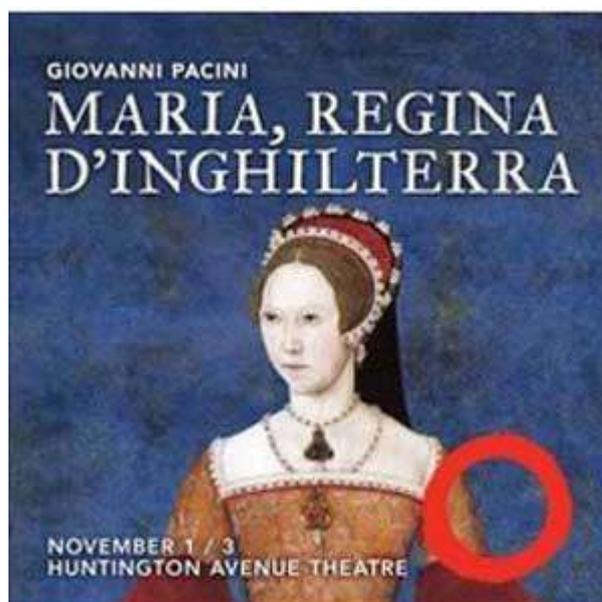


PACINI WITH AN “A”: *MARIA, REGINA D’INGHILTERRA* IN BOSTON

Charles Jernigan, November 2019



Every opera fan knows the name of Giacomo Puccini, but not many know Giovanni Pacini. Pacini’s family was from Tuscany, probably the area near Lucca, where Puccini was born. Like Rossini, Pacini was born in February, 1792, (although not on leap year day), and he was born in Sicily, because his parents were opera singers on tour and were there when Giovanni’s mother gave birth; often he is considered a Sicilian composer, like his beloved model, Bellini. In his maturity, however, he settled down in Lucca, and established the school of music there which still exists and was named for him for about a hundred years until, in 1948, the name was changed to honor “Luigi Boccherini,” another son of Lucca. In 1880, Puccini (with a “u”) graduated from the Pacini (with an “a”) School of Music before going on to the Milan Conservatory.

Pacini’s father Luigi was a buffo bass who had premiered the role of Don Geronio in Rossini’s *Il Turco in Italia*, and he sent young Giovanni to Bologna to study singing, but it soon became evident that composition was his forte. He wrote his first opera in 1813, just as Rossini’s career was taking off, and his last opera was premiered posthumously in 1873, after Verdi entered his maturity. Pacini had died six years earlier, in 1867, one year before Rossini. It was a long career, and it produced well over 70 operas. (*Maria, Regina d’Inghilterra* was #52 or 53.) In his lifetime, Pacini was a serious rival of all the major opera composers in Italy at the time, but his fortune declined as Verdi’s star rose, and by 1900 his operas were rarely performed; today he is known only to serious students of Italian opera.

Pacini believed in singable melody above all other aspects of music, and he had a singular ability to write one beautiful melody after another. It was often said of his operas that there

were enough melodies for ten operas packed into one Pacini work. As Verdian vigor and ability to marry words and music gradually took the Italian operatic scene from the 1840's on, so Pacini's works, with an emphasis on long Chopinesque melodies as the main purveyor of emotional content gradually lost popularity. In other words, realism replaced a striving for emotional purity as developed in the melodic line.

Pacini began composing as a self-admitted imitator of Rossini, writing operas where agility mattered most, but he went through a kind of mid-life musical crisis, and after a hiatus from the stage, he returned with works which emphasized drama more, but always expressed through beautiful melody. Works like *Maria, Regina d'Inghilterra* (sometimes entitled *Maria Tudor*) come from this later stage. Listening to this or other Pacini operas, one might be tempted to say that he models his melodies, at least the slow ones, after his Sicilian compatriot Bellini—and *Maria* shamelessly plagiarizes short passages of *Norma* and other Bellini operas—but Pacini had fashioned melodies like that before Bellini wrote his first opera.

The long, “Bellinian” cantilena is indeed one feature of Pacini's melodic world, but another is the vigor and seemingly inexhaustible supply of catchy tunes for his cabalettas. He was so famous for his ability come up with cabaletta tunes that he was called the “Maestro delle cabalette.” Unfortunately, not all of these tunes match the sense of the words, and sometimes the need for a jaunty cabaletta seems forced, as at the end of *Maria, Regina d'Inghilterra*, where we have the sense that Mary has a cabaletta, well, just because the formula says she should.

