

A miracle written twice:

Caterina di Guisa

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Just as a score begins with a *cavatina* and ends with a *cabaletta* so the life of Carlo Coccia began *contrastato* and ended *luminoso*. Born of a modest musical dynasty in Naples on 14 April 1782, the son of Nicola Coccia, a violinist, he was enrolled in the Conservatorio della Madonna di Loreto at the tender age of ten where his infantile prowess attracted the attention of Fedele Fenaroli and Giovanni Paisiello who in turn and in tandem took his education in hand. As a result he was destined to become the alternative choice of a generation of opera lovers forever confined to the airs and graces of the Settecento and bitterly opposed to the barbs and beatitudes of a certain brilliant composer not yet on the horizon.

Like all his peers he opened his career with a chain of *farse* - the only friendly genre in an age of military invasion and political sins. It was Paisiello who got him his first commission: at the Teatro Valle in Rome on 14 November 1807, with *Il matrimonio per lettere di cambio* based on a play by Camillo Federici (1790) itself parodied from Raymond Poisson's *Le mariage fait par lettre de change* of 1735 (and fatally the same source for *La cambiale di matrimonio* which would ignite the career of his rival Rossini in three years time). Alas the young Neapolitan barely survived the challenge - his opera sank and he was ready to throw in the sponge but Paisiello threw him a lifebelt instead, and in the Spring of 1808 he re-emerged, this time at the Teatro degli'Intrepidi of Florence with *Il poeta fortunato* which was just fortunate enough to confirm its composer's vocation.

The strenuous years that followed were a race for survival, racing from city to city, composing at the drop of a hat, accepting every commission that came his way, writing arias for insertion into the works of his rivals and every now and then obliged to stand-in for a sick singer in operas of his own -

as at Ferrara in 1809 when he took the place tremblingly of the famous buffo Giuseppe Lipparini in his *Voglia di dote e non di moglie*.

But he was now to find himself face-to-face with his operatic nemesis. Ironically enough his real affirmation as an operatic innovator collided with the début of the *pesarese*. In 1810 Coccia composed his first semi-seria score: *Una fatale supposizione ovvero Amore e dovere*, for the Teatro San Moisè in Venice and just prior to the prophetic sortita of Rossini on that very same stage. In this one-act weepy (oddly described as a "*farsa in musica*") the modest Coccia now appeared as an exponent of an embryonic European romanticism with a hint of the passion and force that would dominate the second half of his career. That the public was nonplussed is no surprise, the contrast between Coccia's precocious sensibility and the brilliant packaging of his rival was too much for audiences to bear. *Una fatale supposizione ovvero Amore e dovere* combined the pathos of Paisiello's *Nina pazza per amore* with the grace of Giuseppe Farinelli (and no one would go mad for love or duty in the operas of Rossini!)

It was just a start. His next opera *I solitari* of 1811, also staged at the San Moisè, was even more committed to emotion with a reclusive melancholic drift that was disconcerting. With Napoleonic military adventure as a background frieze the stylistic battle between these two increased dramatically henceforth: Rossini's star soared, Coccia's wavered perilously. It seems that theatre directors had themselves developed a taste for conflict pitting brio against grace as a parable for the times - these two composers were often on the same bill and Rossini did not invariably come out on top: in 1813 for example, precisely the same cast sang Coccia's *Arrighetto* as that of Rossini's *Il Signor Bruschino* but while the latter was a failure the first won hands down (*Arrighetto* held its place for a decade but was forgotten by 1844 when *Il Signor Bruschino* was indelibly resurrected).

