

Mabellini, political survival and Il conte di Lavagna

Alexander Weatherson

[...when the order form had been passed over the counter of the famous Library requesting the vocal score of *Il conte di Lavagna*, there was a long pause - then the lady came back and said there did not seem to be an opera by Bellini with this name...]

Once a musical personality of considerable renown, if mostly as a conductor, Teodulo Mabellini should nowadays perhaps be described as Mercadante's legacy to Padania. Born in Pistoia on 2 April 1817, he studied locally before removing to Florence where soon he was hailed as a prodigy. To such an extent indeed that after the plaudits and astonishment of his 1836 debut with an opera called *Matilde e Toledo* set to a terrible mouthful of a libretto by a certain don Giuseppe Tigri (not "*Matilde a Toledo*" or "*Matilde di Toledo*" as we are often told - Toledo is the name of Matilde's unfortunate husband) sung by students and dilettanti at the Teatro Alfieri, he was sent off to improve himself (*per perfezionarsi*) with Saverio Mercadante in Novara where the latter held the post of Maestro di Cappella. This impressive endorsement of his potential apparently on the initiative of a group of *concittadini* together with the famous impresario Alessandro Lanari, but at the expense of none-other than the Grand-Duke of Tuscany, Leopoldo II.

An amiable, compliant, competent youth he thus achieved a fluency that was wholly meridional matched by an instrumental knowhow that was frankly of the north. On reflection, it may only be by mischance that he failed to generate the same kind of serious acclaim that sustained far-more famous composers with whose careers he overlapped.

The friendly links he set up with Mercadante held true for years. He became much more than a pupil, more an amanuensis, writing letters for him in the latter's first terrible crisis of neo-blindness, copying-out scores and in turn receiving very individual attention at every creative level. A refinement and definition that was to stand him in good stead throughout his later life baton-in-hand. (Mabellini's concern for non-operatic music owes almost everything to Mercadante). In 1840 he staged his *Rolla* with a libretto by Giorgio Giacchetti at the Teatro Carignano of Torino, thanks to a *scrittura* obtained for him by the Queen of Sardinia-Piedmont - sister of Leopoldo II - which had a genuinely warm reception while paradoxically confirming his Florentine affiliation - the opera's hero is Michelangelo - he was never ever to renounce. This was succeeded, in the same theatre and the following year, by *Ginevra di Firenze* (libretto by Lorenzo Guidi Rontani usually miss-titled "*Ginevra degli Almieri*" its heroine's name being Ginevra Amieri) set in a plague-ridden Tuscany of 1400 but without the same favourable impact, not on account of its dismal plot surprisingly but because its happy-ending was found to be incongruous! Both these operas contained a wealth of fluent, effective, and memorable music.

By now his identification with the Tuscan capital had become a way of life and all his remaining works, with very few exceptions would first be staged on his own doorstep. This is especially true of the extremely ambitious opera in the wings - an opera designed to proclaim his dramatic credentials before his fellow citizens with no holds barred.

It was in many ways the most portentous offering of his whole career:
IL CONTE DI LAVAGNA *tragedia lirica in quattro parti/con balletto analogo/da rappresentarsi nell'I e R Teatro in via della Pergola/ La Primavera 1843/ Sotto la Protezione di S A I e R Leopoldo II, Granduca di Toscana* has a text roughly and readily contrived by Francesco Guidi from part of Schiller's epic 'Die Verschwörung des Fiesko zu Genua' of 1783. The barnstorming original was decidedly convoluted; Guidi's verse made it much worse.

The opera is divided thus: Parte Prima: LA CONGIURA: Parte Seconda: IL CONVITO: Parte Terza: LA FESTA DA BALLO (the "*fiesta con coro*" features in Scene V with courtiers caroling and cavorting): and Parte Quarta: LA NOTTE DI MORTA which speaks for itself. It is the remarkably modern tale of a naïf young aristocrat who is set-up by a group of Genoese conspirators as fall-guy to depose the detested Doria Doge. Once this has been achieved, they kill him. He is flanked operatically - not by one, but by two vociferous women: his wife Eleonora and the Contessa Giulia, a "liberated" niece of the tyrant. There is a sly friend, Verrina ("*if this is a friend why do I need any enemies?*") and an unreliable Moor, Mulei Hassan, who mostly supplies local colour. The title role of this rabble-rousing tale - that of Gian Luigi Fieschi, conte di Lavagna, was created by the tenor Andrea Castellan; the prima donna Eleonora, by Teresa Brambilla; her opposite number Giulia Doria, by the formidable Marianna Barbieri-Nini; Arabella - Eleonora's confidante - by Faustina Piombanti; and the conspiratorial activist Verrina, by Carlo Porto (Giannettino Doria - brother of Giulia - and the Moor, are comprimario roles).

