

# An angry young man of 1833

## *Il furioso*

Alexander Weatherson

Islands have always invited soul-storms, if only operatically, think of Rinaldo, Alcina et al. A microcosm fit to concentrate the mind wonderfully upon the eternal truths, but not just the mind, the eye and the ear too. Something of the sort must have warmed Jacopo Ferretti to his bold plot, a focus for truths blown-asunder by a tropical hurricane no less capable of wiping the plate clean than sardonic and parodistic. The tobacco trade<sup>1</sup> must indeed have alerted the famous librettist to the wilder shores of humanity. In *Il furioso all'isola di S.Domingo* he and Donizetti came up with an unexpected variant of the romantic hero, of the *solitario*, the man who wants to be alone, but now in the guise of a furious young husband blind with rage at his wife's infidelities who has taken refuge at the end of the earth. In point of fact on the paradisaical beaches of San Domingo where he is an object of pity by the natives. Surrounded by exotica poor Cardenio re-lives his trauma on a daily basis, absurd, comic and tragic by turn. Half-naked emotionally and literally, bitter, pathetic and exalted, taking refuge in every lyrical escape-clause to underpin his sad fate.

The Ferretti *Furioso* is a perfect vehicle for a Donizettian commentary on the anguish of despair, irresolution and heartbreak with a leavening of self-awareness that is both amused and cathartic. It is no coincidence that the plot derives from Cervantes. Poor Cardenio is to suffer, but never so much as when - as a result of a providential summer storm - his unfaithful Eleonora is washed up in 6/8 on the beach.



Is this really an *opera semi-seria*? The printed libretto declares it to be an *opera seria in due atti* but tradition has allotted the less-taxing description mostly on behalf of the buffo bass, the black slave Kaidamà of the trenchant wit who is the opera's star turn. Ferretti offers us a double irony: his slave is the one character liberated from

emotional excess, and his comments are the one serious element of this *comédie-humaine*. The poet (1784-1852) had encountered Donizetti some twelve years before, meeting him in Rome in 1821 they had worked together on two previous comedies *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* of 1824 and *Olivo e Pasquale* of 1827. *Torquato Tasso* was to follow at the end of 1833. Operas by Ferretti correcting social exclusion in more-or-less comic terms had extended from his famous *Cenerentola* of 1817 to his *L'innocente in periglio* (for Carlo Conti) of 1827, and then significantly enough, at the very last gasp of his long career when he wrote the text for an *Il mulatto ossia Il cavaliere di S. Giorgio*<sup>ii</sup> whose hero was destined to partake of the same knee-jerk racial enlightenment as Donizetti's revelatory *Kaidamà*, the poet sustaining such a heartening series despite a constant demand for "*vecchie comè Noé*" arguments like those of *Berenice in Armenia*, *Scipione in Cartagine* and *Cesare in Egitto*.

Its title proved distinctly elusive at the start, the opera was at first generally known as 'Il furioso nell'isola di S.Domingo' as the original vocal score (Ricordi) makes clear, probably because a play of this name was familiar to audiences, indeed a certain casualness was more in evidence than usual, the Teatro Carolino of Palermo - an opera house distinguished by performances of operas unknown elsewhere - *Arturo e Elvira* by Bellini for instance or an *Orietta in Lesbo* by Verdi - coming forth with an 'Il furioso dell'isola di S.Domingo'. Ferretti started work on the poem in the summer of 1832 and by August Donizetti had the first act in his hands; from the beginning he was pleased and wrote to him "*bravo, bravo Ferretti*". A series of letters exchanged between the maestro in Naples and the poet in Rome show both engaged in a struggle to tailor Ferretti's text to Donizetti's music almost note for note, the latter's constant perfectionism always in evidence by his exhaustive exhortation - "*Don't sweat...caro amico*" he says after some particularly meticulous demands. By mid-autumn the first act was fully orchestrated and the maestro (who had dashed-off *Sancia di Castiglia* in the interim and given it a successful prima at the S. Carlo on 4 November 1832) travelled up to Rome to join Ferretti where - as both immediately became ill - a tragi-comic correspondence ensued between the respective sick-beds. Even so, *Il furioso* was in rehearsal by the middle of December, its prima on 2 January 1833 in Rome at the Teatro Valle was one of the most clamorous successes in the history of a theatre that had seen so many momentous *prime*. The Furioso himself, Giorgio Ronconi then aged 22, carried moist-eyed audiences with him from his unmanly first appearance singing 'Raggio d'amor pareo' in the devastating cantilena that is the essence of his role. He made a real sensation as Cardenio (which alone broke new ground as baritones of the day - villains and fathers all - were signally deprived of sympathy when cast as husbands) his haggard, boyish contour and bedraggled despairing silhouette alternating endearing singing with frenzied interjections and brief episodes of quasi-reasonable behaviour (mostly in the face of the terrified *Kaidamà*) drew sighs of compassion from capacity audiences, an empathy in no way diminished when the opera was revived at La Scala that same year this time with a comparably moving Orazio Cartagenova in the title role where it ran for thirty-six performances.

