

# Malibran recalled

(Harps and tears)

Alexander Weatherson

No one knows *when* this multicomposer cantata in memory of Maria Malibran was actually conceived, nor who was responsible for the idea in the first place. Vaccai's letters tell us nothing of significance, nor do those of Donizetti and Mercadante. How and when its short list of composers was decided-upon too is a mystery, only the state of their autograph material - showing haste or otherwise - can supply a clue. This five-composer cantata came and went very quickly - it was performed just once and then went the way of all such lachrymose ephemera.

The frontispiece is highly decorative with ornate scrollwork. At the top, it reads 'IN MORTE DI Malibran De Beriot' in a mix of bold, block letters and elegant cursive. Below this, it states 'CANTATA eseguitasi all' D. R. Teatro alla Scala la sera del 17. Marzo 1837 dall' Editore Gio. Ricordi rispettosamente dedicata a S. E. il Spnce Conte Francesco di Baffio'. The name 'FRANCESCO DI BAFFIO' is written in large, bold, outlined letters. Below the name, his titles are listed: 'Governatore della Lombardia', 'Spnce di Vienna, Westfalia & Consigliere intemo, Ciambellano di S. M. S. P. Ap. Cavaliere del. Glorio dell' Ordine Imperiale Austriaco della Corona di ferro e Gran Croc di varj ordini &c'. A list of performers follows: 'La Partita è del Sig. Ant. Fuzze', 'La Musica del Sig. Mantua', 'Sinfonia..... Cav. G. Donizetti', 'Il Cippo di Mausoleo..... Cav. G. Pacini', 'L' Inaugurazione..... S. Mercadante', 'La Corona..... S. M. Cappella', 'Il Monumento di Milano..... H. Vaccai'. At the bottom, it says 'Registrata nell' Archivio dell' Unione', 'Milano presso Gio. Ricordi', 'Firenze presso G. Ricordi e C.', and 'Messico presso G. Pizzi'. On the left, it says 'Proprietà degli Editori Dal 18037. al 18044.' and on the right, 'Deposta all' I. R. Bibliot. N. 18. 1. Pl. 6. 54. cm'.

Ephemera? Above is the frontispiece of the vocal score that followed in its wake, that is, after its single appearance on the stage at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on 17 March 1837, five months or so after the disappearance of the great diva at the height of her fame. No one can accuse the theatre of failing her (as *she* failed the theatre on so many occasions) but her memorial cantata failed to survive. Now it is to reappear.

Its protagonists were the very best that could be got together at short notice: *Sofia Dell'Oca Schoberlechner, Francesco Pedrazzi, Pietro Milesi, Benedetta Colleoni-Corti, Marietta Brambilla, Teresa Brambilla, Ignazio Marini, Orazio Cartagenova, Carlo Marcolini, Carolina Lusignani* and *Felicità Baillou-Hilaret* - a starry roster including all those in the current scaligero *stagione* with an added artist or two. And the cantata ended the season, the great theatre did not reopen again until the beginning of the following July.

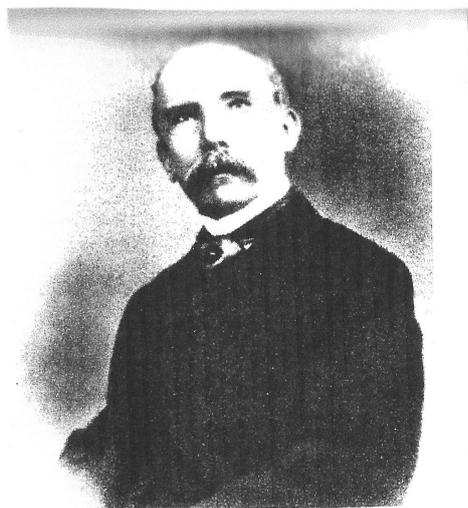
The disposition of its various musical sections is extremely curious. They are all of different lengths with differing demands and keys. That there was no

very articulate overall plan for their distribution is clear - and unsurprising - much of it being due to the uneven muse of its inexperienced librettist Antonio Piazza. The uneven collection of maestri is something else - however were they chosen? Composers captured on the wing? *Ad hoc*? All with links to the vanished diva? But Pietro Antonio Coppola never met her as far as anyone knows and Mercadante's contacts were tenuous in the extreme, she sang in a noisy duet from his *Andronico* just before her fatal collapse! Donizetti was recruited in passing, Pacini may have offered his services - though he claimed to be "*retired*"; Vaccai alone, was ready, willing and available, but this final trio, at least, had undoubted links with the brand new inhabitant of Parnassus.