Unlike Verdi and even Donizetti, Pacini never broke from the formulae of early nineteenth century Italian opera—the double aria (slow cantilena followed by a fast cabaletta, usually repeated) and the big concertato finale at the end of act two in a three act opera. Even the duets and trios use the slow-fast formula. So it can be said that if Pacini developed his own “voice” as he moved away from imitation of Rossini, he was not the innovator that some of his compatriots were.

Maria, Regina d'Inghilterra is based on a Victor Hugo play which failed in Paris in 1833. It is a complicated plot, and Pacini's librettist, Leopoldo Tarantini, jettisoned all of Hugo's interesting political and social commentary which the censors in Italy would not have allowed. We are left with a complex love-plot and a Mary Tudor (the child of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon) that history would not recognize. “Bloody Mary,” who tried to force the yoke of Roman Catholicism back on newly Protestant England, is not the Mary of the opera, a woman consumed more with romantic intrigue than religion.

In Pacini-Tarantini, the unmarried Mary is in love with Fenimore, a n'er-do-well Scotsman who has insinuated himself into the court, looking for advancement. Mary wants to give him the title and wealth of the recently deceased Talbot, who seemingly left no heirs—but Fenimore knows that Talbot's daughter Clotilde is alive. She had been rescued as a child and raised by the commoner Ernesto, and now that she is grown up, he wants to marry her. Only Fenimore knows who she really is, and he has seduced her so that she is torn by her

sense of duty to Ernesto and her love for the duplicitous Fenimore. Mary's Lord Chancellor, Gualtiero Churchill, who wants to stop Fenimore's rise to power, suspects what is going on and follows Fenimore to Ernesto's cottage where he plans to meet Clotilde; Churchill warns Ernesto that his ward has been seduced by Fenimore. The two men swear vengeance as Act I ends. In the second act, Mary vacillates between believing in Fenimore and thinking him false, as Churchill has told her. Churchill introduces Clotilde to her as proof of Fenimore's treachery, and in the act's finale, Mary confronts Fenimore with Clotilde. As Fenimore denies his guilt, Ernesto enters and claims (falsely) that Fenimore has given him gold and a dagger to slay Mary herself. Mary orders both men arrested. In the last act, Mary vacillates about signing Fenimore's death warrant. Finally she is convinced to do so, but she secretly plans to free him and substitute a cloaked and hooded Ernesto on the scaffold for him, making the bloodthirsty people believe that the villain has been executed. Churchill, however, bribes the guard, and it is Fenimore who goes to his death. Mary is at first distraught, but still she hopes that "heaven's ray" will shine on her.

Maria, Regina d'Inghilterra was commissioned by the Prince of Cuto, who had taken over the management of the Teatro Carolino in Palermo. Pacini wanted a libretto by Salvatore Cammarano, author of *Lucia* and *Trovatore* among many others, but Cammarano was too busy, and the choice fell on Maria, which Tarantini had written a few years earlier. The opera was composed in 23 days, and premiered to great acclaim on 11 February, 1843. Pacini was called on stage 43 times and carried home in a torchlight parade, however the initial success of the opera was not to be repeated. Subsequent productions in Italy never measured up to the premiere, and the work scarcely travelled out of Italy. And so it lay, a dusty archived score until Opera Rara revived it at the 1983 Camden festival and subsequently gave it a studio recording (ORC15) in 1996. It was also performed in Giessen, Germany, in 2012 (a performance which I saw). Now Boston's Odyssey Opera has revived it for two performances (Nov. 1 and 3, 2019) in a complete, staged, performance directed by Steve Maler and conducted by Gil Rose.

