apart from a lower transposition throughout, in her version Pasta choses a downward cast to the melody, where Rubini goes up, she goes down, as well as - oddly enough in view of her strange tastes in trilling - often placing trills on notes where there are none in the composer's autograph score, lengthening the fioriture, making the same repetitions but omitting some of the text. In addition to including a hugely extended orchestral bridge passage before the reprise of the cabaletta the reprise itself takes an even lower option for the entire vocal line so that exaggerated jumps to *acuti* can be introduced Callas-wise - pruning notes in bursts so as to be able to deliver them machine-gun fashion, the whole eventually ascending to a handful of modest B flats - in open contrast with Rubini's handful of D's in alt!

[Pasta's printed vocal score offers an *oppure* even less challenging than her own barely palpitating dénouement]

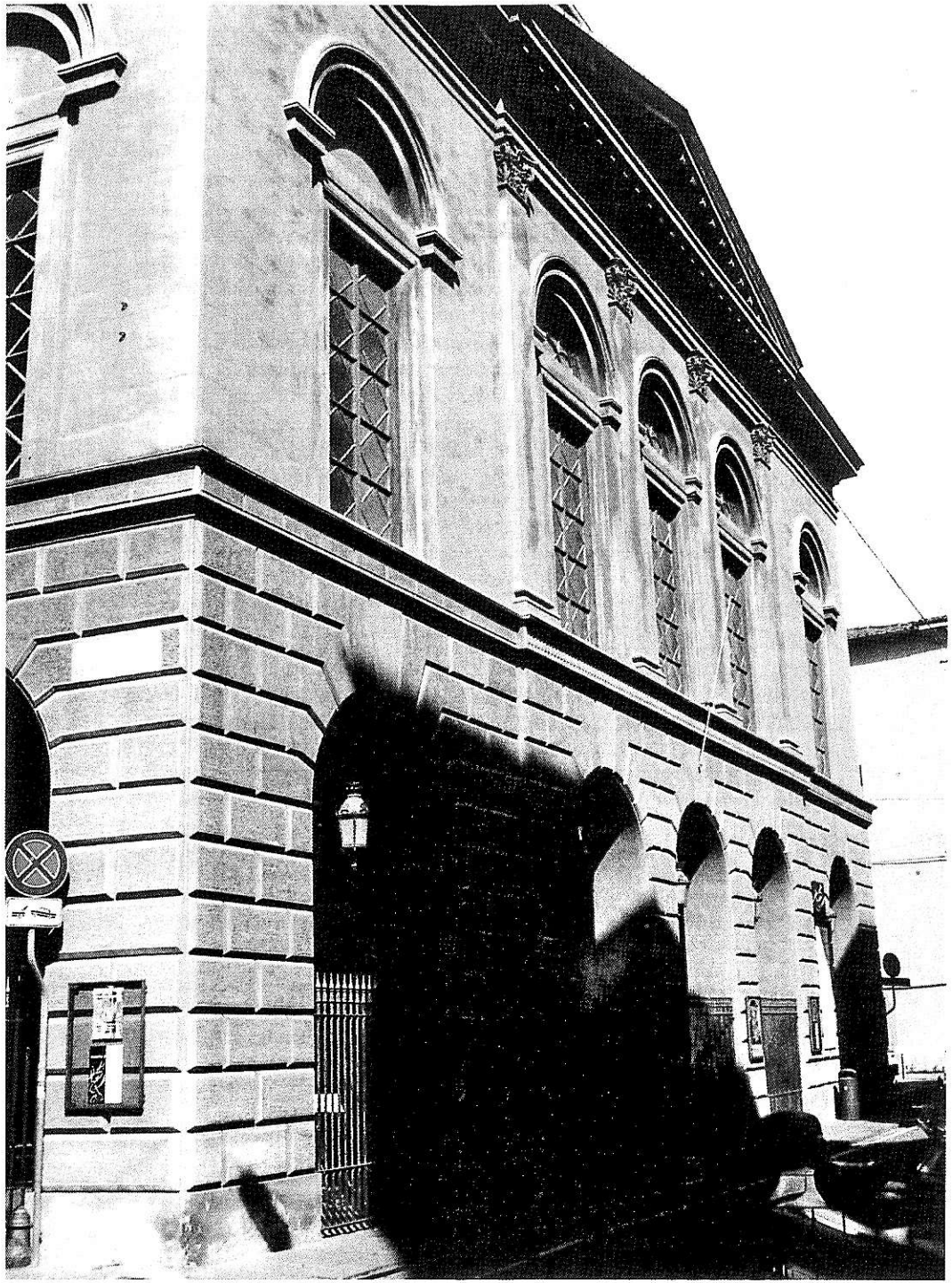
This Pasta version of *Il soave e bel contento* with its famous cabaletta is frankly a transcription of the aria for mezzo soprano, the great tenor for whom it was composed had no fear of rivalry on the grounds of vocal athletics but the exceptional Pasta may well have contributed an idiosyncratic tempo and an appropriately soave colour to the whole whose ease and rhythmic precision must always have been energetic and fascinating.

NB. It is possible she sang this aria in concert in London, the performance material upon which this brief paper is based was the property of Giacinta Puzzi-Toso and comes with the address of her house at 19 Piccadilly where she and her husband gave regular concerts before exclusive audiences. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Giuditta Pasta did not forgive Pacini for throwing such a desirable ball to a high-profile vocal rival under her very own nose. Whatever her success with his *I tuoi frequenti palpiti* she created no further roles for Pacini[7] moreover she allied herself ostentatiously with *his* rivals (with *Norma* and *Anna Bolena* in particular in whose epic engendering she played a major part).

Is it not a case of *La vendetta di Latone* being replaced by La vendetta di Pasta?

