

# One size fits all

## Pacini's *Gli arabi nelle Gallie*

Alexander Weatherson

Of all his incredible series of operas (and he claims to have written one hundred) Giovanni Pacini's *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* is certainly the most fantastic. For some reason or other - and although the original version was perfectly successful - he came to regard it as an elastic confection to be expanded or contracted at will. To have interminable additions, subtractions, amendments and so on so that there was at least *one* edition to the taste of any listener. Between its prima in 1827, and 1855, in an interminable series of revivals, every aria, every duet, every ensemble was rewritten, wholly or in part sometimes over and over again, as too was every chorus, every *concertato*, every *finale*, every *preghiera*-even, in a kind of fervour for correction. Even the hugely praised Act I *Introduzione* was not sacrosanct, as for the tragic *finale ultimo* which featured the famous tenor Giovanni David, moribund, stuttering his dying adieu before a lachrymose circle of friends and enemies, every so often this Moor-cum-Merovingian hero was obliged to slink away quietly so that the primadonna soprano or mezzo-soprano could take the limelight in a starburst of fioriture. It was due to the fall of the dice, both music and plot depended upon the composer's whim. And how whimsical was it possible to be? There is alternative material for this opera three times the length of the original score! *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* is like a Rubik cube whose faces can be turned to achieve any number of permutations, any number of stage pictures - for each new cast - for each new theatre - there was an ever-growing choice of *arie* and *cabalette*, the opera could find room for every species of voice, soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor or bass, each of the *comprimari* could find a flattering solo spot in one or another of the available versions. No key or tempo was ever finite, solo instruments were always negotiable, as further items were added the choice became ever greater still so that new music written for this or that stage could be crossed with the music of all the previous stagings *ad infinitum*... Music at every level of difficulty, vocal and orchestral, was at the disposal of theatres, managements, impressarii and artists great and small.

Pacini seems to have tailored his omnivorous *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* like an all-purpose garment with adjustments and fittings that no composer had contemplated before - or would contemplate again. The result was unnerving, even hilarious, though Italian opera in the nineteenth century often boils down to a simple equation of *one-man-between-two-women* or *one-woman-between-*

*two-men*, in 1855 (if inadvertently) Achille de Lauzières supplied Pacini with both scenarios at once with the remarkable consequence that Adelaide Borghi-Mamo's "male" pregnancy had audiences in stitches. In this instance he offered a modern - voire radical - model for the lyric stage, not just Opera for all Seasons but androgynous Opera for both Sexes!

Why did he do it? We can only guess. His struggle for supremacy with Bellini was beginning in 1827. Bellini, popular favorite, was not *versatile*, nor especially fluent, Pacini was both. Bellini had to "*sweat blood*" to write his operas, Pacini proposed to make his rivals sweat. But the alteration-mania went on long after Bellini had departed from the scene culminating in the outsize 1855 Paris edition staged at the request of the Emperor Napoléon III with an intemperate display of new pieces - updated to the Verdian era and re-composed magisterially from the raising of the baton to the very final note of the score.

Unless early discarded scores are still to be uncovered (which is by no means impossible) *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* can be reckoned Pacini's 35th opera. Born on 11 February 1796 at Catania, he was 31 years old at the time of its composition, he had been composing for the stage since the age of fifteen and still had a theatrical itch fifty-six years later when he died. He never stopped writing music, his music was unstoppable. He spent hours at his desk every day, no digression, no romance - no amorous entanglement (he had three wives in succession and a series of high-profile mistresses including Pauline Bonaparte) ever interrupted its flow. He wrote during meals, in his bath, in his coach, in his sleep (according to his critics), in the intervals of staging one opera he was writing the next. He infuriated his enemies, astonished his friends, and kept a vast audience amused by his high profile antics and flair for publicity.

He was also an ultra-professional composer fulfilling his contracts on time and at the drop of a hat, with a whole string of undisputed successes to his credit. Both his *Il barone di Dolsheim* of 23 September 1818 and his *Il falegname di Livonia* of 12 April 1819, staged at La Scala, were given more than forty times on their opening run; *La schiava in Bagdad*, staged at the Carignano of Turin on 28 October 1819 had Giuditta Pasta in the title role; *La gioventù di Enrico quinto*, at the Teatro Valle of Rome, given on 26 December 1820 had a proto-Shakespearian plot and an enduring shelf-life; the following year *Cesare in Egitto*, thanks to Pauline Bonaparte Borghese, had a Roman triumph on opening the carnival at the Teatro Argentina (26 December 1821) the role of Cleopatra being universally supposed to portray the princess preening in her box; *Amazilia* (6 July 1825); *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (19 November 1825), and *Niobe* with the insurmountable cast of Giuditte Pasta,

Luigi Lablache and Giovanni Battista Rubini (and staged on 19 November 1826), all three composed for the Teatro S. Carlo of Naples and all clamorous successes, the last of them furnishing the key operatic ditty of the day: 'I tuoi frequenti palpiti' an irresistible cabaletta written for Rubini and adopted later by aspirant after aspirant for vocal fame for insertion into works as unsuitable as *Semiramide*, *Norma* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, irrespective of the plot, a signature tune reaching apotheosis above the Alps in a transcription by Liszt - a tribute to Pacinian bravura that made compulsive listening then, as it does now.