Maler's production is fairly straight forward and has the virtue of making the confusing plot fairly clear (with the help of English surtitles). Whether for budgetary or philosophical reasons, he and Set Designer Jeffrey Allen Petersen place the action in an abstract ("metaphorical") set with a slatted backdrop and a huge moon in the first act, which takes place at night on the banks of the Thames. Rowers move, symbolically, slowly across the stage. When Ernesto and Churchill meet, presumably outside the cottage, Clotilde is "inside," an interior symbolized by a slightly raised platform. More grey slats descend to form the two prison cells in Act III, and minimalist furniture is used when needed—a throne for Act II, tables, chairs. It was certainly not realistic, but it was not ineffective either. Costume Designer Brooke Stanton seemed to draw clothes from both vaguely Renaissance and modern times in an attempt to "...blend eras to create worlds that feel both classic and contemporary." Mary's dresses looked like Mother-of-the-bride, circa 1985, while Clotilde's simple dresses seemed more suited to the period. Men wore doublets or long red coats. The rabble wore rabble stuff. The mixing of costume periods has become a cliché in opera production, and it always appears to me as if someone has raided the thrift store basement. At

least they weren't the absurd, contrary-to-type costumes of the Giessen production, which conflicted with the story at every turn. In Boston, lighting by Jorge Arroyo was effective.



The Ensemble

With one exception, Odyssey Opera's cast consisted of an impressive array of young singers near the start of their careers. The role of Maria was taken by Amy Shoremount-Obra, a soprano of Wagnerian capacity. In fact she had just won a 2018 competition in the Wagner division, and it showed. She is a big woman with a big, powerful voice, and yet she handled the coloratura quite well, except perhaps for some of the trills. More important, she had plenty of breath for the long phrases of the cantilenas. In contrast, the diminutive Alisa Jordheim, movingly sang Clotilde. I heard Jordheim sing Ninetta in *La gazza ladra* at Teatro Nuovo last summer, and she has recently sung Rosina in Boston. Pacini had given the original Clotilde, Teresa Merli-Clerici, a big scena of her own since she was the Prince of Cuto's mistress, and Ms. Jordheim delivered it beautifully in Act III. She was the best of the singers at acting too, and in spite of her small stature, her voice is big—big enough to compete and blend with Ms. Shoremount-Obra in the duets, which are one of the crowning joys of bel canto opera.

Pacini wrote the role of Fenimore for Nicola Ivanoff, a tenor with a very high tessitura, and the vocal writing shows it, often reaching up to high Cs. Opera Odyssey found a young tenor who could do it in Kameron Lopreore, a New Orleans native, who will perform there in Tchaikovsky's *The Maid of Orleans* in February, 2020. His barcarolle, early in the opera ("Quando assisa a me d'accanto") and his duets were spot on. Pacini gave the tenor a very

difficult aria in the last act, obviously modeled after Roberto Devereux' prison aria in Donizetti's opera, and even Ivanoff had trouble with it. Mr. Lopreore made it through this difficult, high, soft piece ("M'amò qual aman gli angeli") with honor, although his voice seemed a bit tired in those altitudes. His bouncy cabaletta proved to be well sung: "Ancor d'un sogno roseo").



Maria and Clotilde

Young baritone Leroy Davis sang Ernesto very well indeed. Although he looked as young (or younger than) his Clotilde (he is supposed to be much older), he was an exciting singer to listen to. The one veteran in the cast was James Demler as Gualtiero Churchill. He has numerous credits with Opera Odyssey (including Pietro de Wisants in L'assedio di Calais in 2017) and elsewhere. As always, his singing was very fine.

Gil Rose is a four-square kind of conductor and he is not a show-off in the pit, but he keeps things going in an agreeable way. He also rises to the excitement of the climaxes. Musical preparation was, in fact, quite high. The orchestra consisted of 36 players, and kudos must go to the harpist, Ina Zdorovetchi, who has a lot to do in this opera. The 16 person chorus was a little small, but they managed well.



Clotilde and Ernesto

We saw performances on Nov. 1 and 3. The second performance showed notable improvement. The cast seemed more relaxed, acting was better, and the audience, sparse on Friday night, was much fuller and more enthusiastic on Sunday. Opera Odyssey's "Tudor" season continues with the world premiere of Arnold Rosner's *The Chronicle of Nine*, Britten's *Gloriana*, Rossini's *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra* and Edward German's *Merrie England*.

I am indebted to the fine and thorough essay on the opera by Jeremy Commons, which initially appeared in the *Donizetti Society Journal*, 6 (1988) and was updated and reprinted for the booklet accompanying the Opera Rara recording.