Lillo and the unhappy *Caterina Howard*

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Giuseppe Lillo (1814-1863) has manged to vanish more completely than almost any other of the so-called *minori*. Dictionaries and memoirs forget him as if by deliberate intent, as though the sad collapse that ended his career must be swept decently under the carpet. Nothing could be more cruel, he was gifted with a vein of seductive melody worthy of his tattered portrait displayed in the Museo belliniano in Catania where few of that maestro's contemporaries have a place on the walls. Born at Galatina (Lecce) Lillo began his career just at the moment when Bellini was about to end his, like him he studied under Zingarelli in Naples, like him he wrote only a handful of operas, but unlike his they rarely took flight from this city of his youth so that a modest fame only was his reward. And unlike Bellini, too, he tested his melancholy muse with a prudent array of flippant and fleeting scores some of which made a brief stir.

Like Bellini, however, his first opera was a student production sung by his fellows: *La moglie per 24 ore* (Conservatorio S.Pietro a Majella, Naples 1834) gave evidence of a rare talent for vocal elegance as well as for sly humour. In addition to his gifts as a pianist his sense of theatre was unusually vivid. His first professional opera came the following year; *Il giojello* a dramma per musica in 2 atti staged at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples on 10 October 1835; it had a picturesque libretto by Leopoldo Tarantini based upon a Scott-inspired French vaudeville and suffered from a complicated argument but set in the Edinburgh of 1745 at the time of Charles Edward Stuart's defeat it was a modish enough offering in the shadow of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It made no special impact at first, revived in Florence in 1837, however, with a cast of Napoleone Moriani, Felice Varesi and Giuseppe Frezzolini it was received happily and had a spate of futher revivals. Lillo breathed a sigh of relief. This initial stage offering revealed not only his felicitous scoring, his capacity for writing memorable tunes and a real theatrical itch, but also his weakness for ultra-literary libretti - something that would ultimately prove his undoing, unlike other more parsimonious rivals this scholarly maestro who spoke and read (it seems) English and French preferred to set to music every word his poet supplied, without change or comment.

Next came *Odda di Bernaver*, a melodramma in due atti with a libretto by Emmanuele Bidera. This was his baptism by fire in serious drama, indeed gory drama. Staged at the S.Carlo on 22 January 1837 starring Paul Barroilhet and Giovanni Basadonna in an otherwise routine cast it was received. without enthusiasm. But it too did well in revival, restaged three years later in the same theatre with Ignazio Marini and with Amalia Schütz-Oldosi in the title role it became Lillo's first real taste of theatrical triumph. Later that same year came *Rosmunda in Ravenna*, a tragedia lirica in 2 atti with a bold libretto by Luisa Amalia Paladini (that rare bird, a female librettist) based on a tragedy by conte Gambara di Brescia. Presented at La Fenice on 26 December 1837 with the worldbeating cast of Carolina Ungher, Napoleone Moriani, Giorgio Ronconi and Ignazio Marini it turned out to be a lavish medieval bloodbath replete with guilty queen, poisoned husband, and a languishing long-drawn-out lyrical suicide on the part of the prima donna. This notwithstanding, its grateful music, big arias and riveting text earned it a welcome from the Venetians of a kind that would not, alas, remain to the end of the season. Soon audiences began to tire of gore; in due course came Donizetti's *Maria de Rudenz* and noisy rejection.

Undiscouraged, an ephemeral *Alisia di Rieux* followed, a melodramma in tre parti with libretto by Gaetano Rossi and staged at the Teatro Argentina in Rome on 12 June 1838. This turned out to be another suicide but dressed-up impressively with an ultra-romantic decor. It came and went leaving nothing. Then emerged a portent, his *Il conte di Chalais* with plot and libretto by Salvadore Cammarano. It has had a bad press, although certainly eclipsed by Donizetti's*Maria di Rohan* (Vienna 1842) - also titled "Il conte di Chalais" for its Neapolitan revival two years later and with some of the same text - Lillo's opera was no flop whatever has been reported since. Indeed the music was appreciated and (some sections) printed internationally. Staged on 6 November 1839 with a cast of Bassadonna and Barroilhet and with Matilde Palazzesi as Maria, it had an undeservedly short career and would repay sensitive revival. The young composer was making progress, if slowly.