[6] Pasta had been present at Catalani's extraordinary vocal exhibition in a revival of Mayr's farsa in London in 1824

[7] Her career was almost founded upon revivals of Pacini's *Adelaide e Comingio* (1817), later she created the role of Zora in his major opera *La schiava in Bagdad* at the Teatro Carignano in Turin on 28 October 1820 - the composer obliging her with almost her very first ranking as prima donna on the stage of a leading opera house in a capital city



Pia de' Tolomei nella sua Toscana

di **Giulia Vannoni**

Parte di fianco o coprotagonista? Rodrigo, ruolo di contralto en travesti fuori tempo massimo, è il vero quarto incomodo in *Pia de' Tolomei* di Donizetti. Se il musicista voleva concentrare l'intero dramma sul triangolo soprano-tenore-baritono, sebbene qui declinato in modo atipico (il malvagio è in chiave tenorile, mentre rappresentare un amore violento, eppure autentico, spetta al baritono), dovette poi assecondare, *obtorto collo*, la volontà dell'impresario, assegnando alla seconda donna due arie – una con tanto di coro belligerante e patriottico – e un duetto. Tutta musica ragguardevole, per fortuna, come testimonia l'esito "buono, ma non d'entusiasmo" alla première veneziana del 1837, però pochi mesi dopo, per una ripresa a Senigallia, Donizetti preferì fare di testa sua: sia ridimensionando drasticamente il personaggio di Rodrigo – troppo rossiniano come psicologia canora, che rischiava di diluire un plot tutto proteso alla sintesi drammatica – sia con un secondo atto concentrato nell'ambientazione in Maremma (dove la protagonista, ritenuta ingiustamente fedifraga, viene mandata a morire dal marito), oltre a un finale primo ampiamente riscritto e ancora più bello. In disco le parti veneziane, poi espunte, si possono mettere in appendice (fu questa la scelta in un'incisione Opera Rara), ma in teatro? A Pisa, dove *Pia de' Tolomei* ha inaugurato la nuova stagione operistica, l'edizione critica curata da Giorgio Pagannone ha cercato di salvare più musica possibile (e, dunque, Venezia), ma innestandovi le inequivocabili migliorie di Senigallia.

Al di là dei compromessi per assecondare le esigenze del pubblico, comunque, questa tragedia lirica su libretto di Salvatore Cammarano, che subì la fascinazione dantesca (di Pia de' Tolomei si parla nel V canto del *Purgatorio*) esercitata nel periodo romantico, appare proiettata verso un futuro di cui si leggono già tutti i fermenti innovativi. Così, anche in un'opera come questa, a torto ritenute minore, Donizetti non finisce di stupire: si rimane sorpresi da soluzioni inedite, come il duetto fra tenore e baritono del primo atto, di sorprendente modernità con le sue tre sezioni fortemente contrastanti tra loro. Ed è probabile che di queste novità si fossero accorti anche altri colleghi compositori, tanto che l'invettiva iniziale del tenore contro la protagonista, *O Pia mendace*, ritornerà esattamente con le stesse note nella *Traviata*, in *Amami Alfredo*.

La scelta del Teatro Verdi di Pisa d'inaugurare la stagione operistica con un titolo così raro – ma di ambientazione toscana – è stata davvero lungimirante, anche perché poteva contare su un cast in grado di far fronte all'impegnativo compito. Nel ruolo di protagonista il soprano Francesca Tiburzi ha sfoggiato buoni mezzi, anche se non sempre gestiti nel modo migliore – ma dava l'impressione di non essere in perfette condizioni fisiche – per inopinati cedimenti vocali, cui ha supplito con qualche forzatura. Ne ha risentito un po' la messa a fuoco del personaggio, che s'immagina quello di una donna sostanzialmente remissiva e perdente, eppure s'intuiscono buone potenzialità e altrettanto valide intenzioni

interpretative: lontane dal cristallo purissimo di Lella Cuberli d'una remota registrazione Rai come dalla fragilità – ma non debolezza – di Patrizia Ciofi in una più recente ripresa veneziana, eppure suggestive nella loro insospettata drammaticità. Il baritono lettone Valdis Jansons, il marito di parte ghibellina, ha interpretato con sicurezza un convincente personaggio, forse più algido che cupo – possiede un timbro chiaro – ma comunque inflessibile e macerato; mentre nella parte en travesti del giovane fratello di Pia (appartenente alla fazione guelfa) e supposto amante della protagonista, Marina Comparato ha affrontato una scrittura contraltile con spavalderia e sempre buona timbratura vocale. Resta la singolarità (ma si tratta di un lascito del Rossini serio) di un tenore malvagio e antagonista: è Ghino, vanamente innamorato di Pia e che pertanto getterà il discredito su di lei, causandone la rovina. Giulio Pelligra ha dominato il ruolo sia sul piano vocalistico sia su quello interpretativo: plasmando un personaggio ora aggressivo e passionale, ora preda dei rimorsi. Fra i comprimari da ricordare il mezzosoprano Silvia Regazzo, nei panni della damigella di Pia, oltre ai due bassi: Claudio Mannino, interprete del fido Lamberto, e Andrea Comelli, l'eremita, cui Donizetti affida una preghiera con coro di enorme suggestione. Peccato che Christopher Franklin, sul podio dell'Orchestra della Toscana, abbia evidenziato qualche estraneità al respiro e al fraseggio donizettiani, limitandosi a un certo rigore ritmico e a una generica estroversione fonica. Apprezzabili gli interventi del Coro Ars Lyrica (diretto da Marco Bargagna), soprattutto per quanto riguarda la componente femminile.

Lo spettacolo concepito da Andrea Cigni sposta l'ambientazione dal tredicesimo secolo agli anni trenta-quaranta del novecento, trasferendo la lotta fra guelfi e ghibellini, che del resto rimane abbastanza in filigrana nel libretto, a quella tra fascisti e antifascisti, ma si limita solo a qualche riferimento all'architettura dell'epoca (leggibile nelle scene di Dario Gessati) e agli abiti, di Tommaso Lagattolla, dove viene enfatizzato per le donne – soprattutto nei copricapo – un richiamo all'Inghilterra delle mecenati dell'arte italiana. La protagonista diventa così una sorta di albionica vestale impegnata nella salvaguardia dei nostri tesori pittorici, ma la dedizione con cui si applica a questo compito è destinata alla sconfitta – i fascisti non ne comprendono il significato, distruggendo le tele custodite – e diventa così lo specchio dell'annientamento cui Pia andrà incontro.