It was *Niobe* that immediately preceded his first premeditated bid for fame: GLI ARABI NELLE GALLIE o sia IL TRIONFO DELLA FEDE *Melodramma serio di Luigi Romanelli, da rappresentarsi nell' I. R Teatro alla Scala la quaresima del 1827*. The opera arrived initially on that celebrated stage on 8 March 1827, like so many others of the day it was based on a pulp French source, in this instance on the *vicomte* d'Arlincourt's absurd novella 'Le Rénégat' of 1822 - Byronic, harrowing but decorous and with non-existent historical credentials. From the source *feuilleton* was derived a sequence of verses that were serviceable but not in the least distinguished, indeed the flabby text of *Gli arabi* may well have been the *fons et origo* of the strange fate of this opera: Pacini - who set texts by almost every theatrical poet with equal *sang-froid* seems to have believed that certain of them (Angelo Anelli, Andrea Leone Tottola, Gaetano Rossi, Salvatore Cammarano and Francesco Maria Piave) were worthy of respect, while a wide swathe of all the rest (including Giovanni Federico Schmidt, Luigi Romanelli and Felice Romani) were not - and thus felt free to amend their verses as, when, and as often, as he pleased. That this was not always the pecking-order of contemporary notions of poetical merit worried him not at all, it was symptomatic of his refusal to conform which dazzled and dismayed his contemporaries in equal measure. But as a result only some key portions of the original text of Romanelli's *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* remained in place after a few stagings. The opera was turned upside-down even before the prima (as a *prima stesura* manuscript in Naples reveals) and a lot of the verse was supplied by the composer himself. The initial cast was competent if not outstanding: Ezilda, the Gallic princess, was sung by the soprano Stefania Favelli; Agobar, her long-lost infant-fiancé become Moorish-leader, was sung by the virtuoso tenorino Giovanni David; his *musico* rival for her hand, the confused General Leodato, was sung by the mezzo Brigida Lorenzani, while the far-from negligible roles of Gondair, Zarele, Aloar, and Mohamud were taken by Vincenzo Galli, Teresa Ruggeri, Lorenzo Lombardi and Carlo Poggiali

respectively. The opera made a *furore* from the start, the expansiveness of the setting, the neo-stereophonic deployment of the spectacular opening (Pacini had applied an eager ear to *Il crociato in Egitto*) got the audience to a boiling-point of enthusiasm which held throughout, but they were astonished to discover that the infectiously syncopated *cabalette* for which he was renowned had been for the first time upstaged by a tremendous final scene for David in an orchestrally distinguished setpiece that was genuinely moving. Everyone expected a brilliant envoi and everyone was taken by surprise. In this opera, Pacini was proud to boast, for the first time he had propelled his muse beyond the easy audience-seduction of his earlier operas and now aspired to an emotive core. His instrumentation, already (how few people have noticed) one of his best features, was becoming more nuanced, airy, bitter, more idiosyncratic and he pushed his cast into a new arena by obliging them to sing affectively in accord with well-deployed solo instruments - especially the outrageous Giovanni David whose abuse of a head-voice was beginning to jar. This feat alone was regarded as quasi-miraculous and Bellini took notice on his own account. Even the most hostile critic reported that the opera was "*considered a masterly production*" that Pacini was being held up as "*the great regenerator of modern music*" (eg London-based *Harmonicon*). A view not destined to fall sweetly on the ears of his *catanese* concittadino...

The plot (if far-from invariably) is as follows: set in the France of Charles Martel the child heir of the Merovingian kings, Clodomiro (tenor), has been affianced to the infant Princess Ezilda (soprano), but his dynasty having been overthrown he has been taken to Spain and converted to Islam by the Moors. Now he has returned as a turbaned warrior to claim France for his Islamic masters under the name of Agobar.