A slight comedy *La modista* with a libretto by Leopoldo Tarantini, staged on 7 May 1840 at La Pergola in Florence made no impact at all, but *L'osteria di Andujar* an azione comica in tre atti with the same librettist, based on Scribe's text for Auber's *Fra Diavolo* (1829) and staged at the Fondo in Naples on 30 September that same year made almost a furore. Its rich English tourists Lord Pispis (sic) and daughter Sofia were robbed enjoyably by a fake Marquis and there were lots of good tunes. This was an especially sparkling score, with sustained ribaldry and a stream of popular numbers. It was a Neapolitan *opéra comique* well able to make a mark beyond the confines of his elected city and extracts from its music were printed widely. Then, in Florence once more, came yet a third comedy: *Le disgrazie di un bel giovane ossia Il zio, ed il nipote* , a melodramma giocosa in 2 atti with a further text by Leopoldo Tarantini and staged at the Teatro degl'Infuocati of Florence later that same year of 1840; a Goldonian comedy devised as a starring role for Gennaro Luzio ("*il zio*"). Set in Milan, with patter (for Luzio), lots of ensembles, teasing, tricks, fake poison and an aria-finale for the tenor (the " *bel giovane*"), an excellent receipe for popularity, it made a decided splash.

Next was a return to serious music. This frivolous trio was capped by *Cristina* di *Svezia*, tragedia lirica in 3 parti. Libretto by Salvadore Cammarano and staged at the Teatro S.Carlo on 21 January 1841. With a cast of Fanny Marray, Domenico Reina and Orazio Cartagenova it boasted an improbable reconfection of genuine historical events and characters. The versification was predictably adroit but the personaggi were foursquare while, in contrast, the music was unexpectedly gentle and lyrical. It was banished promptly. *Lara*, a tragedia lirica in due atti, its libretto yet again by Leopoldo Tarantini, followed. Staged at the S.Carlo on 12 December 1842 the opera had some very substantial music as well as an impressive cast - indeed a sensational cast - with Eugenia Tadolini, Carlotta Gruitz, Giovanni Basadonna and Filippo Coletti. It too was soon, and undeservedly, eclipsed.The successive score was no luckier: *Il mulatto - Il cavaliere di San Giorgio* with verses by Jacopo Ferretti, a dramma giocoso, was staged at the T.Carignano of Turin in 1846 and has vanished utterly leaving no trace whatsover. One day I suppose something of its music and text may re-emerge. This last however, heralded - its only merit maybe - the opera which can be considered Lillo's masterpiece. After a three year period of reflection emerged:

CATERINA HOWARD melodramma tragico in quattro atti da rappresentarsi nel Real Teatro S.Carlo was staged at the great theatre on 26 September 1849, with Achille De Bassini in the baritone role of Enrico VIII; with

Marietta Riva Giunti as his mezzo-soprano sister, Margherita; with the passionate Carlo Baucardé in the important tenor role of Etelvoldo (how this absurd Saxon name survived into the Renaisssance Tudor Court is a mystery known only to Paisiello it would seem, whose *Elfrida* of 1792 - Lillo's heroine sings a ballad mentioning Elfrida - has a ducal "Aethelwold" who imposed himself indelibly upon nineteenth-century librettists)[1] and with a roster of important comprimari: Gaetano Rossi as Sussex; Marco Arati as Melvil; and Giuseppe Benedetti as a page, above all, with the imposing lyrico/dramatic soprano Eugenia Tadolini "*grande e prodigiosa cantatrice*" in the title role of Caterina Howard, last-but-one wife of the terrible Tudor. The plot lacked novelty - yet another headless Queen of England, yet another opera climaxing with an angry spouse and the block. This was indeed a disadvantage - but whereas Anne Boleyn was lucky on-stage and unlucky off - Catherine Howard was unlucky both on and off. Indeed justice was no more done to the impressive score that Lillo offered to the Neapolitans than to the unfortunate queen herself. His fine opera was despatched from public view as neatly as any discarded consort. *Caterina Howard* seems to have had only one significant revival.