P13 la bella facciata del Teatro Verdi di Pisa

The Itinerant Melomane

Jacopo Who?

Foroni's *Margherita* is *Rediscovered Treasure* in Wexford

John Jernigan

Jacopo Foroni (1824-1858) will not be a name that most opera lovers know. Born at Valeggio sul Mincio near Verona to a musical family, he studied in Milan and made his operatic debut there at the Teatro Re in 1848 (he was 23) with *Margherita*, an opera semi-seria based on a French libretto by Eugène Scribe intended for Boieldieu (who died before he could finish it). *Margherita* had a very successful début, both with audiences and critics, in part perhaps because of indirect but well-understood criticism of Austrian rule, but its run was interrupted by a direct challenge to Austria--the "Cinque Giornate" rebellion, Italy's first attempt to free itself from foreign domination, which temporarily drove the Austrians out of Milan. Foroni was active with the Italian patriots, and he was forced to flee when the Austrians regained control of the city.

The young composer went to northern Europe, and ended up with a touring Italian opera company in Sweden, where he settled for a time and caught the favor of the king Oscar I. As a calling card, Foroni returned the compliment to his adopted land and composed a new opera in Italian on a Swedish subject (*Cristina, regina di Svezia*); he rose to become Director of the Royal Opera and Hofkapellmeister (Court Composer). Returning to the peninsula when political conditions allowed, he mounted a revised version of *Cristina* in Trieste and in 1851, composed a new opera, *I gladiatori* (*The Gladiators*) based on the Spartacus legend. Returning to Sweden, he took up his duties again as Hofkapellmeister, not only seeing to the production of operas at the Royal Theater, but introducing Swedes to symphonic, chamber and religious music by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Rossini and even Wagner. His last opera, performed posthumously in 1858, was a Swedish comedy based on a well known medieval French farce, *Advokaten Pathelin*. Foroni had died three months before the premiere in a cholera epidemic; he was 34.

Swedish musicologist Anders Wiklund rediscovered *Cristina, regina di Svezia* a few years ago and produced an edition which was first performed in concert in Sweden and recorded. Wexford offered the first staging to great acclaim in 2013, and now Professor Wiklund has prepared the score of Foroni's first opera. Wexford once again has a

coup, offering its first staging in the modern era. It is a wonderful score, well constructed and full of very beautiful and melodious music and clever rhythms. Anders Wiklund once again deserves enormous thanks for bringing this superb piece to the public.

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The libretto by Giorgio Giachetti is set in a Swiss village and tells the tale of the wealthy orphan girl Margherita (mezzo-soprano), who is in love with Ernesto (tenor), a farmer turned soldier who is returning to the village now that the war is over. Roberto (baritone) also wants to marry her because she is rich, in order to pay back money he has borrowed from his uncle, the new town mayor, Ser Matteo, for his gambling and drinking debts. When Ernesto returns, however, Roberto's plans go out the window, and Giustina (soprano), Margherita's friend and Ernesto's sister, goes off to get a notary to marry the lovers. However, Count Rodolfo, returning from the war, interrupts the plans and asks Ernesto for help in a duel he must fight over his own beloved, and Ernesto follows him, losing his hat, decorated with a ribbon given to him by Margherita (a garter in our production), in the process. At the end of Act I, Giustina reports that she has seen a man attacked in the forest; she does not know the outcome, but has found a hat with a ribbon.... In Act II, Ernesto acknowledges that the hat is his and is thrown into prison by the mayor, who sees a way to restore Roberto's chances with Margherita. Indeed, when Margherita asks Roberto for help, he offers to use his influence with the mayor to free Ernesto if Margherita will marry him. To save her lover from the gallows, she agrees. Count Rodolfo arrives to explain that he was the one who was attacked and that he has escaped. Ernesto is freed, but distraught to discover that Margherita has agreed to marry Roberto. All is saved, however, when the Count recognizes Roberto as one of his attackers; the marriage agreement is torn up, Margherita and Ernesto are united, and it is Roberto's turn to go to prison



Alessandra Volpe as Margherita

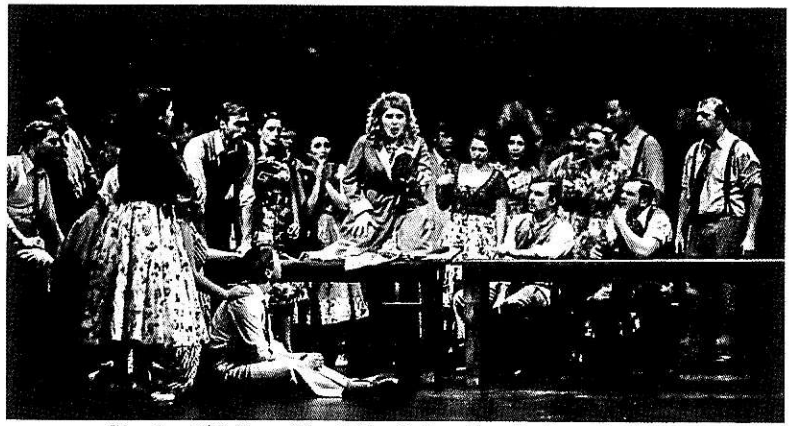
Giachetti's libretto is well constructed but standard issue opera semi-seria with a typical setting: a small village square with the nobleman's castle on the hill in the distance. A powerless peasant (Ernesto) is accused of a crime on flimsy evidence (the hat) and imprisoned by a corrupt power authority (the Podestà-mayor); execution looms, but the truth comes out in the nick of time. Except for the fact that the accused is a man instead of an innocent young girl, the story is almost identical to Rossini's *La gazza ladra*, a work which had its debut in Milan thirty years before Foroni's work. The rural setting, the choruses of villagers (which are frequent and important), the aria structure, the melting mezzo-soprano duet in Act II (like the Pippo-Ninetta duet in *La gazza ladra*), the villain who is also a buffo (Roberto and the Podestà) all have close parallels in Rossini's opera. The structure may be Rossinian, but the music is not, although the buffo duets and the love duet in Act II (*"A* te d'appresso") often resemble the Donizetti of *Don Pasquale*, and one can hear the influence of Bellini's *La sonnambula* (another opera semi-seria) at times. Otherwise, it is new wine in an old bottle--and very good wine it is, closer to Verdi than the earlier composers.

