Tragedia lirica di G. S.

posta in musica e dedicata al Sig.r Conte

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DA

ALESSANDRO NINI

Rappresentata in Padova la Fiera del Santo del 1839.

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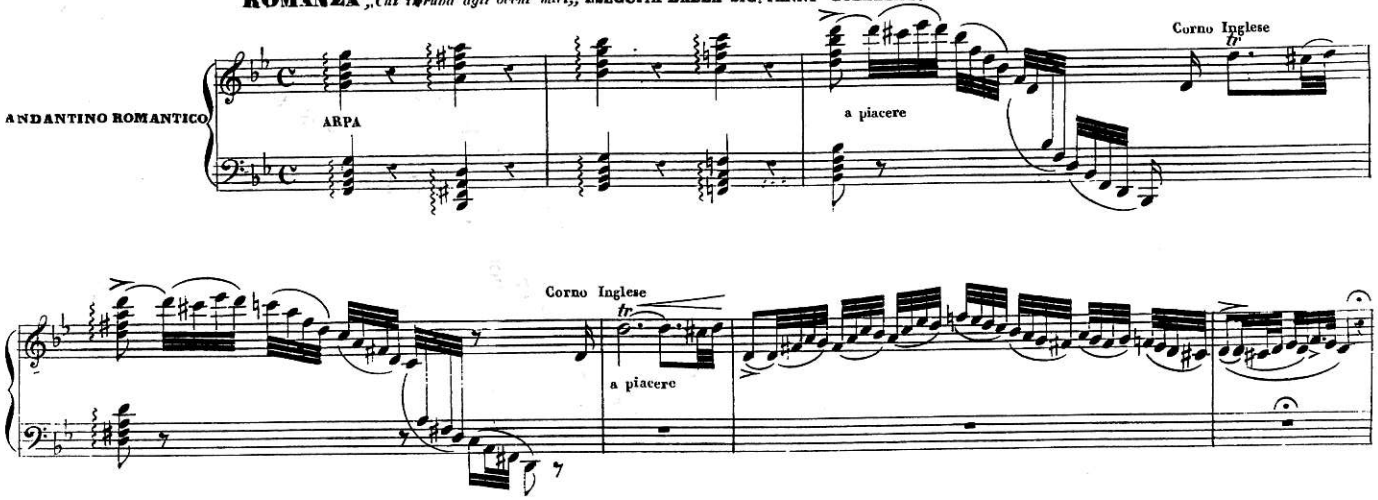
ROMANZA *„Chi turba agli occhi miei„* **ESEGUITA DALLA SIG.a FANNY GOLDBERG.**



MILANO PRESSO GIO: RICORDI.
Mendrisio presso C. Pozzi.

FIRENZE PRESSO G: RICORDI E C.
Parigi presso Schlesinger.

Dying becomes Leonora

"What a lot of people to see an unhappy woman die" observed calmly Leonora Galigaï, *maréchale* d'Ancre on the scaffold in 1617 with such majestic composure that the crowd fell silent. Of modest birth, "laide, intelligente et tourmentée", cultivated, articulate, fond of horoscopes and filters, her fate would be doubly dramatic: destined to become a prima donna two centuries after her appalling death she bequeathed (if involuntarily) the magnificent diamond necklace she had worn with such pomp in the great gallery of the Louvre, to Marie de Rohan of Donizettian renown when she married the *comte* de Luynes[1], a time-serving courtier who was none other than the pimp responsible for the destruction of its original owner. In this way, one prima donna made sure that another equally unfortunate companion-in-misfortune would have the most disturbing send-off imaginable.

No one could claim that any such majestic calm would attend the fate of the *maréchale* in the theatre. From the opera's début on 23 July 1839 at the Teatro Nuovo in Padua onwards Alessandro Nini's *La marescialla d'Ancre* had a *succès fou* Italy-wide, with huge acclaim and audience delerium. Those attending the two performances at the Teatro Pergolesi di Jesi on 26 and 28 September 2003 will easily be able to supply an explanation: a more energetic score is scarcely conceivable.

How can we begin? What about an opening like this...

