RE LEAR
THE PLOT

Every brave attempt to reduce this heavily subprime, but poignant, cri-de-cœur of a play to manageable proportions involves factual loss together with (high risk) dramatic gains. The libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni for Antonio Cagnoni shows its colours at the start through its list of principals: they are six in number: *Lear, Cordelia, Regana, Il Matto, Edgaro* and *Gloster*, that is to say baritone-soprano-mezzo-soprano-tenor-bass, together with six *comprimari* one or two of whom have sizable roles and the others just a few words: they are - *Gonerilla, Duca di Cornovaglia, Conte di Kent, Edmondo, Duca di Borgogna, Duca di Albania* – ie soprano-tenor-bass-bass, the remaining two being indeterminate vocally. As a result of which distribution, however, Cagnoni's "*personaggi*" suggests a certain opulent belcantist logic.

His *Swan Song* – as indeed this is what *Re Lear* represents in Cagnoni's career - is a *tragedia lirica in 4 atti e 7 parti* and a huge score, one of *grand opéra* dimensions, replete with long episodes of dancing and feasting, a plethora of *bande* and substantial instrumental interludes under stormy skies amid frightful rocks and caverns, omitting only the gruesome Shakespearian Grand Guignol which would not have gone down well in Belle Époque Italy. Cruelty is implicit rather than explicit and takes place off-stage. In total contrast, faithful to the brilliantly modish over-the-top histrionic semaphoring of the day (we are in the era of Duse and Bernhardt with their silent screen gestures) not one iota of emotion fails to be squeezed-out to the very last gasp. Guessing what is happening is the problem, continuity falters in the face of such a dense score and plot, it is one of those operas heavily dependent on the satnav in the lap.

Act 1

At the start of the opera almost everything remains more or less as dictated by the play: Lear divides his Kingdom and allots husbands to his daughters as improvidently as Stratford demanded, the whole act with its stately background to betrayal is a slow rise to insensate fury as the aged monarch begins to go off his head. Set in the Royal Palace, Regan and Goneril flatter Lear; Cordelia demurs, is taken to task and rejected in a prolongued bout of anger. At the climax of the act Regan and Goneril get their bloody domains and husbands and a towering suffused Lear sends off the dissenting Gloucester and his son to follow Cordelia into exile

1.Coro d'Introduzione '*Salve, Salve: ti arridano*'

2. Ensemble: Lear/Gonerilla/Cordelia/Regana/Edgaro/Gloster

[Gonerilla: '*Più della luce, v'amo, o Signore*']

[Cordelia: '*Io…nulla Signore…Mio Re, mio padre ebbi da voi la vita*']

[Lear a Cordelia: '*Vai ti cela agli occhi miei* ']

3. (concertato a 9):
Cord/Matto/Reg/Gon/Duca di Corn/Lear/Glo/Edg/Edmondo con coro

Act II

Unfamiliar with the ways of Italian opera Shakespeare would have been astonished to find that his irresolute Edgar, son and heir of Gloucester, (now Edgaro, *primo tenore*) has been transformed into a macho swain with Cordelia in his sights. In this act, the first scene of which is set in his father's Castle near Dover, he goes to find her: she having contemptuously rejected the hand of the Duke of Burgundy, is now the Queen of France:

Sc. 1

1. Recit: Edgaro/Kent
2. Aria Cordelia '*Se di Cordelia il nome*'
3. Duetto Edgaro/Cordelia
   (primo tempo) '*Lascia che compiasi la mia tremenda sorte*'
   (cantabile) '*Là nel regale paterno ostello*'
   (stretta) '*Un'ora, il ciel, di tregua consente*'

Sc. 2

A vivacious reunion(not really known to Shakespeare) in the Castle of Regana (not Goneril): *banda*, roistering guests, the music of the dance dominates until the entry of the fool (Il Matto, *soprano*):

4. Coro '*Oro e poter, vino e piacer*'
5. Aria con coro Regana '*Ai giovani, ai forti l'impero del mondo*'
6. Aria Matto '*Viva il lusso a l'abbondanza*'