An opera semi-seria combines elements of opera buffa with elements of opera seria, and it in this case the libretto and the music do a fine job of balancing the comic and the serious/sentimental. Roberto, for instance, is both wicked villain and comic character. He sings a wonderful buffo patter duet with Matteo the Mayor in Act I, but he has a duet with Margherita in Act II (when he forces her to agree to marry him) that stage director Michael Sturm compares to the Tosca-Scarpia duet in Act II of Puccini's opera. Certainly it is serious, with music which forecasts *Rigoletto* and even middle-period Verdi. Act I is predominantly comic with bubbly choruses, a love duet and happy arias like Giustina's entrance piece which celebrates the returning regiment and ends with brilliant coloratura display which sounds like a *ländler*, a popular Austrian dance with a yodel-like refrain. In Act II, things turn serious with Ernesto's imprisonment; there is a gorgeous aria "in catene" (a prisoner's aria) for Ernesto, the aforementioned Margherita-Roberto duet, full of anger, fury and resignation, and a duet for Margherita and Giustina, which may be the musical high point of the score. This latter duet matches anything in early Verdi for poignancy and melodic invention, although it joins the soprano and mezzo voices in the manner so dear to the bel canto composers. Then, before the happy resolution, Margherita has a big aria which morphs into a grand ensemble which is musically inventive and complex. The happy finale-stretta takes the form of an infectious Viennese waltz. In this act, one superb musical number follows another, making this opera a melodic "find" on the level of *Cristina*.

One curiosity about the music is the use of popular Austrian forms such as the waltz and the ländler. Most curious of all is a trio near the opera's end for Ernesto, Roberto and Ser Matteo. The mayor and his nephew want to free Ernesto now that Margherita has agreed to marry Roberto; they urge him to flee, but Ernesto is suspicious of them. The trio takes the form of a march, almost a polka rhythm,

which is remarkably close to Johann Strauss Sr.'s "Radetzky March," which premiered a few months after *Margherita* was written to celebrate Austria's victory over rebellious Italian cities under Field Marshall Radetzky von Radetz. It is certainly an odd rhythmic choice for a trio between two buffo characters and the tenor-hero. Director Michael Sturm feels that this music is ironic, and that the Podestà and his nephew Roberto represent the oppressive Austrian authorities. The standard semi-seria plot thus becomes a veiled reference to a misuse of power, indicting people for false offenses on little evidence. It is certainly true that during the trio, Ernesto accuses the Podestà and his nephew of lying and corruption.

Setting the opera in Switzerland and giving it an old form (semi-seria) was a safe way to avoid censorship according to Sturm. Nonetheless, the Director moves the setting of the Wexford production to post-World War II Milan which we see in the solid unit set of a bombed-out landscape of urban northern Italian architecture. His inspiration (he says) came from post war Italian films like de Sica's "Miracle in Milan" or Rosselini's "Roma, Città Aperta." Other scenery drops into place or is brought into the Milanese piazza to create various other scenes--Margherita's bedroom or the town court room. Instead of a prison, we got a scaffold with a hangman's noose for Ernesto's "prison" aria in Act II. Mostly it works. The colorful costumes (1950's post-war Italian) are very attractive too; like the solid sets, they were by Stefan Rieckhoff. Lighting by D.M. Wood was atmospheric in this opera and very helpful in establishing mood and scene.



Giustina (Giuliana Gianfaldoni) describes the "murder"

Sturm's production (which will go to Oldenburg, Germany) appropriately treats the buffo parts traditionally, and the choral movement (they often dance) gives the production verve. The fairly complicated story is told clearly through the action and acting, which tended to be good if not brilliant. Mezzo-soprano Alessandra Volpe was a very pretty, rich-voiced Margherita, especially good in the duets. She has a sumptuous lower register and real power, but it was not always under perfect control, especially at the second of the two performances I saw (Nov. 1 and 4). Giustina seems to be a character whose principal purpose is vocal contrast,

and Giuliana Gianfaldoni sang her coloratura passages correctly; her voice has power too, although it tended to be less smooth in the higher parts. It melded perfectly with Volpe for their Act II duet. Ser Matteo seems obviously intended for a buffo bass and Matteo D'Apolito is a baritone, but he was excellent vocally and as an actor, his patter amusing and accurate.

Filippo Fontana was a slim Roberto with a limp--apparently the reason he has not been in the army. Vocally he was reasonably good, though not so good as I remember him from two previous seasons at Wexford (in *An Italian Straw Hat* and *Don Bucefalo*). Baritone Yuri Yurchuk was a mellifluous Count Rodolfo. Tenor Andrew Stenson as Ernesto was the weakest of the principals. His is a sweet *tenore di grazia* and like all the singers, he was better in Act II than in Act I (the music is better in Act II also). Sometimes he was tentative with the decorations or had some trouble finding the notes, but his Act II "prisoner's aria" was beautifully sung, including a perfect high note at the end. Timothy Meyers conducted what seemed to me o be a well-paced performance, but complete unfamiliarity with the score makes judgement difficult. The chorus (as in all of the Wexford operas) was very well trained (Errol Girdlestone, Chorus Master) and they acted as well as they sang.



Curtain call

Donizetti died the same year as *Margherita's* début, by then he had been silent for a few years and lost to the world through dementia but though Foroni's music is clearly reminiscent of late Donizetti from time to time it strikes me that it is closer to Verdi than to the earlier bel canto composers. In any case, Foroni has a style and shape to his melodies that is his own. In other words, he was a composer with his own discernible voice. It is a tragedy that he died so young, certainly; otherwise he might well have given Verdi a run for his money. Both *Margherita* and *Cristina, regina di Svezia* are splendid operas, well worthy of revival. *Margherita* will be streamed by Irish radio and I hope a CD or DVD will be forthcoming. Count me as an ardent Foroni fan. I loved this opera.