Based on an anglophobe potboiler *en cinq actes et en huit tableaux* by Alexandre Dumas *père* staged in Paris in 1835, Giorgio Giacchetti supplied verse of modest distinction, it is true that the argument was clumsy as well as a bit silly (with a drugged heroine à la *Giulietta e Romeo*) but there were moments where this nonsense is completely effaced by music of real merit. Originally written for Donizetti's pupil - Matteo Salvi's *Caterina Howard* had first been given in Vienna in 1847 with Eugenia Tadolini also in the title role - for Lillo the text was shortened at the request of the theatre (who knew Lillo's penchant for happy pedantry). Costumes and setting were first- class - as was not always the case at the S.Carlo - the opera was staged with some attention to detail. The plot of course echoes that of Donizetti's *Anna:* Caterina has had an earlier lover (in fact her husband), through ambition she marries Enrico - bigamously of course, like Anna *in extremis* she acknowledges her guilt and goes to her death. But there are significant shadings to the unhappy tale, unlike that of Anna, her lover is deliberately malicious and is reproved by her in the final terrible moments of the drama (after which he prepares to commit suicide). The main difference, dramaturgically speaking, between the two plots is represented by the fantastic scene of presumed death when Caterina is given a somniferic drug in a charnel-house setting of tombstones and monuments, and by the fact that Enrico is romantic and gullible instead of vicious; certainly also by the fact that this score is heavily reliant upon descriptive music coloured by the intensely emotional vocalisation of the mid-century - epitomised - not just by the vaulting account of Tadolini but also by that, even more forceful, of her rabid Baucardé.

The opera opens with a *Preludio e Coro*, an *Introduzione* which has at its heart a quite beautiful Scena ed aria (quasi-duetto) 'Se di ricchezze e titoli' for the King in which he confesses to Etelvoldo, his friend - in a lilting 9/8 with a magnificent cabaletta 'Sento appien da questo imene' - his blind love for Caterina. The King is completely unaware of her liaison with Etelvoldo for whom he intends the hand of his sister. This aria which was received with a storm of applause with the maestro called out of stage provided the most encouraging start possible, an augury

[1] Making a notable reappearance in Felice Romani's libretto for Mayr's *Le due duchesse ossia La caccia dei lupi* of 1814. Etelvoldo - it would seem - is supposed to be the very epitome of the *"anglo-saxon"* so beloved of the French press ever since the time of Ethelred the Unready.

subsequently endorsed by Caterina's sortita - part *andantino pastorale* part *allegro-giusto* 'Io pur fra le più splendide', as well as the following duet with her alarmed Etelvoldo; a sequence capped by a *ballata* for Caterina in three strophe, at once archaic and nostalgic with a harp obbligato, 'Del Franco arcier Riccardo' - delicious music embued with the dreamy melodic seduction that was Lillo's special gift. Somehow managing to combine wonderfully lyrical flights with an underlying menace that was both surprising and novel. So far so good.

Act II opens in the interior of the vault of his ancestors; Etelvoldo has surreptitiously drugged Caterina, feigning her death in order to keep her out of the clutches of the King. The scene both gloomy and thoroughly bizarre, its improbability endorsed by a visit from Enrico who puts a ring on the hand of the "corpse" (duetto andante 'Lieta una stella ergevasi sul ciel') as a sign of his intended matrimony, a deft if lugubrious encounter and ending with a stretta of notable vigour ('Ah! nol posso; non posso staccarmi/Da quest'urna ov'è chiuso il cor mio'). On awakening (like Giulietta) on her bier, Caterina discovers the ring and is consumed by a vision of the throne; disdaining her husband (he, equally, disdaining the overtures of Margherita Tudor) she pays a visit to Enrico who is naturally rather surprised; she claims that she merely fainted and was believed dead - a pack of lies swallowed by the king who offers to make her his fifth wife. This encounter (duetto 'Non sei tu, che or or vedea') was received rather coldly, not particularly suprisingly.

Act III contains some remarkable music, Etelvoldo's *romanza* 'Un dolce incanto...spergiura! ingrata!' combines fury at his betrayal with a vision of Bolena's fate which lies ahead for her. In accents that somehow manage to recall both Donizett's Chevreuse and Bellini's Filippo Maria Visconti but distinguished by a passion that belongs squarely to the dawning age of Ponchielli he corners Caterina, now Queen of England, and berates her with bitter reproaches. She rejects him with hauteur:

Cat. ... chi mai
Oserebbe accusar una Regina?
Ete. Io!