### The poet

The dim Antonio Piazza (1794-1872) of no known career - no one knows where he came from or where he went - was far from lucky in his musical contacts. Or his biographers for that matter: "*un oscuro impiegato governativo di nome Antonio Piazza*" is all we hear from one distinguished Verdian authority, but we do know that he supplied the unknown *bussentino* with some verse for his first opera - a "*Rocester*" (sic) or a "*Lord Hamilton*", it is not clear which - ignominiously elaborated by Temistocle Solera into the libretto for *Oberto, conte di S.Bonifacio* (La Scala 17 November 1839). The great maestro himself reveals these details in a letter of 9 October 1837 (sold in London on 28 November 2012) relating that Pietro Massini (born 1796) conductor of the Società Filarmonica of Milan had invited him to write an opera for the Filodrammatici Theatre in that city handing him a text by Piazza. So at least we know how close was Verdi's relationship with the despised poet and confirming that his involvement with the Malibran cantata for La Scala *predates* his Verdian adventure.

We do not know, however, how this dim poet made contact with that lofty stage in the first place. All we can be sure is that Piazza got there two years before.



Antonio Piazza

Are there any residual echoes to be found in the two libretti? A stately Arcadian terminology can be found in both *Oberto* and the cantata texts, there are *similarities* but no actual borrowings. This notwithstanding, some decidedly fustian rhetoric remains in *Oberto's* opening scenes - all there is of Piazza's retro muse perhaps - and among the singers of the Malibran cantata it will be noted, was Ignazio Marini who created the role of Oberto.

### The musical sequence

Gaetano Donizetti	<i>Sinfonia</i>
Giovanni Pacini	<i>Il cippo di Manchester</i>
	Introduzione e Quintettino ' <i>Gettiamo Narcisi</i> '
	Recitativo e stretta ' <i>E della vaga immagine</i> '
Saverio Mercadante	<i>L'inaugurazione</i>
	Terzetto con cori ' <i>Come suon del arpa dolente</i> '
Pietro Antonio Coppola	<i>La corona</i>
	Recitativo ed arietta ' <i>Sovra quell'urna posi</i> '
	Aria con cori ' <i>Questo allora che ti stessa</i> '
Nicola Vaccai	<i>Il monumento di Milano</i>
	Finale, coro e stretta finale ' <i>Salve o donna</i> '

What do we know of these composers? Almost certainly they were the choice of Nicola Vaccai (or Vaccaj) (1790-1848) *marchegiano* maestro and renowned singing teacher famed for his *Giulietta e Romeo*. His was the last important opera to have been written for the dead diva and - even if his *Giovanna Gray* (La Scala 23 February 1836) was massacred by her caprice the last time she appeared on that stage Vaccai may have felt obliged to play the leading role in her ultimate musical *stretta*, writing the longest stretch of her memorial music, making the most extensive demands choral and orchestral, and bringing the whole to its grand celestial apotheosis. As *Vice-censore* of the Milan Conservatorio he was in the best position both to organise and preside over such a project.

The list of maestri in fact reflects his prejudices. Included are composers in his good books and excluded are those he disdained (even if they had recently written music for her or were easily available), Carlo Coccia for example was not included, also teaching at the Conservatorio he was ignored as there was no love lost between them (the disdain was mutual, Coccia's pet name for this fellow-pupil of Paisiello was "*viso di cazzo*"); rejected too were the discordant Ricci brothers, prominent devotees of the divine Malibran who were never on the same wavelength as the author of the celebrated *metodo*; Saverio Mercadante was on the spot as it happens and could scarcely be ignored, his *Il giuramento* had just triumphed at La Scala (11 March 1837); Donizetti was essential and may have offered his services but must have burned midnight oil over his contribution while hurrying though Milan on engagements elsewhere; as for the irrepressible Giovanni Pacini, he adored Malibran and admired Vaccai (as he admired everyone who detested Bellini) and rose to the occasion nobly (if illegibly). There are all sorts of unanswered questions. Why was Rossini not included? Malibran had always been one of

his cushioning coterie and Vaccai revered Rossini. He was on the spot, indeed he was in Milan buying a coach in November 1836 when the project was in embryo and was perfectly well-acquainted with all the participants. Later he was in Bologna and thus far-from inaccessible. Maybe he had quarreled with Merelli at La Scala (no difficult task, Verdi - later - refused all contact with him). Perhaps he was simply tired: Weinstock, in his 'Rossini' (p195) says of this very period: "*What Rossini really desired was to remain at his ease in Bologna, doing nothing - or at least nothing that would involve him with impresarios, librettists, singers, all the exhausting paraphernalia of the operatic stage.*" Was he asked to contribute? No one knows. The Malibran Memorial Cantata was both conceived and delivered in utter obscurity. All sorts of talented composers were available in the Lombardian capital. Who can know now what criteria was involved?