Gli equivoci
a scene from the turbulent musical comedy by Stephen Storace staged by the FREE OPERA COMPANY of Zurich in November last year.



Jérusalem

Parma, Teatro Regio –
Giuseppe Montemagno

Nuove strategie per grandi traguardi. Questo, in sintesi, il senso della 'svolta' verdiana del 1847, anno prodigo di fermenti internazionali, destinati a concretizzarsi in una terna di creazioni di felice impatto: il 14 marzo alla Pergola di Firenze debutta *Macbeth*, primo incontro con la musa shakespeariana; il 22 luglio esordisce all'Her Majesty's Theatre di Londra con *I masnadieri*; e il 26 novembre tiene a battesimo il primo titolo concepito per l'Académie royale de musique: *Jérusalem*. Risale al fondamentale, pionieristico contributo di Abramo Basevi, lo *Studio sulle opere di Verdi* pubblicato nel 1859, l'inizio di un atteggiamento critico pronto a precipitare *Jérusalem* di Giuseppe Verdi dalla rupe Tarpea dei titoli di cui si poteva tranquillamente fare a meno: poiché assommava in sé almeno un paio di difetti, l'appartenenza alla fase giovanile degli "anni di galera" e il movente commerciale, compiacente adattamento dei *Lombardi alla prima Crociata* agli usi di quel teatro, l'Opéra di Parigi, che il musicista stesso non avrebbe esitato a definire come la «grande boutique». Rimasta nel repertorio delle scene liriche francofone fino al 1862, *Jérusalem* ha da allora beneficiato di un interesse saltuario e liminare, certo incapace di scalfire la graduatoria ideale del catalogo verdiano.

Nuove strategie, grandi traguardi segnano anche l'orizzonte del Festival Verdi di Parma, che proprio a *Jérusalem* ha trionfalmente tagliato il nastro del *grand cru* 2017: con un'operazione che merita forse qualche considerazione più ampia, per meglio comprenderne motivazioni ed esiti. Il primo passaggio – fondamentale – riguarda un'operazione di metodo: come per tutti gli altri spettacoli che fanno parte della rassegna, anche *Jérusalem* è stata rappresentata seguendo l'edizione critica approntata da Jürgen Selk, che ha ricostruito il dettato originario (con esiti di un qualche interesse segnatamente a carico dell'ultimo atto) e, per questa via, ha permesso di comprendere quanto Verdi stesso pubblicamente dichiarava, e cioè che *I Lombardi* erano stati «rifatti in modo da non riconoscersi». Se da una parte è vero, allora, che il debutto francese di Verdi si colloca nel solco di quanto, prima di lui, avevano già fatto Rossini o Donizetti, d'altro canto, proprio come era accaduto ai suoi predecessori, *Jérusalem* è altro perché va oltre, recupera undici numeri dal titolo precedente ma per il resto appare come una finestra schiusa per lo meno sulla contemporaneità, se non sul futuro del dramma verdiano. Più che opera del debutto, allora, *Jérusalem* appare opera di sintesi, lungimirante conclusione della prima stagione aurea del *grand-opéra* – che grosso modo coincide con gli estremi cronologici della Monarchia di Luglio – inaugurata dalla *Muette de Portici* di Auber, portata al suo massimo splendore dal *Guillaume Tell* di Rossini quindi destinata a culminare nella *Juive* di Halévy e nei primi tre titoli di Meyerbeer, *Robert le Diable*, *Les Huguenots* e *Le Prophète*. Centrale diventa allora il tema dello scontro di religione, l'affresco storico che qui evoca addirittura la partenza di un drappello di soldati francesi in Palestina onde liberare la città di Gerusalemme; ma Verdi modifica l'approccio sin dal primo brano dell'opera, che è un duetto tra due innamorati: e dunque ribalta la prospettiva, facendone un dramma di personaggi, scolpiti con il medesimo scalpello che il musicista aveva utilizzato negli altri due titoli messi in cantiere nel 1847, per l'appunto *Macbeth* e *I masnadieri*.

C'è un secondo aspetto che connota *Jérusalem*, e che di fatto mostra l'attenzione per la scena musicale parigina – al di là del *divertissement* coreografico del terzo atto, imposto dal canone grand-operistico.

Sapientemente lo evidenzia la bacchetta di Daniele Callegari, certo esperta del repertorio italiano di primo Ottocento ma da sempre altrettanto attenta alle migrazioni culturali per i palcoscenici francesi. E come Verdi aveva messo a frutto le straordinarie risorse della compagine orchestrale dell'Opéra, così adesso Callegari dispiega le forze della Filarmonica "A. Toscanini" per valorizzare quelle pagine orchestrali, in cui si ritrova il gusto tipicamente francese per un descrittivismo di marca pittorica: a cominciare dal *Lever du soleil* che suggella il primo quadro, che certo era stato sperimentato nel prologo di *Attila* ma che qui compiutamente rimanda al prodigioso effetto immaginato nel *Désert* di Félicien David. Ha mano felice, Callegari, nel restituire questo repertorio di brani di carattere, marce assortite (ci sarà quella *guerrière* e quella *funèbre*) e cori, che diventano tessuto connettivo, nucleo da cui germina l'azione drammatica principale, vibrante sfondo sonoro, trapunto di vigorosi ma non fragorosi fiati e ottoni, su cui sbalzare gli interventi dei protagonisti.