This roster of voices represented the very cream of current talent in the city and a few of them repeated their roles in later productions when *Il conte di Lavagna* ran though Lanari's Tuscan empire. Dedicated boldly, irrespective of its revolutionary temper, to the shrinking but temperate Leopoldo II and set in 1547, it flaunts a Tiepolesque *mise-en-scène* in a waterfront palazzo, a feature that ensured - together with the family name of its hero - that *Il conte di Lavagna* became something like a harbinger of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* with its over-gilded rooms of state set before the implacable barrier of the sea, its growls of insurrection, its anachronistic knot of idealism, intrigue, betrayal and bungling that ends without hope.

The sombre *Sinfonia* heralds the conspiracy: there is a sibilant opening coro inset with a muttered arioso from Verrina but burst apart by noisy cries for vendetta; this is followed by a duet (*sotto voce*) between the tenor Fieschi and the basso Verrina capped by an allegro marcato *stretta* with a deafening choral finale: 'Ebben? Fieschi e fedel' (allegro feroce), which, with its stark juxtaposition of extremes recalls the excesses of Giovanni Pacini rather than those of the decorous Saverio Mercadante: shock tactics and rousing tunes.

Parte Seconda opens in elaborate contrast: a women's chorus sung brightly and followed by the cavatina of Eleonora 'Come un sogno or mi rammento', underpinned by a sinuous *tremolando* evolving into an athletic cantabile and cabaletta of filigree delicacy. This introduces yet a further duet, again with Fieschi, but unpredictably he sings - not with her - but with her rival Giulia in accents especially tailored to the stentorian voice of Marianna Barbieri-Nini. This is a striking encounter, her ambiguous relationship torn between the fêted hero and her powerful uncle the Doge epitomised by noisy climaxes (allegro/ lento/ allegro) but resolving into a *unisono stretta* 'E decisa in tal momento' with a grandiose sweeping melody. Then follows a quintet of the major voices, sung with muted menace (with a coda of jealous fury from the two women), then a coro, then a vivid, somewhat Verdian concertato, brilliant and exhilarating.

These two prefacing acts allowed Mabellini to reveal his real resource, but much

more was to come. Parte Terza the FESTA DA BALLO is the spectacular heart of the opera, opening before a wide panorama of the sea under a setting sun and with Fieschi standing alone in the centre of the stage, it marks the turning point of the plot with a fine aria divided between the twin demands of idealism and a longing for power, torn - not just between the alternatives offered by the conspiracy - but also by those more specific offered by the two women. This aria, his big moment, indulging in contrasts of colouring to emphasise the struggle between flesh and brute politics - the worm of eroticism by his sultry cantabile 'Coll'ali brune/Giù si appressa la notte' and the hard grind of politics by the bitter cabaletta 'Era il duolo a lei d'accanto'. This imposing aria, as originally composed, was sensational, but it did not prevent the composer from changing it drastically in later staging's. Giulia's parallel big aria follows; prefaced by a glittering coro 'Il fianco adornati', it is equally savage, its opening phrases 'Fiori, gemme, ornamenti e ricche vesti/ Oggi io non vuò' (anticipating Elvira's opening aria in the Verdian *Ernani* to be staged the following year) but unlike Elvira, Giulia is full of bile. Her cantabile 'L'amo ancor, sebben l'ingrato è spergiuro' at first calm slowly becomes rabid, and when Fieschi appears her jealousy of Eleonora boils over into a cabaletta 'Ah! se m'ami, o mio tesoro' of such vituperation that both are driven from the stage. The scene changes into a magnificent ballroom full of Fieschi's supporters whose hopes for their hero are heard with disdain by the treacherous Verrina. Against the backdrop frieze of a *ballabile* comes together an ensemble of memorable viciousness: Eleonora and Giulia at daggers-drawn; Fieschi proclaiming his higher motives with Verrina and his confrères intoning dissent above an *ostinato* of foreboding from the coro. This concertato, begun by Eleonora's 'Iniqua! volesti rapirmi l'affetto dell'uomo che adoro' (addressed to Giulia naturally enough but with an aside to Verrina) explodes into a fortissimo cacophony of taunts, insults and imprecations whose vituperation results in Giulia being led off to the cells, a dramatic coup that brings down the curtain in a crescendo of abuse. Mabellini's musical skills in holding all this together could never have been so much in evidence.