By the middle of the decade both composers were firmly established. Coccia's riotous *Clotilde* of 1815 at the Teatro San

Benedetto of Venice still held the stage in the 1860's and could be seen abroad as far away as Mexico, an opera within an opera with an especially potent argument and danced choruses more than a little indebted to Giovanni Simone Mayr, it shared the popularity stakes with *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* which had transformed the audience expectations of the day. But whereas the *pesarese* went on to universal renown, Coccia progressively lost his way, indeed floundered. Both maestri had reverses of fortune, especially with opera seria but Coccia fell on his face dramatically time after time: *I begli usi di città* (Milan, La Scala 1815) was booed despite a superb cast; *Teseo e Medea* (Turin, Teatro Regio 1815) had no more than a critical success; *Rinaldo d'Asti* (Rome, Teatro Valle 1816) in the vein of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Torvaldo e Dorliska* and *L'inganno felice* went unnoticed and un-applauded as on his previous appearance on that stage; *Etelinda* (Venice, Teatro San Benedetto 1816) was an utter fiasco and had to be replaced by *Clotilde*; *Claudina in Torino* (Venice San Moisè 1816) was heard coolly despite Coccia's abject surrender to Rossinian prototypes, while *Fajello* (Teatro degl'Infuocati Florence 1817) was fitted out with a jokey plot for safety - irrespective of its unique tragedy only levity was possible on that stage. But it was the last of this series that really caused him to retreat; *Donna Caritea, regina di Spagna* (Genoa Teatro Sant'Agostino 1818) hit the jackpot for disaster - he was ill as soon as he arrived, there was a 'flu epidemic in the city, his librettist was ill as well so he had only fragments of the text with the prima imminent but the management insisted on the fulfilment of his contract under pain of imprisonment, his bedroom door was guarded by two soldiers while he scrambled together a mixed-up score in six days. The opera was a failure of course.

It was the limit. Furious, and harassed by Rossinian ubiquity Coccia fled Italy and stayed away for almost a decade. An apparently propitious invitation to compose and conduct in Portugal took him to Lisbon where he encountered anything but the calm he sought. The superb Theatro São Carlos stood like a refuge in a sea of insurrection, revolt and revolution raged

throughout the city during his three-year sojourn, he was able to bow only briefly to his patron King João VI as the latter took ship to Brazil prudently just after his arrival. Not one of the four operas he wrote for Lisbon was much more than a *succès d'estime*, all were composed to second-hand plots and most of his time was spent keeping his head down and his life and limb intact under political (and real) crossfire. A further engagement for another off-shore venue came luckily to his rescue, this was a providential offer of appointment to conduct at the King's Theatre in London - a larger, more lucrative, less precarious engagement but without any truly creative solace. At the end of 1822 he took ship for England and the theatre in the Haymarket where almost every composer of note had featured the century before from Handel to Porpora to Gluck to Cherubini. Scarcely was he installed on his dais when Rossini too set foot in England with Isabella Colbran in tow for a musical season that would leave the *pesarese* with a capital sum guaranteeing his comfort for life. Coccia was faced with the nightmare of conducting the operas of his rival! The contact between the two competing composers on neutral ground was perfectly amiable naturally enough, Coccia was by nature tight-lipped and composed (thus his appeal to the anglo-saxons) while Rossini of course was the very picture of magnanimity (but crept off to the French Embassy when his pocket was full and signed a contract for Paris).

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This initial challenge successfully over, these years were to be a rich intermezzo for Carlo Coccia. An interlude of frank evolution. In the smoky British capital, a no-man's land of music unaware of or unallied with any native tradition of its own, he discovered Beethoven, Mozart, Hummel and Clementi and found himself face-to-face with Weber, Spohr and Mendelssohn. He heard music never to be dreamed-of in the Italian peninsula and won a professional boost by being recruited to teach singing and harmony at the brand-new Royal Academy of Music. For four years Coccia abandoned operatic

composition for cantatas and songs. He led the orchestra for the début of the seventeen-year-old Malibran in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and earned the friendship of the *diva assoluta* of the day, Giuditta Pasta. It was for her that he returned to opera - with a radical work in a style aimed at combining Italian melody with German orchestration. *Maria Stuart, regina di Scozia* (King's Theatre, London 1827)ⁱ emerged as an exceptionally long and strenuous evening which only a mesmerising star like *La Pasta* could have sustained. Thus it proved a critical but not a popular success. But it was a life-changer for the Neapolitan maestro: with it as an exotic trophy and a modish international prestige he shook off the gilded dust and returned home to take up the struggle anew.