OK Signor Verdi...tell us what you have written that Signor Nini did not write before you? [collapse of stout Verdiano]

That Nini's opera was writtten before Verdi is indisputable[2] , in most respects it could be mistaken for a work of the first maturity of the maestro from Busseto. This is not all the story of course, indeed far from it. An appealing, sumptuous and compulsive score, its sinister plot subsumed in music of real velocity it naturally bears the imprint of several predecessors: most especially Bellini (echoes of *Norma* and a weakness for Bellini's hop-skip-and a jump into limpid cantilena) as well as for Donizetti (his climactic *topos* and his seamless dramatic pacing) but not without a real contribution of his own (Nini's ability to subsume a complicated sequence within one broad melodic arch reveals a belcantistic heredity never quite put aside behind his pounding rhythms and bouncing cabalettas). But make no mistake, this is not a derivative score, the resulting mix is smooth, intrusive *recitativi* are almost non-existent, the drama is continuous, it is a bold homogeneous offering, one that never sags and never fails to stir.

Did Verdi attend performances of Nini's opera? This sort of question is utterly counter-productive. Even if we were able to put a finger upon a precise date, a precise evening, a precise place, the implanting of ideas, the

[1] Luynes was the first husband of *Maria di Rohan* it is only after his death that she married the "rabidly jealous" *duc* de Chevreuse (who was old enough to be her father and whose string of mistresses gave him no such right to marital fidelity). The plot of the Donizetti/Cammarano opera , historically, is absurd.

[2] Verdi's first opera *Oberto conte di S.Bonfacio* was given at La Scala on 17 November 1839

digestive process that lies behind creativity is so clouded and so misleading that any accusation of servile imitation is an absurdity. Nini's opera needs no Verdian endorsement - even in retrospect - who initiated what and when will remain unanswerable. It is claimed by some of their contemporaries, for example, that many of the surging vocal tricks we associate with early Verdi were "borrowed" from Federico Ricci. Who knows? (Who will ever know?) Like those of Verdi in his youth this opera floated upon a raft of scandal, Mercadante is on record of stating crossly that Nini's opera - that this kind of horrific stage-drama - was utterly beyond the pale as far as he was concerned (a remark compounded partly of sour-grapes and partly of fear that the excesses of *Maria de Rudenz* and similar romantic semaphoring then coming into vogue would cast his sad muse into the shadow once and for all). Much of this scandal is in fact derived from the gory poem, not from the composer, and here we have a real point of departure from Verdi. Giovanni Prati (1814-1884) earned his laurels outside the theatre and this was his one and only libretto it seems. This single effort has always been snobbished without much justification, as if a Wordsworth or a Browning had stooped to conquer in an ignominious youth. In fact his verses are perfectly adept - at times searing - scene-painting with some reflective language that is more than praiseworthy, the problem is that they tend to lose focus under the weight of the music and only rarely - and then only really in the final aria - can be heard to have made an impact on the listener in the house, much remains unintelligible - this is one of those operas where you need to have the libretto on your lap to know what is happening on the stage. The result is twofold: Nini's music surges ahead, regardless, and there is none of the careful pointing of the text we associate with Giuseppe Verdi.

Nini, however, is especially attentive to scene painting, in Act II there is a kind of strategic shift from the earlier music; beginning with the coro 'O luce conforto dei mesti mortali' followed by a marvellous trio which is utterly compulsive listening and then before Scene IV there is an orchestral prelude *"that would make the reputation of any composer"*. The performance at Jesi? The sets were not bad, the costumes fabulous. Fabrizio Maria Carminati had the measure of this music which he clearly looked-upon fondly, the cavil is only that the theatre is rather small and the decibels large. The cast was suitably urgent and well-balanced - each one on top of their role and all should come up shining on CD (*Bongiovanni - but next year*). Monica Minarelli (Isabella Monti) was an especially good actress and made much of her expressive dilemma; Marzio Giossi (Borgia) had slancio enough for two, Maurizio Comencini (Concino Concini) who has the most beautiful aria in the opera ' O sogni miei di gloria' (Act II Scene III) managed a covert elegance but the role is intended for a Manrico not for a *baritenore*; the ball of course fell squarely at the feet of Chiara Taigi in the title role. Composed for the English prima donna Adelaide Kemble (1814-1879), a famous Norma, this is one of the most arduous vocal steeplechases ever to be conceived, La Galigaï is never off-stage for long, and her stamina is the real litmus-test for operatic success, Chiara Taigi has the temperament, the style, the imagination and the vocal resource to bring the *maréchale* d'Ancre back to life, and this she did quite as memorably and quite as stylishly as when she departed in the first place.

Alexander Weatherson