Caterina, frightened, points out that all will be lost if he betrays her. She begs for pity. Enrico calls from outside the room, Etelvoldo escapes, a vast concertato ensues with clever handling, integral *ariosi* and asides of really impressive facture, with the jealous Enrico furiously demanding the name of the man with whom she has had a secret rendezvous. The act ends with her arrest amid wild accusations, self-pity and protestations, punctuated by a magnificent *largo* 'È desso! ahimè! qual demone' which was currently described as *"ben concepito, sapientemente condotto e di effetto meraviglioso."*

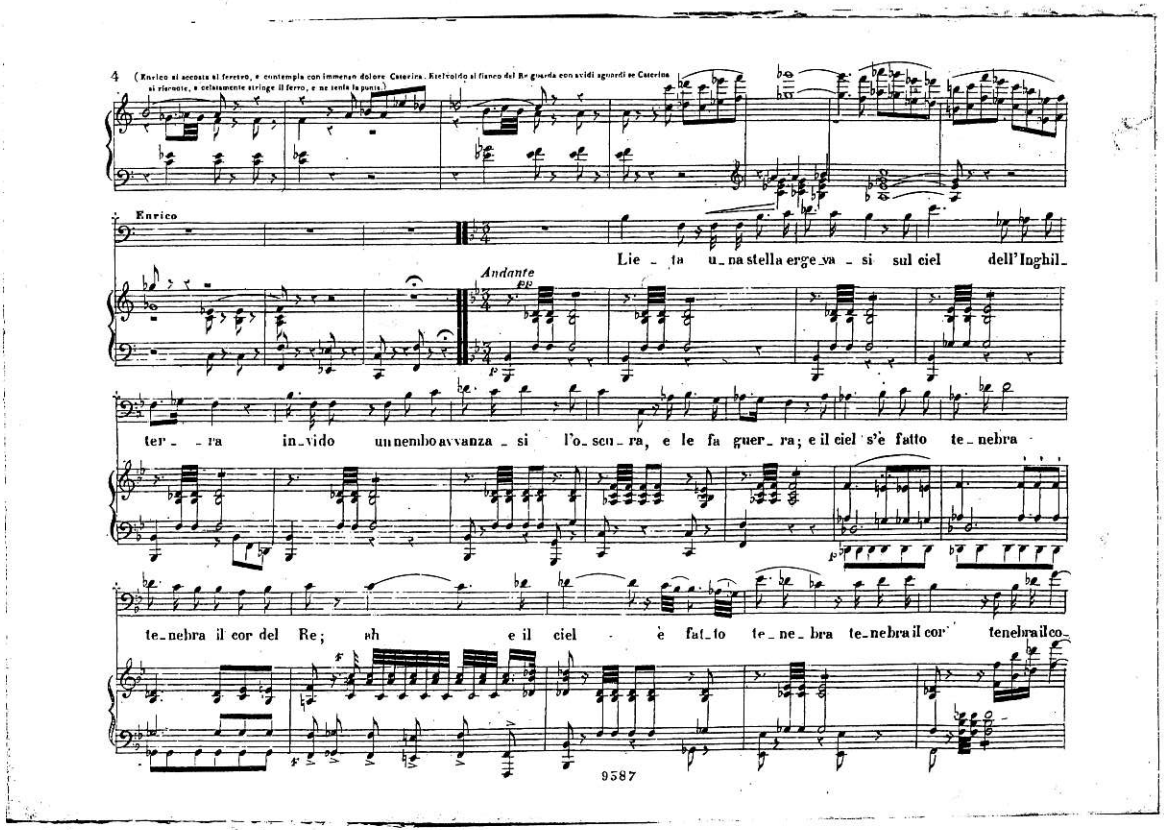
ActIV is set in a cell of the Tower of London. Caterina has one more hour to live. She is tormented by hope as well as by Etelvoldo determined to witness her death (duetto 'Invan speravi, o perfida'). His violence persuades even the guards to come to her aid but at the last, in a touching andante she admits her guilt ('È ver! È vero; io fui colpevole') with such affecting music that he almost relents, a second later furiously upbraiding her. As the door opens upon the block she gives a cry of terror, turns to Etelvoldo and sings her *cabaletta finale con forza* 'Uom feroce, la vendetta/Compi omai sul palco orrendo' with a brilliant pounding melodic slanciò and goes with dignity to her doom.