The first stop was Milan. Bellini and Donizetti were now about to compete for the attention of an operatic clientele hungry for romantic frissons. Florid singing was frowned on and instrumental felicities were in the ascendant. *L'orfano della selva* (La Scala 1828) was his visiting card to a new public and by virtue of its sumptuous cast (Henriette Méric-Lalande, Carolina Ungher and Luigi Lablache), and a heart-rending argument, Coccia managed to put his name forward as a promising contender for popular favour. The settings (by Sanquirico) were some of the most remarkable of the decade. Three "anglo-saxon" operas followed suit, a direct legacy of his recent displacement: *Rosmonda* (La Fenice 1829) failed to make any real mark with the Venetians in view of its restricted palette and preponderance of female voices; but in Naples *Edoardo in Iscozia* (S. Carlo 1831) not only caused the audience to rise to its feet to welcome its prodigal home but also to respond to a score that was prodigal in good tunes. Alas, the third of the series, on the most exposed stage in Italy, *Enrico di Monfort* (La Scala 1831) - and set in England despite its foreign sounding title - supplied the expected correction, a poor plot

and a certain exhaustion led to fiasco irrespective of a cast that included both the Grisi sisters.

It was this unequal trio, however, that steadied the resolution of the composer. The combination of such a rebuff and a further commission for La Scala convinced Coccia that now was the time to stand up to the challenge of operas like *Anna Bolena* and *Norma* then sweeping the board. He had the good fortune to attract the sympathetic attention of Felice Romani - librettist of both these ineluctable triumphs, then at odds with Bellini over *Beatrice di Tenda*, in dispute with Mercadante over *Il conte d'Essex*, and involved in a knot of sour letters with Donizetti over *Parisina* - the libretti of each of which operas would be delivered late and piecemeal. The undemanding Coccia (bolstered by a British phlegm possibly) came like a welcome balm to the harassed poet, he instantly agreed to write for him, every aspect of the versification was discussed rationally, disputes were out of the question. These two would remain on good terms to the end of their lives.

Who chose the plot of *Caterina di Guisa*? It is plausible to assume that it was Romani himself. The libretto arrived on time and in one piece. It is in no way surprising that they both considered the subject irresistible, *Caterina di Guisa* was one of a family of subjects that heralded not just *Il conte d'Essex* (which succeeded *Caterina di Guisa* at La Scala) but also such landmarks in the Donizetti canon as *Roberto Devereux* (1837) and *Maria di Rohan* (1843), in each of which operas is to be found a wife trapped in infidelity and a husband constrained to hate his best friend as a result of a compromising trifle (a scarf, a medallion, or a ring etc). All the long series desperate historical intrigues of internal torment destined to end in death and disgrace. (It is very probable that they owe their real origin to *Otello*)

Coccia and Romani found themselves in perfect accord. All the deadlines were fulfilled with ease. The opera made its début at La Scala on 14 February 1833 and was heard in one of those *streppitoso* assaults of audience fervour that crowns an entire

career, the company of singers (which had failed in every other opera that season) found themselves with a miracle on their hands. This intensely dramatic score had a colouring, a power and an inventiveness that left the audience transfixed, its timing, engorged emotion and spatial orchestral usage witnessed a house on the edge of dismay. To cap it all the *finale ultimo* - distressing beyond belief - was conceived with a vigour and theatrical command that was found worthy of all the gory dénouements that entranced the Italian romantic stage. The unknown and unexpected Carlo Coccia had taken everyone by surprise.