As usual Italian opera struck a topical chord. Hidden among its artificialities were the themes of the day. Especially current was a strain of exotica that reflected the tenor of tabloid preoccupations - opera and ballet being quick to report-on and relish popular concerns with sarcasm or endorsement, often enough with savage irony (based on guilt or envy) - and most especially upon the age of colonial expansion blossoming all around them. The stage had become a barometer for a geopolitical dissidence that rose and fell irrespective of active censorship. It is often overlooked

that the decade of the *Restaurazione* - that is, 1820 to 1830 - was the boldest ever theatrically both in France and Italy with a colour, scale and scenic ambition that remains radical and innovative even today when the entire century can be put under review. The bourgeoisie had tasted blood and made the running launching a theatre that only became anodyne and dry as the century advanced. In this decade the underdog emerged as a reluctant hero - not as a result of the genteel salon romanticism then reclining on every sofa in Europe but as a result of plots making heroes out of the excluded. It was a strain of colonial exotica that would travel far and wide, provoking the ballet *Il sacrificio indiano/Le Sacrifice Indien* (1822)<sup>iii</sup> for instance, which tackled *suttee* (the convention that a widow should perish on the funeral pyre of her husband), and even though Hindu castes were not exactly under the noses of the audience heralded a new and compelling vision - a new social conscience that would launch an *Il paria* by Carafa (1826) or an *Il paria* by Donizetti (1829) on the Italian stage. It was a period when the pariah was no longer merely a literary escape mechanism for writers like Byron or Delavigne but launched an inspirational decade in opera plots, exalting, endorsing and enhancing the destiny of the religiously, emotionally and politically submerged. Two spectacular *grands opéras* were paramount in this phase of development: *La Muette de Portici* of Auber (1828) with its repeated cries of "Esclavage", and *Guillaume Tell* of Rossini (1829) with its insurrectional message of freedom - both outsize offerings and overtures (and what Overtures!) to the oppressed.

Slavery was more than a figurative item in this development. Under Donizetti's nose, at the time of his *L'esule di Roma* (1828) had been Luigi Marchionni's play 'Il proscritto romano' (1825) in which the following dialogue appears:

Publio (pointing to Leontina's slave Eumene who is kneeling in the background)

*Leontina! Costui che udi il nostro colloquio...*

Leontina *Costui è un degno, e fedel depositario de'miei segreti*

Publio *È perchè dunque ti dai il nome di schiavo?*

*Alzati, o confidente di Leontina. È il cuore, e non la condizione che ci fa schiavi. Abbracciami, e quindi innanzi ti darò il nome di amico*