Lear enters but repulsed by Regana and her guests, he begins an unbalanced complaint :

7. Aria Lear
   (primo tempo) '*Sii forte. Sii forte, mio povero core*'
   (allegro feroce) '*Farò tal vendetta di queste rejette*'

he rushes out, thunder starts to be heard, the guests and the heartless sisters resume their celebrations:

8. Finale Atto II
   (quartet con coro) Reg/Gon/Corn/Edmondo
   '*Viva la giovinezza*'

Act III

Sc.1

A wild stretch of countryside not far from Gloster's Castle. Edgaro is disguised as a beggar under a darkening sky, a big storm is imminent:

1. (recitative) '*Delle sventure mie come pianger pottrei?*'
   (romanza) '*Ma tu, divina, eterea larva*'

He takes shelter in a cabin and attempts to keep his incognito when joined by other refugees. A bedraggled Lear followed by his fool appears on a rocky spur just at the moment when the storm breaks, they descend towards the cabin. The old king is quite mad and gestures to the heavens:

2. Lear (ballad) '*Soffiate aquiloni, nel l'ira del nembo*'
he is recognised by Edgaro who echoes his theme
[Edgaro *'Già l'ira prorompe dei Numi cruciati'*]
which develops into a noisy
3. Trio con coro (Matto/Edg/Lear)
[Matto '*Involati all'ire*']
and they all take refuge in the cabin as the violent storm reaches its climax the refugee peasants begging softly for pity
4. Coro *'Lunghi fantasimi spazian per l'etere'*
both for themselves and for their King (who they have not recognised to be in their midst).

The storm slowly moving away Gloster, now blinded, is led towards the cabin (in the play Regan's husband the Duke of Cornwall, has pulled-out his eyes with Regan's assistance – a scene happily dispensed with by Ghislanzoni)

5. Recit. [Gloster '*Sull'orlo dell'abisso*']
6. Ensemble Edgaro/Gloster/Lear/Matto
[Edgaro '*Gli infami ancor respiranno*']
[Gloster '*La crudel Regana volle , punirli*']
[Lear '*Bieca quei due fantasmi*']
[Matto *'Pazzo chi al verno spogliarsi'*]
[Lear *'Corriamo al sole...'*]

Sc.2

The scene is set by a fountain in the garden of Cordelia where she has retired:

7. Coro Ancelle *'Zeffiretto gentil'*
Cordelia has had news of the outrages of Regana:
8. Recit *'O sciagurata..Ed era desso il mio povero padre'*

The demented king is brought to her by the fool. He fails to recognise her and asks for water, which she gives him:

Duetto Cordelia/Lear
(primo tempo) Lear '*Prendi; mercè ti rendano*'
Cordelia '*Oh! Questo bacio dissipi le angoscie*'
(secondo) Cordelia *'Io nella polvere, prostrarmi a tuoi ginocchi'*
(cantabile) Lear *'La giovinezza è sorridente'*

Cordelia decides to summon her soldiers to attack the castles of her sisters and leaves taking her father with her

(stretta: coro [dentro]) *'Ai duchi feroci si intimi la guerra'*

Act IV

Sc.1

Regana awaits with trepidation news of Cordelia's French army from within Gloster's Castle which she and Cornwall have seized and is now under siege. From her window she sees that it is completely surrounded by hostile soldiers:

1. Recit. Regana 'Densa nube di polve ricopre la pianura'

Her husband tells her that Gonerilla has been captured and the Duca di Albania slain, he tells her they are lost:

Corn. *'In mezzo all'armi la morte io troverò'*

Through the window she watches him cross the bridge and vanish under a seething mob of assailants; Regana calls for her servants, but no one responds to her cry:

2. Regana *'Cupo un lamento odo eccheggiar'*
   [da se] *'Chi è quell vegliardo pallido e bieco...'*
   'Qual nuovo spettro, mi sorge a latò?'
   'Perchè al mio capo le man distendi?'