Even the hardboiled critics were caught on a back foot:

*"Il pubblico...resterà a lodare nella nuova opera di Coccia quella venustà e maestria di condotta nei vari pezzi, quella chiarezza e quel vigore d'instrumentazione che sono le primarie prerogative della musica classica, di quella musica che parla al pensiero, che scuote l'animo, e che, se non strappa applausi clamorosi e assordanti, impone però allo spettatore il silenzio dell'emozione e della meraviglia"*ⁱⁱ

Few composers would be ready to make changes to a miracle but three years later Coccia rewrote *Caterina di Guisa*.

One can only guess why. With a better cast and more time at his disposal he had the opportunity to redistribute the roles. The original cast had been ad hoc: as the villainous Enrico duca di Guisa, Head of the League, there had been Domenico Reina (a lyric tenor); his unhappy wife, Caterina, had been Adelaide Tosi (a spinto soprano); as Arturo di Cleves, her cousin, had been Isabella Fabbrica (a contralto profondo); and San Megrino, her lover and the favourite of the King of France had been Francesco Pedrazzi (also a lyric tenor). All had been well-received in this initial version but Coccia certainly knew that *two tenors* was decidedly retro and *Rossinian*.

Whatever the explanation, for the revival of the opera at the Teatro Carignano of Turin on 15 June 1836 these roles were

recast: the dark basso Pio Botticelli now took that of Enrico; the famous soprano-angelico Henriette Méric-Lalande that of Caterina; the true mezzo-soprano Carlotta Griffini that of Arturo, while San Megrino was ascribed to the *baritenore* Domenico Donzelli, a quartet of the major voices to be heard in that day. The composer also took the opportunity to remove some of the fusion stratospheric high notes that littered the score - indeed Méric-Lalande and Donzelli - both veterans may well have requested such a change. Moreover, the entire tessitura of the version was adjusted downwards - with the single exception of the role of Arturo, which, for Carlotta Griffini, was moved slightly higher.

This exceptional facelift may equally plausibly have been at the request of Felice Romani eager to re-establish his "title" as supreme theatrical poet in his *hometown* of Turin.ⁱⁱⁱ Hoping to win back his credibility after the outrageous as well as damaging row with Vincenzo Bellini whose *Beatrice di Tenda* had paid the price for his failure to fulfil his obligations. In a distressing historical sequence, the failure of *Beatrice di Tenda* in Venice on 16 March 1833 had been prefaced by the brilliant reception of *Caterina di Guisa* at La Scala just one month before. Only now - after three years of bitter reproach from the *belliniani* - who accused him of betrayal, did the poet consent to offer an essay in self-justification on his own terms.

His review of this Turin revival in the *Gazzetta piemontese* may have been merely an excuse, but it sheds a real light on the opera for which he had neglected even Bellini:

"It was a serious thing three years ago, indeed it was bold for any composer of music to offer himself in Milan and at La Scala with a novelty! The stage still rang with the celestial melodies of Bellini: Pirata, Straniera, Norma and Sonnambula. The crown acquired by Donizetti with Anna Bolena and L'elisir d'amore at the Carcano and Canobbiana still resonated prodigiously. But even more prodigious was the success of Caterina di Guisa of the modest Coccia which

not just confronted the difficult task without any great voices, with no one to help him or stand up for him or share his glory, but triumphed with a prestige that was entirely his own, with a music that was entirely robust, entirely impassioned, entirely dramatic.

Here now on the stage of Turin is this regenerated daughter, here she is before you o readers, more lovely than ever, for your delight, and the pride of its gentle author. Coccia has reason to be proud, I know of few operas where the music is so true to the words, the singing so dramatic, the characters so well defined, emotions expressed with such clarity. There is sadness, unhappy love, fear, fright, jealousy, ambition, hatred and pain, in a word all the pathetic majesty of tragedy.

