La fidanzata corsa

Pride, Patrimony, Matrimony and Murder

Alexander Weatherson

"O padre" (she sings happily)
...queste lagrime
Son figlie del contento..."
...a shot rings out and she falls dead. Alessio steps smiling onto the stage

A five year sprint followed *Saffo,* in a renewed leap for fame opera after opera emerged, each one of which opened yet another door. Before a mesmerised public Giovanni Pacini conjured-up no less than ten enormous operas, some of which were quite the most challenging ever to be offered to the Italian stage. His musical portraiture now ripened extravagantly, like Donizetti in these years, he brought to each of his characters a vocal identity which was both poignant and his own idiosyncratic response to human frailty.

The blissfully hyper-romantic but poisoned *La fidanzata corsa* is in many ways a lynchpin of this phase of renewal, in utter contrast to his zany *L'uomo del mistero* and the blighted *Il duca d'Alba* which came before, and the lovelorn *Maria regina d'Inghilterra* and cyclothymic *Medea* which came after, the concentration of this extraordinary opera took audiences by storm. With its prima at the S.Carlo on 10 December 1842 and its amazing cast of Eugenia Tadolini, Filippo Coletti, Giovanni Basadonna and Gaetano Fraschini this *melodramma tragico in tre atti* offered a riposte to Verdi's pounding *Nabucco* and Donizetti's cosy *Linda,* operas which might roughly be regarded as contemporary. Insidiously fluent, compulsive, seductively coloured and almost breathless in its flow, in a deadly setting of moonlight chiaroscuro, this Corsican drama paces its violence to the sound of native guitars, harps and bassoons, the jangling accompaniments and wild cries of popular music underpinning a vocal line that (surprisingly) never quite surrenders to excess – and this despite a dramatic content that would have set the tills ringing furiously in the silent film era.

Salvadore Cammarano culled his plot from Victor-Henri-Joseph Brahain Ducange's three-act play *La Vendetta ou La Fiancée corse*

launched in Paris a decade earlier[1], a shady shocker set at the time of the Directoire and designed both to satisfy a low taste for Grand Guignol and to titillate the political sensibilities of an overdressed audience *à propos* the Ile de Beauté, an offshore presence never quite out-of-mind since the arrival and departure of the "Little Corporal." In fact this boulevard source lent itself perfectly to operatic treatment: the three headings of **Disfida, Fuga** and **Vendetta** one of which prefaces each act of Cammarano's libretto provide an uncomplicated resumé of the argument, not one iota of which escapes Pacini's minute attention. Here again we have the composer riding high, full of new confidence, nothing beyond his grasp after the trough of a few years earlier when (or so he likes us to believe) he had given up the struggle against Bellini and Donizetti with his tail between his legs. "*Sorpassato*" he said he was, though now he was running faster than everybody else, Verdi could never keep up with either his range or pace and Donizetti – more prudent and even more resourceful – would never have dreamed of attempting to rival the sheer throwaway melodic profligacy that was such a feature of Pacini's operatic orbit.

The plot? Pacini, of island birth, could scarcely have been unresponsive to tribal mentality, claustrophobia, and to mafioso conflict even if he never set foot on that particular contentious shore. With an acute ear for all kinds of dissent, for exotic retribution in an idyllic setting cankered by hatred the storyline of his "Trouble in Corsica" shares only one important quirk with his next opera, *Maria regina d'Inghilterra* : that kind of engaging operatic dichotomy he adored where he has both his cake and eats it!

The perfect conclusion; indulgent to every censorial whim: whereas *Maria* has a tragic ending with a gloriously ecstatic dénouement tacked-on afterwards in which he is in his element, *La fidanzata corsa* has a happy ending with wonderful *fioriture* but then has a gloriously ghastly scene of horror as a chaser to bring down the curtain.

Planned at the start of 1841 with a title of *La vendetta corsa* the verses appear to have been dribbled to Pacini, there was a certain problem with novelty as the Ducange play was far from unknown in Naples (it had been given in Italian perfectly successfully in the previous decade in the tiny Teatro Fiorentini). But Cammarano considered the subject "*not unsuitable for you*" and he knew that Pacini "*had another Saffo boiling in his veins*"[2], he asked to get to grips with the composer soon so that they could tackle together the

[1] It has nothing whatsoever to do with Prosper Merimée's *Colomba*.
[2] John Black *The Italian romantic libretto, s study of Salvadore Cammarano* (Edinburgh 1984), 79-80

large-scale items. Thus they began work in tandem unprecedentally early (for our composer that is) in September 1842, demonstrating readily enough that Pacini understood that the opera required a landmark application, and despite their fragmented arrival on his desk, he proved uncharacteristically responsive to the verses he received. For once, it would seem, the drama as a whole exceeded the sum of its parts, Pacini welcomed an argument that glued his audience to its seats to the very last note and there was nothing like bloodshed to bring down the tabs. Even the censors found that in this instance it was spilled with an unquestionable logic.