Di questo beneficiano i quindici movimenti del balletto, che così ritornano a essere *morceaux de bravoure*, segnatamente il pimpante, irresistibile Galop e il successivo Allegro non troppo, variazioni brillanti per flauto di effetto particolarmente ricercato. Inscrivendosi a pieno titolo in una visione registica, di cui si dirà tra breve, Leda Lojodice risolve gli interventi coreografici con un *pas de huit* di stampo accademico, felicemente realizzato dal corpo di ballo, che punta molto sulle singolari sfumature dei costumi, nelle tinte del malva, del salmone e del bianco, e soprattutto sulle fogge di quelli maschili, accorta rivisitazione della tradizione dei dervisci rotanti. Preziosa citazione in odor di Peter Brook è l'uso di bastoncini di bambù, da tempo cari all'immaginario della coreografa, immagine di un Oriente filtrato con raffinato gusto antiquario. Ma risalta anche, soprattutto, il formidabile impatto del Coro del Teatro Regio di Parma, vigorosamente preparato da Martino Faggiani, protagonista a pieno titolo di pagine di vaga leggerezza, come l'iniziale «Enfin voici le jour propice», ma soprattutto della processione finale, che qui viene assunta con intensità profetica. Accolto da richieste di bis l'intervento del secondo atto, «O mon Dieu! Ta parole est donc vaine!» (che è riscrittura dell'originale «O Signore, dal tetto natio»), in cui viene esperito un mirabile gioco di coloriti e di sfumature.

Singolare è anche il lavoro condotto con una distribuzione vocale di pregio, che certo si ritrova a dover fare i conti non solo con le attribuzioni originarie (alla prima Gaston era Gilbert-Louis Duprez, Esther-Eliza Julian van Gelder vestiva i panni di Hélène e Adolphe-Louis-Joseph Alizard era Roger) ma soprattutto con una tradizione interpretativa, seppur limitata, che ha sempre fatto affidamento su strumenti di maggior consistenza: a Parma, nel caso del primo e unico precedente del 1986, i tre ruoli erano ricoperti da Veriano Luchetti, Katia Ricciarelli e Cesare Siepi. Callegari ricerca invece un diverso equilibrio sonoro, forse meno cospicuo ma utile per cogliere il rapporto con la prosodia francese: da qui scaturisce la scelta di un terzetto di protagonisti d'invidiabile proprietà stilistica. Così per il Gaston di Ramón Vargas, che conserva intatta l'eleganza di un timbro chiaro e luminoso, la facilità di un'emissione fluida e immacolata, il nitore del registro acuto. Interprete forbito della grande scena dell'accusa, nel terzo atto, è forse comprensibilmente più titubante nella sua aria più celebre, «Je veux encore entendre», in cui sarebbe stato proficuo sorvegliare maggiormente la linea vocale come la purezza del legato. Ma sono dettagli, nel più ampio contesto di una prova anche intimamente vissuta, segnatamente nello splendido terzetto «Dieu nous sépare, Hélène», che grazie al suo accorato, vigile impegno sembra quasi diventare pagina preparatoria del finale della *Forza del destino*. Così per l'Hélène di Annick Massis, che si conferma interprete di rango di quella scuola di canto francese, che ormai vanta nel mondo pochi rappresentanti. Non le si chiederà, certo, il tonnellaggio vocale di

altre interpreti verdiane, e per questo forse il suo unico tallone d'Achille è un registro grave non perfettamente a fuoco: ma anche queste carenze, quando occorre (come nel caso del rondò del terzo atto), vengono piegate a fini drammatici. Poche altre artiste vantano una coloratura così adamantina, scorrevole, cristallina, che trova nella *Polonaise* slancio ed empito drammatico, così come si resta conquistati dagli acuti in pianissimo della grande aria «Mes plaintes sont vaines !», che culmina in una cadenza con filati da manuale. Così anche, forse soprattutto, per il mirabolante Roger di Michele Pertusi, che nonostante un timbro chiaro costruisce un personaggio semplicemente soggiogante. Se c'è una caratteristica del dettato verdiano, che rende il basso di Parma un interprete di riferimento, è la ricerca di accenti, sempre cangianti ma perfettamente calibrati, che strettamente innervano parole e musica: e come all'inizio del secondo atto trasfigura «Ô jour fatal! ô crime» con un attacco in pianissimo da brivido, così trasforma in vaticinio profetico la sua visione della Città santa, al principio dell'ultimo atto. Anche sotto il profilo scenico, trasforma un vendicatore ferino in un eremita pentito, una sorta di Amfortas in cerca di riscatto da un colpevole amore, fino alla redenzione del popolo intero. Fa da corona a questo terzetto una distribuzione omogenea ed efficace. Di grana pastosa è il Comte de Toulouse di Pablo Gálvez, autorevole l'Émir di Massimiliano Catellani, mentre non sempre si fa apprezzare la rugosità del Legato Adhémar de Monteil di Deyan Vatchkov. Con Matteo Roma (Officier), negli interventi più brevi si segnalano anche Valentina Boi, Isaure di nobile manto vocale, e uno squillante Francesco Salvadori, impegnato in più ruoli.