The advance of his troops has obliged Ezilda to seek refuge in one of her castles sustained by her army chief Leodato (mezzo-soprano) Prince of the Auvergne, who despairs both of her hand and of eventual victory against the Moors. He is captured, and Agobar threatens to kill him but is restrained by the savvy Aloar (tenor) and also by an awakening sense of his vanished past. Finding himself in the presence of Ezilda who has sought sanctuary in a church, they are both disturbed by half-forgotten memories, Agobar overhears her lamenting, she insists she is crying for her dead husband and shows him the ring Clodomiro put on her hand as a child bride. Agobar shows her its pair on his own hand. Ezilda rejects him in fury as an imposter, a liar, and an enemy of her country. Overwhelmed by an innate confusion Agobar decides to return to Spain but Leodato warns him that if he does so he risks betrayal by his own soldiers, at the same time confiding that his own loyalty is not to Charles Martel but to his long-lost legitimate sovereign (who he has not

recognised of course) Clodomiro. The troops of Charles Martel attack the Moors inflicting a defeat in the face of Agobar's irresolution, but Ezilda - to the surprise of all - weeps the disgrace of the Moorish general she has rejected to the utter astonishment of her ladies. Agobar, his identity made clear by Aloar, is assured by Gondair (bass) that Ezilda is ready to accept him and decides to go into battle once more with his depleted forces. But this time against the troops of Charles Martel in a bid to restore the fortunes of his own dynasty (rather than that of his Muslim masters). Before he can do so he is stabbed by Mohamud (bass), a Moorish loyalist. Mortally wounded he staggers to Ezilda and dies in her arms.



Giovanni David as Agobar (Francesco Hayez)

There are many surprises in this score especially as first composed, while Leodato has a handsome *entrata*, Ezilda enters quietly (with a *preghiera* in the *prima stesura* version; in a *duetto* with Leodato in the edition of the *prima*), the famous diva Henriette Méric-Lalande found this low-key arrival on stage simply insufficient for her status and when she took over the role for the first La Scala revival in the carnival of 1827/1828 insisted that Pacini supply her with a brilliant cavatina of the kind she considered her due. The experienced

Pacini had a cast-iron technique in dealing with ladies of this eminence - he simply surrendered (a philosophy that infuriated Bellini - and in due course - Giuseppe Verdi). As far as he was concerned he could succeed whatever inconvenient or illogical changes he would be asked to make. The cavatina 'Quando o Duce, a te ridendo' was duly provided and left everyone in extasy. Indeed, as far as *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* was concerned, this second edition, as did the third and fourth editions and so on, exploded in a crescendo of applause. No one seems to have regretted such changes, they kept the inveterate *aficionadi* who went nightly to the Opera on their toes. The Verdian view that an opera should be finite, immutable, set in stone, the artists contracted to sing the music he had composed, was not one that audiences shared in the primo Ottocento. Agobar, who has the key role (Pacini made it clear from the start that he wrote this opera for his friend Giovanni David) initially had a showy *aria di sortita* 'Non è ver, che sia diletto' (rewritten at least five times) which, at the prima, was followed by yet another *preghiera* for Ezilda 'Lo sguardo tuo, Signor' with its deliciously affecting melody. A superb moment of calm in a busy score and not brilliant at all. Such a sacred refuge was in no way to the taste of a whole tribe of *primedonne*, not just La Méric-Lalande, and was soon dispensed with. The Act I *finale primo* is a *concertato*, as was the convention, with vivid confrontations as much amorous as warlike. It became victim to extraordinary modifications in the seasons to come - with a plethora of different *strette* of every possible kind, every possible shape, every possible dynamic - at times marked *piano*, at times marked *fortissimo* - sometimes *unisone*, sometimes canonic in structure, sometimes with snatches of arioso like currants in a cake - you could take your pick. The original edition, however, with a furious Agobar, a lamenting Ezilda, a perplexed Leodato and a chorus of dissent from all sides in an irresistible surge of melody was one of the best versions of all.

In the same way, the second act contained novelties which became increasingly blurred or were brutally replaced. Opening with a sinister coro it originally progressed logically through a duet for tenor and mezzo-soprano, then a big aria for Ezilda, followed by a trio, then another coro, and then a tremendous show-piece aria for Agobar (of which there are at least four versions) and the moving climax of his death scene - one of those drawn-out terminal descriptions of lyrical demise that became almost a blue-print for the entire melodramma romantico of the coming half century. In this instance it was as effective and touching as any to come and for almost the first time handing the final accolade to a voice other than that of a prima donna soprano! Of course that could not last. At the King's Theatre in London on 12 May 1832 Pacini supplied Giulia Grisi with a riotous aria finale to take its place

'Nel suo rapido passaggio' whose rapid (vocal) passages brought her such torrents of applause that all the music and plot that had gone before was cynically defied.