There was another feature, however, that puts *La fidanzata corsa* apart; instead of the familiar dulcet duelling of sopranos as in *Norma* and *Saffo* here we had a violent conflict of tenors, an acutely dangerous move theatrically as two *primi tenori* on the same stage was both dynamite and very expensive. It demanded an unusually intrepid impresario and the rare presence of friendly rivals able to come to terms with a struggle for vocal glory. As for Pacini himself, he could not have avoided casting his mind back to the disaster of *Cesare in Egitto* at the start of his fame when one tenor – attempting to upstage his rival broke a blood vessel in his throat in full cry and promptly collapsed in a fountain of blood [3]- a *tragedia lirica* to be avoided at all costs. In the event he would have almost as much trouble here. His operas were always difficult to revive. Even at his very best his music was far more vulnerable than that of Donizetti and Bellini, the eccentric modulations he indulged-in, the syncopations and asymmetries he favoured (still extant in the works that followed *Saffo*) were both hard to sing and to sustain. No wonder these operas kept the stage so briefly. *La fidanzata corsa* would suffer permanently from its vocal demands, in some forty or so stagings in some nine or ten different countries only a fraction of the productions managed to stick to the prescription two tenors - all the others cast Alberto Doria - the more lyrical of the two, as a mezzo-soprano, thus blighting the opera fatally despite its remarkable music. Those Italian cities within his orbit (Florence, Lucca, Catania, Naples and Palermo for example) stuck to his guns and supplied him with two tenors, many of those outside his immediate range put on *La fidanzata corsa* with travesty casting, thus La Fenice gave the role of the Genoese soldier to Carolina Vietti in 1844, La Scala in 1846 – a theatre invariably inimicable to his reputation - gave the role to the soprano Elena Angri. It failed of course. Indeed *two* only revivals of this opera can actually

[3] *Cesare in Egitto* (T. Argentina, Rome 1821) in which the young tenor Amerigo Sbigoli attempted to outsing Domenico Donzelli with horrifying results.

be said to have been completely and utterly worthy of the *prima*: that at the S.Carlo in June 1843 with Tamberlick and Fraschini, capped at the end of his life when this same theatre revived it for the very last time (November 1866) with Stigelli and Bertolini.

But the orchestration was even more daring. No one coloured his music with more regard for panache and less regard for hard reality. As hopeful modern *revisori* have noted grimly, he alone among all his contemporaries could not resist asking for bagpipes on stage in his *Malvina di Scozia* (something a legion of "*scozzesi*" around him had managed to avoid), in *La fidanzata corsa* he asked for "*chitarre nazionali*" to colour the choral *Serenata* near the end of Act I with a wonderfully beguiling *tinta locale*, thus putting it ironically at odds with the bitter duet that was to follow. [4] But who, in revival, would be able to provide this handful of Corsican guitars? And who would be able to play them? Supposedly Paris – at the Théâtre-Italien on 17 November 1846 – could have made an attempt to get hold of a clutch of native musicians, but I doubt it. Indeed I doubt if guitars of any kind were ever available for a revival of *La fidanzata corsa.*[5] Thus musical integrity was given its usual short shift.

The opera focuses on the feuding Zampardi in their standoff with their rivals the Tobianchi - both tribes sleeping with a musket under the pillow. Stiff and unyielding they agree on one thing only, their fear of Genoa that rules Corsica with a rod of iron. The venerable Piero Zampardi, wearied after decades of strife, plans to marry his daughter to the son of his opposite number thus putting an end to the feud. His noble project falls foul of one important factor: this being Italian opera, Rosa, his daughter, has fallen in love with the leader of the occupying troops (Alberto Doria – tenor number one).

Of course Cammarano may have been poaching from *Lucia* but Pacini's plot takes quite a different route, his heroine, is defended, not destroyed by her brother and actually a shred or two of the plot may plausibly be attributed to *La straniera* (1829: Romani always dangled his plots temptingly before Cammarano) the hero Alberto (formerly it was Valdeburgo) is believed to have drowned after a tussle on the beach and there is a trial at the opera's heart.