The introduction alone reveals both the ingenuity and the philosophy of the maestro as well as the artistry which few after Haydn and Mozart have known how to exercise. There is a fiesta at the Louvre and, at the same time, a conspiracy: here joy, there anger; on one side dancing, on the other, sighs. The merriment is expressed by an offstage band, sombre presage by the orchestra. These two contrasting moods are heard at first discretely, then one after the other, then mingled together in a marvellous fusion in the same way that an artist's colours are united together with one brush"

Romani rightly praised this introductory scene, with a quite fabulous orchestral ingenuity, some of its ingredients similar but different from that of *Lucrezia Borgia* so soon to be seen on that same stage with an analogous mixture of menace, masks, festivity and *banda sul palco*. Coccia's rivals were as bowled-over as his audience by this opera^{iv} he had nobly avoided musical cliché and develop a score of great fluency, drawing the whole plot into one lyrical breath. Thanks to the literary pretensions of Romani, at the apex of the plot is the cumulative set-piece *scena ed aria* 'Deh! non pensar che spegnere' in which Arturo recites verses by Ronsard to the afflicted Duchess agitated by the loss of a fatal handkerchief during an assignation with San Megrino. Formal yet asymmetric, deliberately

antiquated but poignant with its ballad sequence, it is a scenic tour-de-force. Both versions of this scene and the opera as a whole contain extraordinary solo writing: Caterina's aria 'E infierir cosi potete' was extended in this later version, the Act III aria 'Ah! fidar potessi almeno' introduced by the chimes of a clock (subsequently borrowed by Cammarano for Donizetti and *Maria di Rohan*) was recast for the trembling pathos of Méric-Lalande (*la grand'agitata*), this version lower and dense with emotion with its repeated clusters of acciaccature whose intensity expresses Caterina's desperation and indecision. Arturo had been given a new cabaletta after his cavatina 'Con la voce con la vita',^v and the Act II *scena ed aria* 'Torna a lei: tremante è forse' (like the previous aria in C Major much favoured by Donizetti and Pacini at moments of crisis) was added expressly for the 1836 edition to make the most of the colour of Donzelli's voice. (It was later adopted in further revivals by Lorenzo Salvi (eg Turin, Teatro Regio 1842-3) who was captivated by its contagious rhythms).

The most intense moments, however, of this drama, are the duets. That following the Ronsard recitation between a furious Guisa with a Caterina prostrate and imploring, unleashes an energy and truth that completely transcends the operatic recipe; the duetto between Arturo and Guisa 'Guisa, dirà la terra' supplied for the 1836 edition effectively combines the precision of Rossini with the ease of Donizetti; in the apocalyptic duetto between the lovers 'Deh! un accento', this second version is longer than that of the first, panic and blind amorous elation face each other in a profusion of stifled recitatives (marked for the most part *piano* or *pianissimo* with variations in tempo). Here, especially, the Neapolitan maestro displays the mastery with which he indulged in "*formulæ*" without compromising the acid impulse of this remarkable music. In the very last scenes Caterina radiates the splendour of a tragic muse, not a victim of illicit passion, but rather like the eternal focus around whom are centred human passions, she pleads for mercy: 'Per chi preghi?' asks the duke, "Per tutti..." she responds. 'Lascia in pria' is a desperate appeal for reason, in the 1836 version this aria finale

is more elaborate and covers a wider vocal range than that of 1833 edition in order to allow Henriette Méric-Lalande the free rein that was her due. The heartbreaking 'Si, m'uccidi ed il sangue versato' with its lacerating text and terrible climax came to be considered one of the most moving envoi of the decade.

The plot of *Caterina di Guisa* is a compendium of irrational, blind and egocentric passion which renders one woman hostage to violence and terror. From this "*French atrocity*" of Dumas (as *Il censore universale dei teatri* called it)^{vi}, compact, soulless, the authors were further ahead in time than each of them supposed. There are only four characters in the drama, there are no walk-on roles, there is no contrived spectacle - the stage is reduced to bare essentials (nearly all the tragic events take place off-stage) and the entire drama is carried out indoors as if a television camera was in the wings. The *moments clés* - the striking clock, the music of the dance, the clash of swords - are all outside. *Caterina di Guisa*, so vivid and contained, its brutality so refined, has a claustrophobic vulnerability that might belong to another era.

