Józef Michał Poniatowski's *Pierre de Médicis*

Wildbad Festival, July 24, 2025

Charles Jernigan, August, 2025

Who was Józef Poniatowski? Although his music has recently been championed by Polish groups, he was not Polish. He was born in Rome in 1816 as Giuseppe Luci, the fourth child of Countess Cassandra Luci and the Polish Prince Stanislaw Poniatowski. Prince Poniatowski was the nephew of Stanislaw II Augustus, the last king of Poland who was forced to abdicate the throne in 1795; his nephew left Poland in the aftermath and settled in Italy. Cassandra Luci was a young married woman when they met; her husband, Vincenzo Bellnoch, was believed to have died in the Napoleonic campaigns in Spain, but without proof of death, the Vatican refused to annul Luci's marriage and the five children she bore to Poniatowski were born out of wedlock. Bellnoch was in fact not dead, and he resurfaced in Italy in 1814 when Luci's liaison with Poniatowski had been in place for almost ten years and had already produced four of their five children.

In 1822 the Poniatowski family moved to Tuscany and the Grand Duke conferred the rights of nobility on the children of the Prince, with the title of Counts and Princes of Monterotondo, after a place in Tuscany where the family owned an estate. In 1830 Bellnoch died and Cassandra and Prince Poniatowski were finally able to wed, and eventually their children were legitimized. Thus Giuseppe Luci, born in 1814, became Józef Poniatowski with the title of Prince of Monterotondo. Young Giuseppe/Józef studied music in Florence and sang as a tenor. He spent much of his adult life as a diplomat, but his musical life continued apace—as a singer, a librettist, a composer and a conductor.

In Italy Poniatowski wrote eight operas between 1838 and 1848, most of them premiering in Tuscan cities (one was a rewrite). The most popular of these was the opera buffa *Don Desiderio* (Pisa, 1840), which has been successfully revived in modern times in Poland. In 1848 Poniatowski was sent to Paris by the Grand Duke Leopoldo II as the representative of the Duchy of Tuscany to France, Belgium and England. He would live there for many years and became a naturalized French citizen, a Senator and a trusted counsellor to Emperor Napoleon III. When the Emperor was forced into exile in England after France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War, Poniatowski followed him there, dying in London in 1873.

Although Poniatowski's main career in France was diplomatic, he found time to write four operas for Parisian houses: *Pierre de Médecis* (1860) for the Opêra, *Au travers du mur* (1861), a one-act opera-comique for the Théâtre-Lyrique, *L'aventurier* (1865), a four-act opera-comique for the same theatre, and *La contessina* (1868), a three-act opera seria in Italian for the Théâtre-Italien. His last opera, *Gelmina,* was written for Covent Garden in 1872, a year before his death, and starred Adelina Patti.

Opera Rara in its earliest incarnation under Don White performed *Au travers du mur* in English with piano accompaniment at the Hintlisham Festival in 1973 (a performance immortalized on LP by the private UROC label). *Don Desiderio* is available in a video version from Poland on YouTube and *Pierre de Médecis* is also available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMAKRCi2LKE , from a Krakow concert performance, in audio only. The last of these operas was revived, uncut, at the Rossini Festival in Wildbad, Germany, on July 24, 2025. In my opinion it is a masterpiece, worth revival on any opera stage.

The “excuse” for performing a Poniatowski opera at a Rossini Bel Canto festival is that the two composers were friends, Poniatowski’s early operas sound very Rossinian and Rossini evidently composed variations for arias in one of his friend’s operas. The “real” reason for the performance is that the Wildbad festival is allied with the Szymanowski- Philharmonia Krakow Orchestra and Chorus (which perform in the Wildbad summer festival) and the Poles were wanted to promote one of their own (even if Józef Poniatowski was one step removed from Poland). Wildbad assembled a very fine cast, and the orchestra and chorus were fine-tuned and well rehearsed. We must be grateful to the Krakow ensembles for bring the work back to life. The opera was performed as a concert.