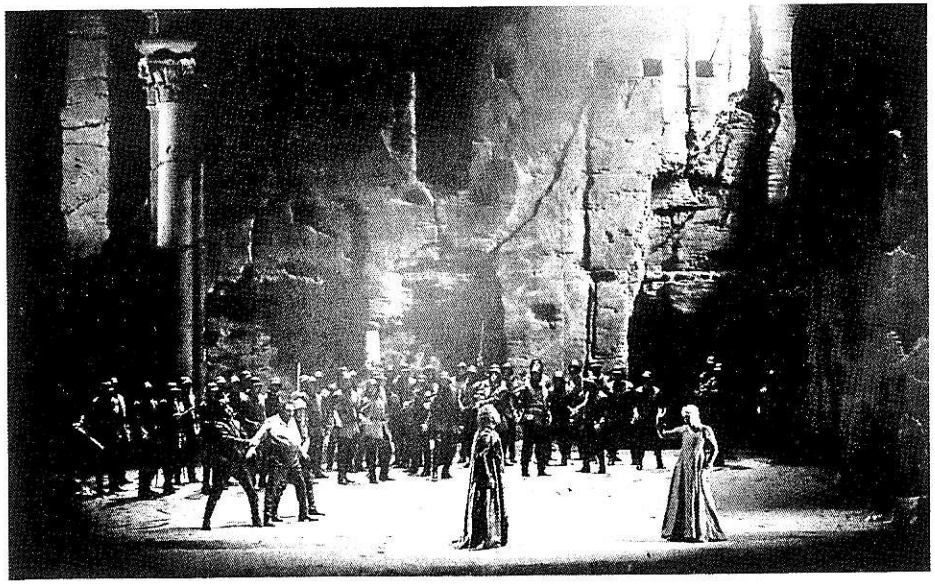
Riprendere *Jérusalem*, tuttavia, significa misurarsi anche – forse soprattutto – con una dimensione spettacolare, che è fondamentale nel caso del *grand-opéra*. Hugo de Ana firma uno spettacolo sontuosamente tradizionale, estremamente 'pieno' eppur costruito su una scena quasi interamente vuota, una cava di pietra che abilmente sfrutta tutta la profondità del palcoscenico del Regio. Certo lo spettacolo rischia di essere talora debordante di citazioni, soprattutto a causa delle doppie proiezioni animate in 3D – sul fondo della scena come sul velario di tulle al proscenio – curate da Sergio Metalli per Ideogramma: praticamente un tripudio di immagini, dalla bolla di Urbano II a capitelli romanici e vetrate gotiche in moto perpetuo, con sfilate di crociati che coraggiosamente s'apprestano alla battaglia e catastrofi meteorologiche che s'abbattono sul deserto. Ma è forse un modo – uno tra gli altri, s'intende, adattato alle possibilità tecnologiche dei giorni nostri – di rispettare la magniloquenza che il *grand-opéra* pretende, e forse impone. Certo il meglio viene dalla raffinatissima mano di Hugo de Ana: nello splendore dei costumi, che valorizzano la morbida *silhouette* rinascimentale della Massis come la nobile asprezza di tratti di Pertusi; come nei riferimenti pittorici, che incrociano gli infuocati panorami africani di Delacroix all'immancabile teschio di Roger – che non cita quello di Amleto, come molti hanno pensato, ma l'iconografia caravaggesca di San Gerolamo, anacoreta in Terra Santa. E tutto questo per comporre sfarzosi *tableaux vivants*, mobili, vibranti immagini dominate dal segno della Croce di Gerusalemme: «Cité du Seigneur! Saint Sépulcre! Calvaire!», irresistibile traguardo, ma da ora anche luminoso approdo di belcanto in terre verdiane.

CODICILLO alla *JÉRUSALEM* di PARMA

Fulvio Stefano Lo Presti

Immaginifica eppur tradizionale (senza che *tradizionale* suoni blasfemo, come se di necessità equivalga a sinonimo di oleografico), la sontuosa e imponente *Jérusalem* di Parma è risultata degna del Teatro Regio e del Festival che si intitola a Verdi. Scenografia, costumi, coreografia hanno appagato il folto pubblico delle rappresentazioni, gratificato dalle pagine più avvincenti del Verdi giovane. Anche i due direttori artistici notati la sera del 12 ottobre, lo svizzero Aviel Kahn, in partenza dalla Vlaamse Opera di Anversa, ed il belga Bernard Foccroulle, in procinto di lasciare Aix-en-Provence, sembravano apprezzare il tutto.

Felice metamorfosi degli straripanti ed epici *Lombardi alla prima* Crociata (Milano 1843), il libretto di Jérusalem è affidato ad Alphonse Royer e Gustave Vaëz, agguerrita coppia già distintasi in precedenza nel fornire a Donizetti *La Favorite* (Parigi 1840). La metamorfosi però non nasconde un tallone d'Achille, al quale non sembra che né gli esperti librettisti né il Maestro, che non era più alla prime armi, abbiano prestato soverchia o qualche attenzione. Nella farragine di Solera, abilissimo a estrarre dal "tassiano" poema omonimo in quindici canti di Tommaso Grossi (1826) le due ore o poco più di azione teatrale, Pagano, il parricida pentito, è seguito dall'inizio alla fine in una coerente evoluzione drammatica. Trasformato in Roger nel libretto francese, di punto in bianco fa perdere le proprie tracce a tutti gli altri dopo il tragico equivoco del primo atto – che fino all'undicesima ora bollerà di un diabolico marchio d'infamia l'innocente Gaston - per riemergere all'ultimissimo momento con un'agnizione quasi forzata e teatralmente zoppicante volta a ristabilire la verità. Dov'è più quel commovente ritrovarsi nel perdono *in extremis* tra i due fratelli rivali, con l'intercessione della provvida Giselda, nel magistrale finale ultimo dei *Lombardi*, che quando adolescente lo ascoltai la prima volta già mi strappava le lacrime?



Jane Austen and Opera
Part 2
Mansfield Park, at The Grange

Douglas M.Bennett

Cattle leave an aroma in the air. It comes from the slurry left by their ruminant digestion, and surrounded *The Grange* (a Parthenon in the Hampshire countryside that boasts a modest theatre within its Orangery) like a pall. It lingered in my nostrils long after Jonathan Dove's opera based on *Mansfield Park* was fading into the background. But don't get the wrong impression. Dove's *Mansfield Park* is no 'stinker'. Although it lacks the memorable tunes of Donizetti or Mozart, it proved to be a cogent retelling of the story of Fanny Price's route into matrimony. It also helped crystallize some of the reasons that discouraged 19th century composers from using Jane Austen's novels as a basis for opera.

Before continuing, it may be useful (at the risk of boring those readers who know Austen's novel well) to summarise the plot of *Mansfield Park*:

The aristocratic Bertram family have adopted a poor relative called Fanny Price. She is used as a general dogsbody, and only young Edmund Bertram (who is destined for the church) treats her well.
Into the neighbourhood come a brother and sister, the Crawfords, who encourage adventurous entertainment, such as amateur theatricals, whilst the Bertrams' father is away in Antigua on business.
Maria, one of Edmund's sisters, gets married, whilst Edmund's brother takes to the high life in London and Newmarket, which nearly kills him.
Edmund courts Mary Crawford, whilst her brother, Henry, cynically woos Fanny by helping Fanny's brother in his naval career. Fanny rejects Henry as the shallow mountebank that he is.
The Bertrams universally condemn Fanny for not accepting Henry Crawford's generous offer of matrimony, but she is vindicated when he, in vengeance following his rejection, seduces Maria away from her new husband.
The Crawfords are now shown up as immoral adventurers, and the scene is set for Edmund to recognise Fanny as being the love of his life.