Ettore Zampardi (tenor number two) discovers to his horror that the man on the beach he has killed is his sister's husband. Rosa's betrayal is brought before a tribal jury, where dressed in bridal array for her

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[4] The text of this Serenata '*O giovinetta sposa*' had been borrowed by Cammarano from Part III Sc 4 of his own *Maria de Rudenz* of 1838 where its context was even more disturbing

[5] Revivals in Barcelona (1848), Lisbon (1848), Buenos Aires (1854), and Rio de Janeiro (1850/1855) being conceivably an exception

blighted marriage with Alessio Tobianchi she is arraigned by her furious father and demands for revenge from the rival tribe. Under Corsican law as a "*sposa infedel*" she must be executed by the jilted "husband". As a musket is levelled to kill her, Ettore throws himself in front of his sister but Alberto bursts in with his troops and sends off the howling Tobianchi with a fine burst of contempt…

"Addio" "Mi rivedrete"

Confronted by his contrite offspring and her powerful bridegroom Piero backs-down and accepts her choice of marriage. The *ancelle* readjust her bridal veil and she sings ecstatically of her happiness; on the arm of Alberto she turns towards the audience, there is a musket shot from the wings and Rosa drops dead.

LA DISFIDA

INTRODUZIONE Atto I°	**Cavatina Piero**	
Recititativo con coro	*Il droppel Genovese*	**A Major 4/4**
Cantabile	*Per me tacque una vendetta*	**Largo giusto E Major 4/4**
	(Banda: musica guerriera)	
(intermezzo) Recit.	**Pie.** *Brevi momenti*	**All° vivace G Major 2/4 4/4**
Cabaletta (con coro)	*Sento fra voi quest'anima*	**Andante A Major 4/4**

Pacini's holograph, written in one long breath, displays the unusual fervour of this project and is astonishingly free from the usual second-thoughts or corrections. The *Preludio* to Act I (Maestoso) and the *Introduzione* (shortened for Paris in 1846 and much of it near-inaudible - daring the audience to strain to hear its insidious lilt) as well as the opening bucolic *coro,* unveil some of the *morisco* accents he would exploit in the music to come. The first real intimation of quality of this opera is displayed in the pacific entrata of Piero Zampardi (above)

SCENA E DUETTO	**Rosa/Ettore**	
Recit.	**Ett.** *Uopo sarebbe?*	**(omitted La Fenice 1843: extended at La Scala 1845, modified Paris 1846)**
Primo tempo	**Ett.** *Profferir l'insano accento* **Rosa.** *Su quell labbro in cui sperava*	**Allegro vivace/Lento D Major 4/4 (omitted at La Scala 1845)**
Stretta	**Rosa.** *Dall'improvviso annunnzio* **Ett.** *Lo sposo tuo qui giungere*	**Allegro affetusoso D Major 3/4 (duet largely replaced at La Scala 1845 with a newly composed cavatina for Rosa: *Spari dagli occhi il pianto* with cabaletta: *I dolci contenti*)**

A vehement dispute extensively remodeled for La Scala throwing all the emphasis upon the milanese primadonna (Anna Bishop), Pacini clearly having had second thoughts upon the novelty of the libretto in this hostile setting

RECITATIVO E ROMANZA	Alberto*	
Preludio	(Fiati/Arpa)	Andante sostenuto F Major 6/8
Recit.	*Son giunto! Ah! qui la prima volta io dissi t'amo*	Andante sostenuto F Major 4/4
Primo tempo	*Lungi finor da'tuoi celesti rai* (Arpa)	(con delicatezza) F Major 3/8
Romanza	*Mi parve il ciel funereo*	(cantabile) D flat/B flat Major 3/4

Notable for its harp intervention (probably encouraging sopranos to take this role) this ecstatic moonlit invocation leads almost without a pause into a duet with Rosa

["The only current recorded extract from this opera, remarkable for its unexpectedly limpid vocal line (Naxos/Giordani 8.557269), this romanza is wrongly attributed to Ettore]

SCENA E DUETTO	Alberto/Rosa	
Recit.	Ros. *Sei tu! Ritorni alfin* Alb. *A'cenni del Senato fu mestieri obbedir*	Andante/presto/allegro vivace B flat Major 4/4
Primo tempo	Ros. *Ah! sciagurata, ben lo sapea* Alb. *Cessa crudele!*	Allegro agitato con accento disperato F minor 4/4
Tempo di mezzo	Alb. *Allor che in Cielo*	And^te^ mosso D flat Major 3/4
Stretta	*Tu solo da quest'anima* [a2]	Allegro giusto F Major 3/4

A vivid and resourceful exchange between the lovers concluding in some stratospheric singing which seems to have survived intact in all the versions.