It has to be said immediately that little of this music - and few of the replacements - sounds like Rossini, whatever has been asserted, Pacini was a composer who persistently eroded the inherited forms - not with a bold masterstroke like a Donizetti or a Verdi, but step by step with the prudence of a survivor. Despite an irreverent history of changes, adjustments, second-thoughts and downright contradictions, *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* sustained a momentum that depended upon a breathtaking delivery that was in its own way unique - with an utter disdain for the predictable tonalities and visual clichés of the Italian stage. There is a score for everyone. Make your choice. There is a version where Leodato is the star (written for Carolina Ungher) where she has all the good music and three major arias. Between the first cast of 1827 and the last of 1855 most of the big names of the Italian upper-crust trooped through this *melodramma serio*: Ezildas included Adelaide Tosi, Violante Camporesi, Luigia Boccabadati, Caterina Lipparini, Carolina Cortesi, Marietta Albini (who became Pacini's second wife), Mathilde Kyntherland, Emilia Bonini and Virginia Blasis as well as Henriette Méric-Lalande as listed above (who sang in more than one revival) and Giulia Grisi: Leodatos included Adele Cesari, Rosa Mariani, Annetta Fink-Lohr, Clorinda Corradi-Pantanelli, Teresa Cecconi and Amalia Schütz-Oldosi: the outré if sympathetic role of Agobar was sung by Giovanni David (in more than ten revivals) but also by Giovanni-Battista Rubini (at Vicenza), Domenico Reina, Giovanni Basadonna, Napoleone Moriani, Pietro Gentili and Salvatore Patti: among those singing minor roles (surprisingly) were Celestino Salvatori and Vincenzo Galli as well as both Antonio Tamburini and Luigi Lablache!

The Théâtre Impérial-Italien revival on 30 January 1855 with Napoleon III in his box (as an exiled nephew of Pauline Bonaparte he recalled with emotion the opera at the Teatro Apollo in Rome on 17 January 1829 when he had been moved by thoughts of home) emerged with appropriate publicity, now in the form of a miniscule grand-opéra, in four Parts, a truly radical *rifacimento* it had Angiolina Bosio as Ezilda and the wildly emotional Carlo Baucardé as Agobar. Every number had been rewritten or re-orchestrated anew, it had a revised text almost throughout and all the religious and patriotic elements had been redoubled to please the Empress Eugénie. (This climactic edition of the immortal score was given as *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* and not as *L'ultimo dei Clodovei* as is sometimes reported - that was the title of a Newspaper review). It did not stay long, Pacini was never a favorite in the French capital but it was his only offering to approximate to local tastes. A *succès d'estime* - a bit old

hat whatever its plasma infusion under Imperial auspices, *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* was now to disappear for good, but the composer went home with the Légion d'Honneur.

The interminable list of revivals over three decades gives a convincing insight into the demand for this valiantly updated stage spectacular. Its resilience might be regarded as emblematic of his whole career: Pacini's life was centred on constant resurfacing, he survived both Bellini and Donizetti and whatever the surface glitter of his initial output his most substantial operas were written in the happy interim when the first of these had died and the second had taken himself abroad. In middle life, when others of his generation were simply Maestro di Cappella of this or that provincial duomo Pacini was still on the boards. Beginning with his *Saffo* of 1840 he launched an almost impregnable series of outstanding scores many of them received with an eagerness not effaced by the advent of Verdi. By any standards such startlingly memorable operas as *La fidanzata corsa* (1842), *Medea* (1843), *Lorenzino de' Medici* (1845), *Bondelmonte* (1845), *Stella di Napoli* (1845) (three huge operas in one year), *La regina di Cipro* (1846), *Merope* (1847), *Allan Cameron* (1848) and *Malvina di Scozia* (1851) deserve to be taken seriously, not to mention the extraordinary *Il Cid* (1853) and the proto-verist *Il saltimbanco* of 1858 (did *verismo* begin at the Istituto Pacini di Lucca?) in tandem with the two operas with which he closed his long parabola of the stage: *Don Diego de'Mendoza* and *Berta di Varnol* (both with libretti by Piave and both of 1867) in which year he died, still at his desk.

And then there is the "posthumous" *Niccolò dei Lapi*, actually tried-out in at least three preliminary versions with different titles between 1852 and 1858 and given a valedictory staging as a comprehensive swansong after his death in 1873, a huge summation of his entire career awaiting a modern awakening. All these operas contain music that is not to be ignored, vivid, inventive and self-renewing. Pacini - and no other composer can in fact make the same claim - was the living link between Rossini and the Realism that launched the twentieth century.

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With its rational and irrational changes, with its eager surrender to caprice, to the whims of performers, performance and *puntature*, *Gli arabi nelle Gallie* was the child of a popular culture that stubbornly continued to regard opera as a living organism - as a theatrical experience still evolving before the eyes and ears of the spectators - and not yet the immutable monument it would become. As such it was emblematic of an artform in its death-throws no doubt, but that there would be losses as well as gains in the operatic era that ensued is a factor to be faced. In the present day.