### **The state of the manuscript**

There could be few more discouraging prospects than the disorderly manuscript of this cantata. No more disastrous collection of pages can be imagined. Some sections abandoned even before its only performance.

At least we know *when* Donizetti wrote the overture. His *Sinfonia per la Morte di M.F.Malibran* (signed and dated 1837) differs importantly from its more habile reincarnation two years later as the *Ouverture des Martyrs* (signed and dated 1839). The composer's first thoughts are usually superior to his later revisions and so it is here, this imposing offering to memory has different keys and tempi, a different *andamento* from the *Les Martyrs* overture and is tailored to an audience who knew the diva intimately. The instrumentation differs notably, more woodwind (though less bassoons), less brass, its dynamics more closely defined as though the great artist would have to be cosseted as had been her requirements on the stage. The *Maestoso* opening is the same but for Malibran is added *ma non Largo*, and whereas the main theme is *allegro agitato*, for *Les Martyrs* it is a rudimentary *vivace*. In its detail, in its precision, its orchestral clarity, the composition is more finite, urgent and concerned in response - who can doubt it - to the caveats he had always suffered in respect of this *monstre sacré*. It is also an infinitely more profound work. Confronted by the losses around him, by his family, his friends and dismay at his destiny in Naples, there is a quality of heartfelt introspection here that is overwhelming. A cry to lost genius. The overture to the Malibran Cantata is among the most searching of his works in any genre. Its peak - a distant echo of the voice of the vanished diva - his personal souvenir of the very last time he heard her sing which he enshrined as its culminating point: where in *Les Martyrs* there is a chorus of Christian converts heard from behind the closed curtains, in the same place in the cantata overture - the orchestra reduced to a whisper - Marietta Brambilla intones as from above, the fatal invocation 'Ah! se tu dormi, svegliati' from Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo* in the unmistakable accents of the lost Malibran at her zenith in the

role she had made her own. To wake her anew before the audience she had enchanted. At once a touching, poignant and unmanly *aide mémoire* to the agonies he and Vaccai had both endured and relished at her side.



Uncharacteristically this manuscript *Sinfonia* is near-immaculate - rare indeed a factor where the overworked Bergamasc is concerned. Written almost without second-thoughts it is lucid and presents few problems in revision.

Conversely the cantata's *Introduzione* borders on catastrophe. No one who has edited any of Giovanni Pacini's music will be in the least surprised, the state of the appalling manuscript does not imply any special haste - simply that as usual he wrote without taking breath - a composer beset by too many ideas his music is literally choked by a mania for correction



with many pages rendered almost completely unintelligible as a result. Sadly the printed vocal score supplies evidence that vast sections of Pacini's music were never performed at all, stretches of undecipherable instrumentation have been brutally abandoned before the cantata ever appeared on the stage. What with *print-through*, rewritten passages relocated on the staves of alien instruments, sudden interference with the order of scoring, smears, stains, scribbling and scratching-out galore, it is left to Valeer de Vlam in his realisation of this amazing musical Rubik to ensure that for the very first time such an engorged introduction can be played complete as it was conceived. It would seem that Pacini composed this music far from home, perhaps in Milan, certainly distant from his desk in Viareggio with a copyist by his side, and that he was not in the Lombardian capital for its only appearance. The text is among the more earthbound of Piazza's arcadian armory of lofty adulation, and Pacini, who championed and defended the dead diva without reserve has clearly indulged all his fabulous melodic resource to do her justice with appropriate emotion. Among these five composers he is the only one who genuinely shared her sense of disorder and independence and these disordered pages ironically enshrine an appropriate portrait of the great artist replete with the extravagant orchestration that was her due.

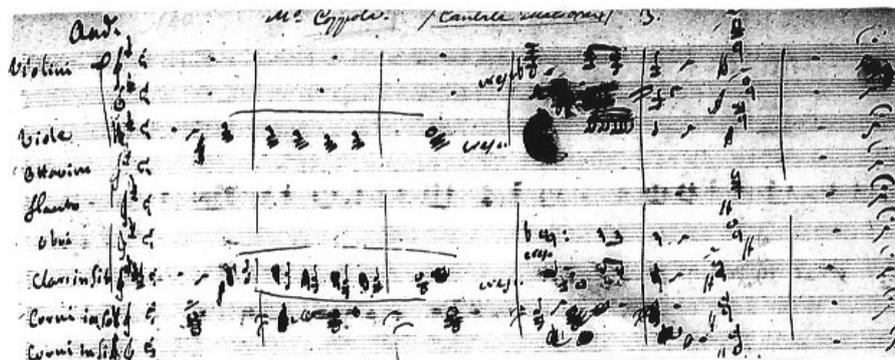
If Pacini displays his intimate liaison with the great artist in *Il cippo di Manchester*, Mercadante maintains a dignified distance appropriate to his respect for a highly professional divinity in *L'inaugurazione*, the introductory harps referring directly to her current *scrittura* in heaven. The tempi are sedate, opening with a decorous triple-time flourishing swoop for cor anglais and two harps, evolving into an angelic trio for soprano, tenor and bass - underpinned by a *sotto voce* coro, and culminating in a fortissimo climax on the words 'L'estremo addio' it has an impressive dramatic command that one can scarcely believe would have been performed adequately on its one appearance on stage at La Scala.