Edgaro surprises her, irresolute, at her window

3. Edgaro *'Eccola! ...In mia man tu sei'*
   Regana *'Ah! no. Tanto colpevole col padre tuo non fui...*

She tells him if he kills her, Cordelia will die at the hand of Edmondo,

Regana *' Pietà di me , di me pietà'*
Edgaro *'Qual Dio, qual demone, qual Dio ti salverà?'*

He rushes away

from outside they can hear the cries of *'Evviva Cordelia'*

Sc.2

In the camp of the French soldiers the peasants celebrate victory with dancing and singing:

4. Danza con coro *'Di danze, di gaie canzoni'*

To the sound of this victory chant Kent reveals that the retreating soldiers of Regana have sized Lear and Cordelia in their tent and handed them over to Edmondo: the singing comes to a halt with the arrival of the fool pale and weeping

5. Matto [con coro] *'Dacchè cadea reciso quell fiore di beltà...*
   È morta! È morta!

A funeral march is heard approaching

Kent *'Non è più. Dal perfido Edmondo uccisa fu'*

The body of Cordelia is carried slowly in by her soldiers, followed by Lear...

6. Aria finale: Lear *'Ululate ululate. Uomini siete di macigno...'*
   [coro *'Ei delira'*]
   'Mio cor, ti sciogli in lagrime'
   [coro *'Sventurata atroce'*]
   (alla salma) *'No! no! Non è ver che il candido fior di tua vita è spento*
   ... dimmi che vivi ancor...
   Più mai! Più non vivra... guardate là là là'
   he falls dead by the side of the bier.

Edgaro rushes in having killed Edmondo

'Cordelia!...O strazio atroce... spenta!. È vivere poss'io?
Coro *'Pace alla pia Cordelia*
Pace all'estinto Re'

To sum up: as far as the *plot* is concerned it is Giuseppe Verdi who is hovering in the wings. Not Shakespeare with his fable of the fleeting Tudors and their problems of succession [the Henrys as Lear? Their various women – Margaret of Scotland, Bloody Mary (Regan or Goneril?) and Elizabeth (Lady Jane Grey crossed with Mary Tudor ex Queen of France as Cordelia?) and their variously horrible husbands together with the shifty Dukedoms of Albany and Burgundy and other ambitious nonentities, above all its abandon to sound and fury and nothing]. We don't have to look far to find Verdi's Gilda in Cagnoni's opera, his Lady Macbeth and her *brindisi*, her psychopathic introspection, as well as several of his old men (Foscari, Rigoletto, Boccanegra) and a vestige of the Verdian tenor. But the music mostly postdates Verdi; Cagnoni would certainly have fascinated the Bard had he been attuned to the accents of an emergent verismo! **Alexander Weatherson**

NB This is a through-composed opera true to its late nineteenth-century ethos: the numbers serve only as a guide to its articulation



Re Lear:
Might we be about to lose the ultimate fantasy opera?

I suppose we lovers of both opera and Shakespeare often speculate how Verdi's *Re Lear* might have turned out. I imagine it would be quite unlike more recent Lear operas (Reimann: a grand part for the baritone that commissioned it, but little else emerging through a storm of modernist noise - Sallinen: a brave attempt at the comic/tragic irony, but fatally encumbered with a Suomi text (it has yet to receive a performance in English, I think)). Let me hazard a guess at what each of us hears in the virtual opera house of our imaginations: Lear as misunderstood as Philip II, Regan as malignant as Eboli, Gloucester as equivocal a father as Germont, Cordelia as pure as any number of Leonoras. It is a tempting cocktail, and what's more we can 'karaoke' the main scenes in the shower (al fresco or domestic). So what happens when the news comes that a *Re Lear* by Cagnoni (from about the same period in Italian operatic history) exists: never before performed, and will be premiered in Martina Franca this summer? Do we shut it out and retire into our little fantasy 'Don Lear' or 'La Fedeltà' world? Or do we remember Cagnoni's *Don Bucefalo* and try to dismiss him (as many do Donizetti) for being 'not up to such a tragic subject'? Well, we shouldn't be so craven!

Consider the facts. Making an opera of King Lear presents some challenges: a buffo-style story (doddering father puts himself at the mercy of his grasping daughters); then there are alienating events (for