Parte Quarta is the dénouement, nocturnal both in theme (LA MORTA) and colouring, its use of lugubrious brass instruments and with a plot more like *Gioconda* than *Ernani*. A long orchestral prelude opens upon Giulia's despairing reflections in her prison which the scarcely welcome arrival of Eleonora offering to help her escape turns into a sarcastic duo, a Ponchielliesque encounter asking for very subtle articulation on the part of the two ladies. But Giulia accepts, and fighting-to-the-last is escorted to safety. With the news of the flight of the Doge and the bloody victory of the conspirators the scene is changed to the harbour strewn with corpses and a wide vista open to the ocean and the sky. There is a last confrontation (in the form of a *terzetto* for the most part) between Verrina, Eleonora and Fieschi; the crowd acclaims Fieschi as the new Doge; he ignores the plea of Verrina to refuse this honour jumps on the prow of a ship and shouts 'Io regno in trono!' Verrina makes a sign to his followers who stab Fieschi and throw him into the sea.

In the months after the Florence prima in 1843 and before its revival at the Teatro dei Rinnovati of Siena in the summer of 1844 Mabellini made very considerable adjustments to this offering to the turbulent interim that would culminate in the Risorgimento. Someone seems to have passed on the message that *Il conte di Lavagna* was too "*politically incorrect*" in the eyes of the establishment. Too suggestive indeed. Fieschi's big aria was the first item to go. It became more concise, less bold, less insistent upon political dissent and far more concerned with the struggles of the flesh. Less lyrical and more declamatory it was supplied with a new cabaletta, equally

energetic, equally incisive rhythmically, but also more commonplace ('Era il duolo a lei d'accanto' being replaced by 'Più della vita istessa') and the ensuing encounter (with the Moor) becoming less pointed.

These alterations could no doubt be seen by timid listeners as an improvement but the amendments made to the Parte Quarta of this new version are far more dubious and lower the dramatic tension to near-fatal banality. In the Siena edition, the opera is transformed after Scene III: Scenes IV, V and VI of the original vanish, in place of the swift and shocking finale ultimo seen at Firenze with Fieschi cut down and thrown in the sea - swift and shocking - there is a far-less traumatic *Scena ultima*: Fieschi has been stabbed off-stage, staggers to the footlights and sings a conventional aria-finale ('Pria di morir perdonami') and expires dolefully in the arms of the grieving Giulia (who has made an unexplained reappearance) and Eleonora. The original had been too horrific and too catastrophic. And much too provocative also. It was a bland retraction often to be encountered in the operas of the day when a nervous status quo began to shiver at the suggestive power of the theatre in their midst.

No one seems to know now whether Mabellini agreed readily to the mutilation of his opera or what pressure might have been applied, but in that same year of 1843 he was made *Maestro Direttore della Società Filarmonica di Firenze*, and, in 1847 - in the wake of a soothing cantata *Il ritorno* celebrating the reappearance of Leopoldo II after one of his tactful withdrawals - *Maestro di Cappella alla Corte di Toscana*. A reward for compliance? Possibly. The music was still good but the heart had gone from the plot.

In any event he was soon to identify strongly with his patrons rather than to any dissident mood. *I veneziani a Constantinopoli* (libretto also by Francesco Guidi and the sole remaining opera by Mabellini to be commissioned outside Tuscany) staged at the Teatro Argentina in Rome on 16 April 1845 having passed without a ripple it was left to this *Maria di Francia* to reassert his local standing. The opera was composed expressly for the Pergola with a prima on 14 March 1846. It too was an ardent political offering, but this time semaphoring support for the régime he served. He had become cool about protest it would seem. The opera is about loyalty to a beleaguered ruler and all very heartening to Leopoldo II. Mabellini knew, as Pacini knew, as Mercadante knew, and others were becoming aware, that the prospective unification of Italy meant one thing only as far as they were concerned: the triumph of Milan and of Verdi, together with commercial obliteration for the former musical dignitaries of the divided peninsula.

