

Pia de' Tolomei in Livorno

By Charles Jernigan

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I, too, have been fascinated by Pia de'Tolomei ever since first reading Dante's *Purgatorio* some five decades ago. Who was she? Dante gives her five brief lines at the end of Canto V: "Remember me," she plaintively asks, "I am Pia; Siena gave me life and the Maremma took it from me, as well he knows who wed me with a jeweled ring." Pia's humility, so appropriate for Purgatory, robs her character of the many details we get from the more famous Francesca da Rimini in Canto V of *Inferno*, and ever after scholars have asked who she was. Most modern research has focussed on a woman of the Tolomei family of Siena (there is still a Tolomei palace there, nowadays a bank) who was married to Nello della Pietra. For reasons of jealousy or wanting a new wife or...whatever, he had her sent to the Maremma, a malaria-infested, swampy area near the Tuscan coast (until Mussolini drained the swamps in the 1930's) where he had a castle and where she died, some say thrown out of a window. (In younger days, I too searched out the ruins of Nello's castle and climbed the crumbling, rocky staircase to a room where Pia might have been imprisoned.)

In the nineteenth century, novelists, dramatists and painters tried to fill in the gaps in Pia's story with romantic portraits and stories of their own. The libretto of Donizetti's opera by Salvatore Cammarano is in fact based on a novella by Bartolomeo Sestini which greatly elaborates Pia's brief story found in Dante. The story is set in the eternal wars between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines which plagued the middle ages (and is the basis of the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues). Ghino (tenor) is in love with Pia (soprano), the wife of his cousin Nello (baritone). When she refuses his advances, he seeks revenge and finds a way when he thinks that she is arranging a rendezvous with a lover. The servant Ubaldo gets hold of a compromising letter from Pia to the unknown person, and Ghino reports the supposed treachery to Nello, who sets a trap for that night. Nello and Ghino surprise Pia, but the unknown man escapes; Nello has Pia arrested and sends her to that castle in the Maremma. The "lover" is really Pia's brother Rodrigo (a mezzo-soprano pants role), who is fighting for the Guelphs against the Ghibelline Nello. In Act II, Pia, afflicted with fever and in prison, is visited by Ghino, who offers her freedom if she will yield to him. She refuses, and Ghino, remorseful and angry at the same time, rushes off. Ubaldo, acting on Nello's orders, puts poison into Pia's cup. Meanwhile, Ghino, mortally wounded in battle, confesses all to Nello, who rushes off to save Pia, but he arrives too late; she has quaffed the poisoned cup, and dies forgiving Nello and asking her brother Rodrigo to bring peace between them.

Donizetti lavished some really wonderful music on this unlikely story, but there were parts which were below par, and he worked on it several times for productions subsequent to the premiere in Venice in February, 1837, which did not please the public. (The opera was supposed to premiere at the Teatro La Fenice, but because of a fire, was transferred to another theater, today the Teatro Carlo Goldoni, the oldest surviving theater in Venice. Those of us who love Donizettian melodies will find much to admire here as beautiful legato after legato is followed by vigorous cabaletta after cabaletta. Not to mention several wonderful, stand-alone choruses. The weak points seemed to have been the big, concertato-finale which closes

Act I (when Nello bursts in on Pia and accuses her of adultery). It was disappointing compared to much greater music for similar circumstances, such as the sextet in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, premiered two years earlier. The finale to the opera is also less strong than one would like. Donizetti revised it, and the concertato finale is improved, but to my way of thinking Pia's final aria (and death scene) relies on a trivial melody, inadequate to the tragic ending.

The production we saw in Livorno on January 20 is circulating among the opera houses of Lucca, Pisa and Livorno this season, and will go the Spoleto USA festival in Charleston, SC, in May. It was unconvincing, but the singing and orchestra playing were remarkably good. First of all, it was updated to the fascist era in Italy—the 1930's judging by the costumes where the Guelphs and Ghibellines became the Mussolini Fascists and the Italian partisans, to no particular effect--or damage. Unfortunately the sets, by Dario Gessati, consisted of big gray cubes and gray, cubed backdrops, all of which distracted from the story and served no purpose that I could think of, symbolic or realistic. This ugly set of movable cubes was filled with large nineteenth century paintings, some of Pia—romantic works with which romantic painters tried to fill in the lacunae left by Dante. Why? At one point, the paintings were piled up and Ghino threatened to light them afire. Why? It was another dreary “concept” which made no sense, and it might have been ok had the stage direction by Andrea Cigni given the singers something to do. All too often, they stood around amidst the cubes and sang. By contrast, I recall a wonderful, compelling production of this opera by the English Touring Opera a few years back, proving that it has real dramatic legs.



The Partisans and the Fascists (Guelphs and Ghibellines) Face Off as Pia, Poisoned, Dies

Many of the singers' roles were double cast, and on January 20 we saw Francesca Tiburzi as Pia, Marina Comparato as Rodrigo, Giulio Pelligra as Ghino and Valdis Jansons as Nello. I was very impressed with Pelligra's tenor, with ringing high notes and smooth delivery and pleasing tone along with an ability to manipulate the coloratura. Ghino has what may be the

most famous vocal phrase in the opera, right at the beginning in a bit of throw-away arioso when he sings a line identical to the phrase Verdi would use thirteen years later for Violetta's "Amami, Alfredo." It isn't even part of his catchy aria "Non può dirti la parola," which follows. Ms. Tiburzi's Pia was also strong, although she did not attempt much acting. Rodrigo has two arias and a melting duet with Pia (it is an important role), and Ms. Comparato did it all very convincingly while Valdis Jansons was adequate to the role of Nello if a bit wooden. The Coro Ars Lyrica and the Orchestra della Toscana were under the inspired baton of Christopher Franklin. He injected a great deal of vigor into the proceedings and respected all of the cabaletta repeats. (Hurrah!; the singers sang appropriate variations with the da capo repeats as well.)



Pia and Her Portrait

The Teatro Goldoni in Livorno is much larger than either the Teatro Verdi of Pisa or the Teatro del Giglio of Lucca, but it was well filled (not full however), and there were many young people in the audience, not looking at their iPhones, but listening respectfully to Donizetti. They applauded the singers ferociously on a cold, rainy evening in the Tuscan port city. Outside the seagulls called and swooped and the rain poured down in torrents (there is a storm in the opera's score and the director had the chorus pull out their umbrellas), but inside it was warm and dry and there were Donizetti's wonderful melodies, well sung and played. I could almost ignore the meaningless production. Meanwhile, the mysterious Pia draws us on...