There is no doubt that the librettist, Alasdair Middleton, has successfully filleted the complexities of the novel down to the scale of an evening drama. Divided into 18 scenes, called 'chapters', it looks as though it should make a novel opera, in '2 volumes' rather than 2 acts. All begins well. The music is a little like Stephen Sondheim, but that could be a compliment to Dove's setting of the notoriously un-singable English language. For me the only drawback was the lack of ensemble in the cast. With so many words to take in, evenness of singing would have been helpful. More troublesome, after an interesting act 1, was comparative dullness in act 2: no new characters, and only the plot to work through to a conclusion. The letter/grotto/newspaper scenes that bring news of Henry Crawford's seduction of Maria Rushworth (née Bertram) I found confusing. The reliance on the English supertitles became total, and there was still too much information for easy comprehension. As a result, the transition into the final scene came too abruptly,

comprehension. As a result, the transition into the final scene came too abruptly, which meant the music (a cross between a baroque chaconne and an Anglican anthem) had to work much harder. Luckily Dove's invention rose to the challenge; reminding me that one sign of the best music is when events on stage seem to pause. Timely resolution was played out, and brought satisfaction to most of the *Grange* audience.

I wish my recommendation of this opera could be extended to the text. It was impossible to obtain a copy of the libretto. Oh, for the days when it would have been available days before so that the audience came prepared! Subtitles are all very well. They deal effectively with the need to know what is being sung. They do not, however, serve the longer term objectives of the plot.

In this case, it might have been assumed that most of the audience were familiar with the plot of the novel *Mansfield Park*, but I doubt it. Perhaps there was another motive, to judge by the following extract:

> *Lovers' Vows! Exciting risqué!*
> *Lovers' Vows! It's only a play!*

Jane Austen could never be so banal. Indeed, one reason for the continuing survival of her novels within mainstream reading (in comparison with her contemporaries, Scott and Richardson, who have faded) is the timelessness of her prose, and the reader's pleasure from reading it.

The other disappointment in this *Mansfield Park* was the rather limp-wristed dances. Both this and *Persuasion*, as seen at Stratford, suffered from a tendency not to trust the dancing skills of actors. The result is some rather feeble figures-of-eight rather than the more rumbustuous dancing that appears in film adaptations, and is, I suspect, what the authoress herself would have expected. A Ball scene was accompanied by a very pedantic minuet, which contrasts with the ebullient country dances that usually feature in screen adaptations of Austen. She was famously keen on dancing herself.

That leaves one remaining problem: the incorporation of letters into the drama. The writing of letters is not entirely unknown within the operatic genre. You only have to think of Tatiana's letter scene in Eugene Onegin and the scene from *The Marriage of Figaro* in which the Countess and Susanna concoct the letter to the Count to know how effective they can be in developing both character and plot. But even the Pamela operas of Generali and Farinelli (not the castrato!) avoid the use of letters. All the Richardson-based operas were filtered through old theatre specialists like Goldoni and Rossi, and dismantle the epistolary origins (viz, *La Buona Figliuola*: a whole chapter of Stefano Castelvecchi's *Sentimental Opera*, Cambridge, 2013 is devoted to the many operatic derivatives of Richardson's Pamela). And yet, all of Austen's novels make much use of the reading of letters as a means of revealing events that occur elsewhere, and their consequences. But watching a character reading (or reciting) a letter is not in itself reveal the drama. In novels, the impact of letters is often left clothed in the thoughts of the reader, which are recorded in passages characterised by what is known as what is called 'indirect speech'. That has been the bane of the many television versions of her books because there is no written dialogue for the script writer to use. In opera such moments are usually re-imagined into ensembles or metaphorical arias

So there we have it: a resumé of at least some of the problems involved in creating an opera out of any one of Jane Austen's great novels. Could they be solved? Yes, probably, but not within the accepted norms of the *melodrama dramatica* as it was evolving in Italy. That seems to be why there is no such opera in the bulging lists of those written during the *primo Ottocento*.

Of the two productions I viewed, I would say there are enough good ideas to guarantee at least one successful opera, but neither of those viewed quite pulled it off. The dance ideas of *Persuasion*, coupled with the use of the music from Jane Austen's own time seem to me to have the right credentials Whoever constructs the libretto needs a finer sensibility than was displayed in either case (as far as I could tell without seeing the words written down). The story telling in all Austen's novels works best in her timeless prose, and seems to stubbornly resist translation into other artistic forms.

But I will close with a true anecdote. When collecting my ticket for a concert at the *Opéra Royal de Versailles*, the lady serving me commented on my surname, and when I told her my wife is Elizabeth Bennett, she was ecstatic. She assured me that the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (wet-shirted but otherwise wooden Colin Firth; dastardly Willoughby 'all goodness and kindness as always'; mock-Mozart music by Carl Davis that goes on and on and on) is her favourite TV programme. I'm sure she was, in that moment, completely sincere, as well as wanting to be polite and unprejudiced.

So, it can be done: Austen's novels have been successfully translated into dramatic form and still gain fanatical fans, in spite of not being able to encompass the style and attractions of her prose. But to create an opera from any of them would have needed a poetaster equal to the task, as well a composer with an ironic subtlety beyond the ordinary: rare in the Italy of the *primo ottocento*, and apparently no more plentiful nowadays, to judge from my two recent experiences.

However, I can recall the stomping Sailor's Hornpipe, which is all that remains to me from that otherwise unsatisfactory *Persuasion* in Stratford, and a hint of suitably sardonic music drama in the altogether better performance of *Mansfield Park*, remembered through the aromatic cloud that rose from that Hampshire cow dung that hung about around the orangery at *The Grange*.