The story (libretto by Saint-Georges and Émilien Pacini) is simplicity itself and was perfect for Poniatowski with his Tuscan background, set as it is in Renaissance Pisa and Florence, although the plot is hardly historically true. The librettists Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Émilien Pacini confected a grand opera with a long formal ballet, great choruses and spectacle, and yet one which is very Italianate in structure and melodic inspiration. Pierre (Pier de’Medici) is in love with the beautiful Countess Laura Salviati, but Laura loves Pierre’s brother Julien. Laura’s uncle, the villainous Friar Antonio wants to promote a union between Pierre and Laura as a means to power through the ruler. Antonio thwarts an attempt of Julien and Laura to elope and tries to force Laura to marry Pierre by threatening her with the convent if she refuses. She chooses the convent, but Julien rushes to save her before she takes her religious vows. Pierre, his throne threatened and wounded in battle, suffers a change of heart and also tries to stop her from taking vows as a nun so that she can be united with Julien. In the first version of the opera, the brothers are successful and there is a happy ending. In 1861, a year after the successful premiere, Poniatowski revised the end towards tragedy: Julien arrives minutes too late and the fatally wounded Pierre dies just has Laura enters the convent. The tragic ending was the one selected for the Wildbad performance.



Act 1 set design

The strong cast in Wildbad was led by Patrick Kabongo, a Wildbad regular, in the tenor role of Pierre. Laura was sung by the beautiful soprano Claudia Pavone and Julien by superb baritone César San Martin. The equally superb bass Nathanael Tavernier was the evil Fra Antonio. Anie Gou as Julien's friend Paolo Monti rounded out the exceptionally strong cast.

Pierre de Médicis is a big opera. After an extensive overture built on two themes in the opera, the melodically rich first act includes Pierre's suave and memorable cavatina "Pour vous, j'abandonne Florence," a difficult duet between Antonio and Pierre which ends when the tenor climbs to a high E flat. Laura's luscious cavatina ("Doux rêve de ma vie") reminds us of Donizetti and concludes with a catchy cabaletta. The first act ends with a duet for Julien and Laura. All of these numbers and structures are more Italian than French, more typical of the bel canto world which had almost disappeared by 1860.

The second act, however, is all French grand opera *divertissement* with a very Meyerbeerian gambling chorus and a full 30 minute ballet entitled "Les Amours de Diane," the story of which has close parallels to the opera's plot. A grand ensemble ends the act, which would also have been full of spectacle—marches and the lighting of "luminarias." Act 3 includes a prayer for Laura and a wonderful trio in which Antonio and Pierre confront Laura with her choice of marriage or the veil. The fisherman's barcarolle, a simple, memorable tune heard in the overture, is the signal for the elopement, now thwarted by Antonio and Pierre. An aria for Julien with a martial cabaletta is the act finale, as he and the aroused people gather to fight Pierre. The last act opens with a grand aria for Pierre, "Abandonné de tous," as he tries to arouse drunken soldiers to fight for him, but cannot. The last scene is in the convent as Laura prepares to take her vows, replete with religious choruses and a final dramatic confrontation with Antonio.

It will be seen that the opera (with the exception of Act 2) is very Italianate, built on cavatinas and cabalettas and grand ensembles. Donizetti often stands in the background with his grand French works *La Favorite* and *Dom Sebastien* serving as models while sometimes both the story and the music foreshadow Verdi's grand French work *Don Carlos.* With all that, the melodic and orchestral richness are in Poniatowski's own voice. He was consistently able to create fluid, memorable melodies and his orchestration was always competent and often interesting.

At the end of the performance in Wildbad, the excellent conductor, José Miguel Perez-Sanchez, held up his huge orchestral score and kissed it, homage to the forgotten composer who had created it. Is it a lost masterpiece? Each person will have to decide for him or herself, but anyone reading this, anyone who loves bel canto opera should find much to admire in the score. The singers and the wonderful Chorus and Orchestra certainly believed in the music and gave it their all. I hope the CDs of this complete performance will come out soon. The opera deserves to be heard.