The exceptional emotive symbiosis long apparent between Donizetti and almost all his librettists was most potent between him and his *Ferrettaccio*.<sup>iv</sup> More than a simple affinity it was the semi-serious nature of their combined musico-literary struggles that threw the most vivid light upon the philosophy of their world. As a genre *opera semi-seria* had been expiring quietly when Donizetti wrote *Il furioso*. The essential *Italianità* of an opera with something-for-everyone was in decline. Even so the choice of a plot demanding all the virtues and vices, volatile, haphazard, inconsequential - only half-serious (what anathema this must have unleashed *oltralpe*) proved irresistible to a composer longing to abandon predictability. It is difficult to resist the impression that the composer's heart was more engaged when creating such volatile scores as *Il furioso all'isola di S. Domingo* or *Torquato Tasso* than with those momentous works like *Parisina* or *Lucrezia Borgia* which were currently turning his international career to gold. It is a musical Jekyll and Hyde that epitomises his score, nothing is quite what it seems, especially when an exalted archi-romantic orchestral vocabulary is deliberately employed in pursuit of *opera buffa*.

There is no more touching, or funny, or disturbing sequence that the surrealist duet when Cardenio - who has previously greeted Kaidamà with punches ("piff paff") frog-marches the trembling slave to an alfresco dinner: *'Mio bene! Fior di beltà' 'Vedi una volta pranziam insieme dentro un boschetto'*

There is no *primo tempo*

Cardenio                    *Oh quanto! Oh quanto*  
*io smaniavo per te. Sentiami attratto*  
*da un arcano potere...*

Kaidamà                    *Io niente affatto*

Cardenio                    *Perchè tremi?*

Kaidamà                    *È un'usanza*  
*che non posso lasciar*

The unwelcome host now proceeds to serenade him with one of the composer's most beautiful songs (*cantabile* and an example, I suspect, of Maestro Donizetti making fun of himself) *'Di quei negl'occhi i lampi ardenti'* after which serene entrée the meal begins to take a more downward course; heralded by a *tremolando* indicating a soul-storm of real import, unsure now who actually is his guest, Cardenio reverts to his anguished norm: *'Iniqua, ingiusta, rea...la mia morte poi segnò' 'Barbara, io piango'*. Poor Kaidamà attempts to comfort him, tries reason, then protest and - finally reduced to echoing mechanically everything Cardenio throws at him, both frightened and aghast in the face of Cardenio's truly terrible distress, with *'Era il sorriso de'giorni miei/da lei diviso tutto perdei'* (the *stretta* of the duet) - he takes to his heels.

In this opera we are at the matrix of his attitude to genres. "Comic" and "Tragic" are not necessarily contradictory forces. It would be relatively easy to confirm that each and every one of his *opere serie*, however dark and imposing, contains at least one wry joke - at least one leavening allusion to the inherent comedy that underpins all our destinies, while each and every one of his *opere buffe* that keeps its head above *farse* has its moment of sober reflection. Thus, one could claim, the angry young man of 1833 invokes a tropical storm in the cause of an eternal paradox (in the Opera House at least). And then who was the guilty one? Who was the angry young man?

Was it Cardenio? Perhaps it was Ferretti? Could it have been Donizetti?

---

<sup>i</sup> Based in Rome, Ferretti made his living as an official of the tobacco trade operating in the Papal States, this supplied him with an intimate knowledge of plantation conditions

<sup>ii</sup> Whether this opera, set to music by Giuseppe Lillo, was actually performed at the Teatro Carignano of Turin has never been certain, Alberto Cametti in his *Jacopo Ferretti* (Milano 1897) 247 insists that it was "*abbandonato, per la proibizioni della censura*" while Florimo insists it was performed, and had an excellent reception; Caselli in his *Catalogo delle opere liriche pubblicate in Italia* (Ref.4554) 250-1/696 confirms that the libretto was published in the autumn of 1846 but no copy has come to the notice of the author and the opera would appear never to have been staged

<sup>iii</sup> Ballet by Luigi Henry, music by Michele Carafa, Pietro Raimondi and Luigi Carlini (Naples 1819/Paris 1822): its theme also forming the subject of operas by Spohr and Mayr

<sup>iv</sup> *Cfr* John Stewart Allitt *Tutto Ferretti?* [in] Donizetti Society Newsletter 81 (October 2000) 17-20