SERENATA	Coro
Recit	Alb/Pie/Guid/Ales (chitarre nazionali)
Scena e serenata	*O giovinetta sposa* allegretto G Major 3/8

The guitars open the serenade, being joined bolero-like by the orchestra at the introduction of the voices, the guitars continue to underpin the accompaniment and supply the final diminuendo in a succession of arpeggiated chords

SCENA E DUETTO	Alberto/Ettore	
Recit.	Alb. *Si dileguar...* Ett. *T'arresta!*	Allegro moderato G Major 4/4

Primo tempo	Ett. *Era il tempio in quelle mura* Alb. *La mia patria, sciagurato* (tremolo)	Moderato E flat Major 4/4
Stretta	Alb./Ett. *Tu provocasti il brando mio* (partly a2)	Allegro E flat major 2/2 3/4(echoing dance music) 4/4 2/2 (vocal sequences mildly remodeled for Paris)
	(Banda di dentro, tempo di valz.)	

The two tenors strike at each other in the sea to the sound of dance music coming from the house of the Zampardi

LA FUGA

DUETTO **Atto 2°**	**Rosa/Piero**	
Recit.	Ros. Gia. Pie. *Amici congiunti abbandonai l'incarco* (Arpe)	(mostly omitted at La Fenice 1843 but considerably extended for Paris 1846 with an inserted duettino) And[te] 4/4 3/4
Primo tempo	Pie. *China quaggiù dall' Etere* Ros. *Prece si pia, si tenere*	Andante affettuoso E flat Major 3/4
Stretta	Pie. *Tenerezza in me si desta* Ros. *Un istante; o padre, almeno. Deh! Prolonga il santo amplesso…*	Allegro mosso/Allegro vivace E flat Major 4/4 2/2 (La Fenice 1843 used the second two-strophe section to create a cabaletta for Rosa, at the same time omitting much of the following dialogue)

The highly emotional central duet of the opera marking Rosa's resolution to take flight with Alberto - leading both to her confrontation with, and her denunciation of, Ettore and her intemperate condemnation as a result by both tribes…

FINALE	**Tutti**	
Scena		**Larghetto/All[o] vivace**
Recit.	Ros. *M'odi…o padre, Egli…uccise il mio consorte…*	(text completely changed and extended for Paris 1846 beginning with Ettore's *E perduta!* and with much new music) Allegro A flat Major/C Major 4/4
Largo (terzetto)	Ros. *Quanto a me concesse Iddio* Pie. *Sul mio capo un fulmin piomba* Ett. *Ah! di lei, di lei pietade*	Largbetto D flat Major 4/4
Concertato	Pie. *Va..ti scaccio dal tetto paterno* (con tutti)	Allegro vivo A flat Major 4/4

LA VENDETTA

PRELUDE Atto 3° SCENA ED ARIA	Alberto	
Preludio	(obbligato corni)	Andantino C Major 6/8
Aria	Alb. *Già col sangue la ferita*	Andante cantabile A Major 3/4
Tempo di mezzo	Giacinta. *Non vaneggio! Si tu vivi!* (con coro) Alb. ...no, *perversi, no*	Allegro giusto F Major 4/4
	(harps throughout)	
Cabaletta	Alb. *Danmi un'aura, oh ciel, di vita*	Allegro giusto A Major 4/4 (partly re-used as an alternative aria in *Lorenzino de'Medici*)

One of Pacini's most imposing bravura arias for tenor with full choral (*coro di pescatori*) intervention in the tempo di mezzo and bridge passage of the cabaletta

SCENA DEL GIUDIZIO	Tutti	
Preludio	(obbligato fagotti)	Maestoso C Major 4/4
Recit.	Guid. *Siam tutti* Tutti. *Aperta è la vendetta*	(Greatly extended for Paris 1846 with added unisone sections and elaborate exchanges)
Quintetto con coro	*Pie. Mira d'intorno i giudici* Ros. *Pena mi attende*	Andante sostenuto B flat Major 12/8
Tempo di mezzo	Guid. *Sei tu, cui dall' infanzia*	Allegro D Major 4/4
Stretta (quartetto con coro) e concertato	Ett.Ales.Pie.Guid. *Vendetta! Vendetta!* Ros. *Se v'arde di sangue*	Allegro B flat Major 2/4 (cantabile)
	(trombe di dentro)	

Rosa's voice soars above the furious Tobianchi and Zampardi

GRAN SCENA	Rosa	
Recit.	Alb. *Qual osa resistenza opporre...* Ett. *Egli!*	(Accerchiandolo) 2/4 4/4
	(Arpa)	
Cantabile (con insieme)	Ros. *No...maledetta, in odio cotanto al padre mio*	Largo D flat Major 2/4
Tempo di mezzo	Pie. *Sorgi, l'impongo. Al tempio va*	Allegro vivace C Major 4/4
Cabaletta	Ros. *O padre...queste lagrime son figlie del contento*	Allegro brillante D flat Major 3/4
Coda tragica	Tutti *Ah! Tradimento!* Pie. *Oh figlia!* Tutti. *Più non è*	Allegro vivo C Major 4/4