Guidi's plot has at least *some* echos of *Il conte di Lavagna* and once again provided a vocal warhorse for Barbieri-Nini. Its novelty lay in the *dea-ex-macchina* 'L'Ispirata di Nivelles' (the heroine of the opera is sister to the Duke of Brabant) who appears from time to time to take a hand in the events. Queen Maria survives calumny and incarceration like her predecessor Giulia, but this time with the aid of heaven and the 'Ispirata' ('Tergi il dolente ciglio/Cara al cielo sei tu!') gets to the end of the opera with her crown intact. Leopoldo II could hope for nothing less. La Barbieri had even more to sing in this opera - three huge arias and innumerable duets and trios - to such an extent that the score was cut savagely before even the prima but the musical invention was of the highest despite the gloom and despondency.

Alas all the confidence and loyalty fell on stony ground, neither his melodies nor his magnificent arias brought him much more than dutiful applause.

After *Maria di Francia*, Mabellini wrote no more major works for the stage. His offering for 1848, the Year of Revolutions, was the apocalyptic oratorio *L'ultimo*

giorno di Gerusalemme (libretto by Barsetтини) which forms the centerpiece of a votive triptych framing the national and local unrest, with *Eudossia e Paolo o I martiri* of 1845 (Venturi) and the azione sacra *II convito di Baldassare* of 1852 (Giuseppe De Toscani) on either side. This was a devotional altarpiece dedicated to Florentine upheaval and brought to an end the first part of his career. From then on there were only fleeting stage works: a daring if abortive collaborative score with Luigi Gordigiani ('The Italian Schubert') *L'avventuriero* (Achille de Lauzières) given at the Teatro Rossini di Livorno in April of 1851, and a comic flutter *Fiammetta* (Giovanni Battista Canovai) given at the Pergola on 12 February 1857. Begun so boldly his career as an operatic composer ended with a whimper.

Teodulo Mabellini lived on until 10 March 1897. The remainder of his life was spent as a conductor and teacher. In 1848 he had been made conductor at the Pergola; in 1850-51 he wrote a momentous *Requiem* (which today is in urgent need of revival). Between 1853 and 1860 he directed the *Concerti Popolari* with a huge orchestra and a repertoire mainly of the great Teutonic symphonies. From his pen emerged an immense quantity of marches, waltzes and music for wind band which resulted in some novelties including a *Fantasia a terzetto* for clarinet, flügelhorn and baritone saxhorn which would animate any musical gathering. His pupils included the operatic luminaries Salvatore Auteri-Manzocchi and Luigi Mancinelli as well as such an exotic implant as the Mexican Melesio Morales. The sacred music that emerged in these latter years seems to have attracted the attention of Verdi, perhaps it was his *Requiem*, possibly it was the *Messa* he wrote for the wedding of Ferdinand of Tuscany in 1852 that earned him a place on the roster of contemporary maestri to complete the famous composite *Messa per Rossini* in 1869 to which he contributed a glittering *Lux Aeterna* - a fine hors d'œuvre for the Verdian *Libera Me*. Would it be true to say that he was destroyed by political turbulence? Not really, he was transformed not destroyed. If he wrote no more operas he remained active, hyper-active almost, to the last. His final compositions included a *Symphonic Ode* to Michelangelo in 1875, and, appropriately, a touching valedictory *Inno all'arte* in 1886.

But all these notwithstanding he was a figure apart after the end of the Grand Duchy. He made no further political statements, with one exception. In 1860, he made an effort, he wrote a cantata dedicated to the victor, to Vittorio Emanuele II: *Le Feste Fiorentine, delle Potenze e degli Omaggi all'Usanza del Secolo XIV pei solenni onori nazionali a S.M. il Re*, A cantata simbolica with a text by Pacini's pistoiese librettist Stefano Fioretti with one major soloist, none-other than Marianna Barbieri-Nini in the role of Beatrice Portinari. With its prologue set in heaven, and the rest comfortably in the next-best-place, in Florence, it featured Harmony, Concord, Liberty, Justice, Wisdom, Education and all the rest, culminating in an enormous Quintet-finale. It fell on deaf ears despite the "modo stupendo" of its execution; according to Regli's *Dizionario Biografico* "che la malevolenza e l'ignoranza degli Agenti Teatrali condannare vorrebbero anzi tempo al riposo"