Even though this opera consists of a disconcerting mixture of much that is all-too familiar with much that is too odd and unreal it has much to commend it. In some ways the character of Caterina Howard in Lillo's melodrama is more convincingly

drawn than that of Anna Bolena in its famous predecessor, the absurdly-named Etelvoldo too has a giant role. If the music does not quite ring true like that of its more celebrated peer it is still a beautiful score, and very moving. Lillo suffers only from being - forgotten! It is valid to ask how it was possible that such an opera could vanish so completely? Apart from a revival at Modena in 1851 and two stagings at Malta in 1851-2 and 1863-4, Lillo's *Caterina Howard* was never heard again. It was not a failure, nor was it received with unconditional rapture, but it stood up impressively, even eloquently, to Verdi's *Luisa Miller* which had its prima in the same season with some of the same artists. Well-made, often elegaic music, a fluent *mise-en-scène* and a compelling dénouement should have ensured an honourable exposure. Clearly, the costumes and settings of Donizetti's Tudor masterpieces could have been recycled to effect further stagings of *Caterina Howard* in almost every theatre in Europe. But no one bothered. Sometime later Errico Petrella took up the sad tale anew (in 1866), with no more success.

And what of the rest of his career? The opera which followed *Caterina Howard* was a slight comedy, *Delfina* with a libretto by Marco D'Arienzo cast in the traditional mould of the Teatro Nuovo of Naples and staged in March 1850. It pleased, it had a fine cast, but went the way of so many passing comedies at that theatre. So did its successor, with the bold title of *La gioventù di Shakespeare*, a commedia lirica in tre atti with verses by Giuseppe Sesto Giannini and staged at the Nuovo on 29 December 1851. The roles included - as well as the great poet in person - a Sir Goffredo Falstaff - but this prestigious pairing in the same opera seems not to have blessed it with any great favour. Indeed, such a "literary" effusion seemed like stooping-to-conquer on such a modest stage. *Ser Babbeo*, a commedia in tre atti this time with a libretto by Leone Emmanuele Bardare too was mildly unfortunate, once again at the Nuovo on 8 May 1853 with Luigi Fioravanti - very much a starring buffo - in the title role, he was supported by an excellent team of experienced comics as was usual at that theatre but the comedy failed to Lillo's astonishment and discomforture. In dismay, he staged his final opera scarcely two months later: *Il figlio della schiava* a dramma lirico in 3 atti with a libretto once more by Sesto-Giannini was put on at the Teatro del Fondo on 31 July 1853 for the birthday of Queen Maria Teresa who preferred less socially-challenging evenings. Only Acts I and II were performed. The cast was excellent including Gennaro Luzio, Pietro Giorgi Pacini (Giovanni Pacini's nephew), Emilio Pancani, and Noemi de Roissi among other favorites of the day. The setting was bold, Creole, exotic - somewhat tactlessly for a Bourbon occasion evoking the world of Joséphine Beauharnais but with its action set in a chateau of the Duc d'Orlèans. With feudal high-jinks and a happy ending, it was intended to please. Alas the happy ending was omitted.

The same could be said of poor Lillo. He had been behaving oddly for some time. In 1861 he became confused and was kept under restraint, a brief remission allowed a hope of return to his career but mania and paralysis swiftly followed and he died on 4 february 1863 at the age of forty-nine. The fate both of Donizetti and Luigi Ricci. His legacy included songs and piano music and a few offerings to the church. Soon forgotten, his memory was cherished only by a handful of singers, Mario liked to insert an aria by Lillo into Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* which had been composed especially for him. Like his heroine, Henry VIII's penultimate queen, his star shone only briefly. Unlike her, his long oblivion has been unjust and completely undeserved.



Giuseppe Lillo **Caterina Howard** Act II *'Lieta una stella ergevasi sul ciel'*
Enrico puts a ring on the hand of Caterina's "corpse"