After this miraculous moment Coccia's prospects paled. *La figlia dell'arciere* (S.Carlo 1834) was mistreated by its heroine (Maria Malibran) and by the press; *Marfa* (S.Carlo 1835) scraped together two performances only, the plot was thought to be ridiculous; *La solitaria delle Asturie ossia La Spagna ricuperata* (La Scala 1838) was successful, an opera as brilliant as any of the day, it thrived even in revival but then unaccountably disappeared; *Giovanna II, regina di Napoli* (La Scala 1840) fell on stony ground, a poor libretto inspired cold music and the entire opera fell stone dead despite a splendid aria finale. His very last opera *Il lago delle fate* did not deserve the abyss into which it fell (Teatro Regio, Turin 1841), it picked up partially after a disastrous début but its author did not, furious, he decided to make an honourable exit from the operatic scene. The year before he had accepted the post of Maestro di Cappella at the celebrated cathedral of Novara, one of the most

prestigious posts the church had to offer. Here he spent the next thirty-two years. Like his incomparable rival and contemporary, Rossini, he chose to leave the operatic fray with a good conscience and no regrets. Though repeatedly asked to return he never did.

Once only did he minimally relent: in 1842 he went back to the Teatro Regio of Turin to conduct a revival of his *Caterina di Guisa* rightly extolled as "*la sua opera magnifica*".^{vii} But inexplicably this was to be its last appearance on any stage.^{viii}

How was it possible that an opera received with such fervour could vanish into thin air?

ⁱ The libretto was written by Pietro Giannone, an expatriate from Modena who belonged to Coccia's circle of friends in London. Giannone made a living teaching and among his students was Pasta's daughter Clelia. *Maria Stuart, regina di Scozia* - like the Donizetti/Bardari *Maria Stuarda* - is based on Schiller's tragedy but because it was intended for an English audience familiar with its own history. downplayed her Catholic "martyrdom" and other continental myths and preoccupations certain to be found objectionable, and portrayed her as a victim of political conspiracy which was more or less the truth.

ⁱⁱ Giaccinto Battaglia 'Il barbiere di Siviglia' (Milan 21 February 1833), 30

ⁱⁱⁱ Born in Genoa, since 1814 the poet Felice Romani (1788-1865) had taken on the direction of the *Gazzetta ufficiale piemontese* and considered himself an honorary resident of Turin.

^{iv} Donizetti would later describe the argument of his *Maria di Rohan* to his brother-in-law as "*a sort of Caterina di Guisa*"

^v Whose autograph is to be found among the manuscript material conserved in the Biblioteca del Conservatorio di Torino

^{vi} *Caterina di Guisa* is based upon the play by Alexandre Dumas *Henri III et sa cour* Paris 1829. (Joseph-Philippe Lockroy and Edmond Bacon *Un duel sous le Cardinal de Richelieu* Paris 1832 may represent a minor source)

^{vii} "*Il pirata*" (Milan 30 December 1842) VIII, n55, 214

^{viii} The opera was performed in 1842 using the 1836 distribution (soprano, mezzo- soprano, tenor, bass) but musically as a combination of the 1833 and 1836 versions. Since Coccia conducted it can be assumed that he had either a third version in mind or that the singers elected to take up some of the earlier music. The basso singing the role of Enrico for example sang 'O miei sudati allori' the Act II aria originally written for the tenor Reina and cut in the 1836 score. Its adaptation was presumably due to the composer himself. All the revivals of the opera after 1836 depended upon the whims or availability of the roster of singers. The La Scala revival of 1837, for example, stiffly elected to reuse the original score conceived for that stage.