Surprisingly his manuscript too is messy, though not irretrievably so, and uncovers some major creative indecision. It also plays havoc with the order of scoring a very rare factor with such a well-ordered composer.



Unlike any other of the maestri, Mercadante also lists the names of the interpreters of *L'inaugurazione* on his manuscript: the soprano Schoberlechner (who refused to sing with Malibran), the tenor Pedrazzi and the bass baritone Cartagenova all of whom had starred in *Il giuramento* and form his vocal trio, a touch of immediacy that probably implies he was present at some of the rehearsals.

Coppola was still in Milan after a well-received scaligero *La festa della Rosa* in the autumn of 1836 and being personable and available presumably found favour with Vaccai - his selection being most likely at the behest of Giovanni Pacini with whom this fellow Sicilian had always been on excellent terms. It is even possible that he was one of the very first maestri to be contracted to compose. The problems with his manuscript do not necessary suggest that it was written in haste. Are there signs of reluctance in this score or are they evidence of hesitation? It is full of false starts, ink blots and obscurities and shares with Pacini a penchant for an ongoing musical *Linear B* where the challenge to interpretation reaches a truly despairing level of perfect incomprehensibility. Pietro Antonio Coppola's holograph may be one of the shortest in length, most sparse in notation, but it has been the second longest to unravel. Far less exuberant than that of his Sicilian *concittadino* it is even more enigmatic quite simply because he alone was not acquainted with its subject.



But despite a multitude of interpretive hurdles Coppola's belcantist response to the text is highly appealing. In two halves, opening with a wildly dramatic *recitative ed aria* for the basso Ignazio Marini, the main section of his *La corona* is an affecting accolade for the defunct genius sung at La Scala by the young soprano Benedetta Colleoni-Corti *con coro* with a terminal emphasis

upon a climactic repeated '*vincerà*' that today we would expect from the name of Puccini.

The final and longest part of the Malibran cantata is supplied by Nicola Vaccai. His manuscript is impeccable. No doubt it was written almost at leisure.

He takes his time in expounding its major themes, if the response to Piazza's text by his colleagues has been entirely operatic, in contrast Vaccai's *Il monumento di Milano* has all the sanctimonious impact of a secular oratorio (souvenir of *his* years in England or *her* death in Manchester?). Two overwhelmingly choral halves bisected by a mezzo soprano "*pellegrino*" - the first a pessimistic andante assembling all the artists in a huge concertato capped by a solo from the virtuous pilgrim - the second a more athletic but even more sonorous *stretta* 'Salve o Donna' with some fragments of dialogue but rising to an impressively "monumental" choral apotheosis employing everyone and everything in full cry on the stage.

Vaccai's operas were always "*too long, too choral and too difficult to sing*" according to the critics, his text may well have saved the lady but alas fell on deafened ears on its one and only hearing, too *noisy* as well, the Malibran cantata was received with scarcely a shred of the requisite celestial impact.

Novelty was always at a premium on the Italian stage and the compositorial mix in such an unexpected sequence of contrasted music was too much for an audience of the primo Ottocento. No one went to the opera house to mourn so the cantata with its amazing memorial intimations vanished. Without a trace? Not quite. This challenging autograph survives in the Ricordi Archive. It

seems most possible that we shall have the opportunity to test its memorial fervour quite soon.

### Addenda

In view of its breathless staging, the publishing of the vocal score by Ricordi was probably something of an *amende honorable*. The short change given to the music, the authors, and the dead diva may well have impelled the famous publisher to make amends, the cantata was not allowed to disappear and engraving of the music began in December 1837 [Pl. nos. between 10037 and 10044]

Bartolommeo Merelli, who may, after all, have been the person responsible for the project in the first place, and under whom the *I e R Teatro alla Scala* reached a nadir in its fortunes, remained in his post until the end of 1850 (with a remarkable comeback between 1861 and 1863)



**MALIBRAN!**