

# Marco Visconti between belcanto and *canbelto* [Part 1] Nicola Vaccai and Errico Petrella

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Two operas with a celebrated plot – game-changing in intention and conceived in a divisive era, could never have been expected to arrive on the operatic stage without trauma - or not at least without the slings and arrows appropriate to the radical aura of its illustrious poet. Tommaso Grossi's celebrated *storia del trecento: Marco Visconti*<sup>1</sup> (1834) was to be divided diametrically between celebrated maestri from opposite ends of the operatic spectrum.<sup>2</sup>

No doubt it was professional renown that determined the choice of plot in each case. Though both could claim that upfront forces – rivals for the most part - had been responsible for enforcing their grasp of such a nettle, the truth is that whatever or whoever should have selected their vehicle for operatic exploitation, however diverse each *modus-vivendi* - each harboured a *mindset*, a highly personal agenda for such a challenge, even if not at all the same agenda.

Appropriately their offerings would have a contrasting welcome. Whereas Errico Petrella's *melodramma tragico in tre atti* would be staged with the highest possible profile in the resplendent Teatro S. Carlo of Naples on 9 February 1854 and bathe subsequently in a surge of revivals running into triple figures and undimmed extra-territorial success, it followed the opera of his *confrère*, Nicola Vaccai - a *dramma lirico in quattro giornate* - conceived with ardour and precision for solemn exordium before the King and Queen of Sardinia-Piedmont in the imposing Teatro Regio of Torino on 27 January 1838. That is to say, in a capital city where Grossi's prefacing dedication to Alessandro Manzoni was indelibly enshrined. As a result it became an *incarico* that set Vaccai on a back-foot from the start: constrained to stick to the narrative, deprived of any *beefing-up* to the current mode –patently forbidden those fashionably burning confrontations and *dénouements* then enjoying success peninsula-wide – Vaccai's exquisite opera barely found repetition and even willing acceptance either at home or abroad.

Petrella would never have agreed to fall at any such hurdle.

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<sup>1</sup> *MARCO VISCONTI storia del trecento cavata delle cronache di quel secolo* (Milano 1834)

<sup>2</sup> Other composers confronting the same source included Ermanno Picchi (Firenze 1838), Raffaello Mazzetti (Urbino 1843), Ermanno Biletta (1845) and Antonio Pedrocco (Venezia 1853). Enrico Bernadi supplied the Teatro Regio of Torino with a ballet on this subject in (1862)

Both maestri were seeking career endorsement. In distant Naples with quite different priorities Petrella was endowed with all the colourful paraphernalia of a romantic recipe that now had come to a head and which swam comfortably to his pen. Both composers, however, had confrontational requirements outside the current arena. With Errico Petrella they consisted quite simply of **Giuseppe Verdi**. Grossi's early essay *I lombardi alla prima crociata canto quindici* (1826) had supplied the necessary boost for this terrifyingly insuperable rival to subjugate La Scala in 1843 with the result that this *palermitano* rival had pinpointed Tommaso Grossi - together with his imposing *Marco Visconti* - for urgent attention.

The confrontational requirements of Vaccai were of a much more distressing kind - the need to surmount a perfectly disastrous crisis brought upon his career by an attack upon his one-and-only truly successful score, *Giulietta e Romeo*.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the genesis of Petrella's *Marco Visconti* was vivid and uncomplicated that of Vaccaj was mired in a desire to dispatch to oblivion an unprecedented assault upon his credibility, his fame and international reputation by a vindictive Felice Romani who - with the far-from passive assistance of Vincenzo Bellini - had sought publicly to efface his *Giulietta e Romeo* with a replacement: with their joint *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* based precisely upon the same tale!<sup>4</sup>

Under cover of a normal *scrittura* this had been a deeply scandalous business - a mixture of deceit, vengeance and outright trickery, sufficiently bold and premeditated that its major theatrical target - the celebrated Teatro La Fenice of Venice - made its offensive treatment loud and clear to its fellow opera houses near and far in the peninsula. The commission for *Marco Visconti* offered in sympathy and compensation to Nicola Vaccaj by a shocked Teatro Regio of Torino - unwilling witness to the appalling initiatives of a current *cittadino*<sup>5</sup> was the direct result, proffering the unfortunate Vaccai a compensation on Romani's homeground as well as a career-move to a larger and more imposing theatrical league. Alas, whatever the noble intentions they were not destined to succeed.

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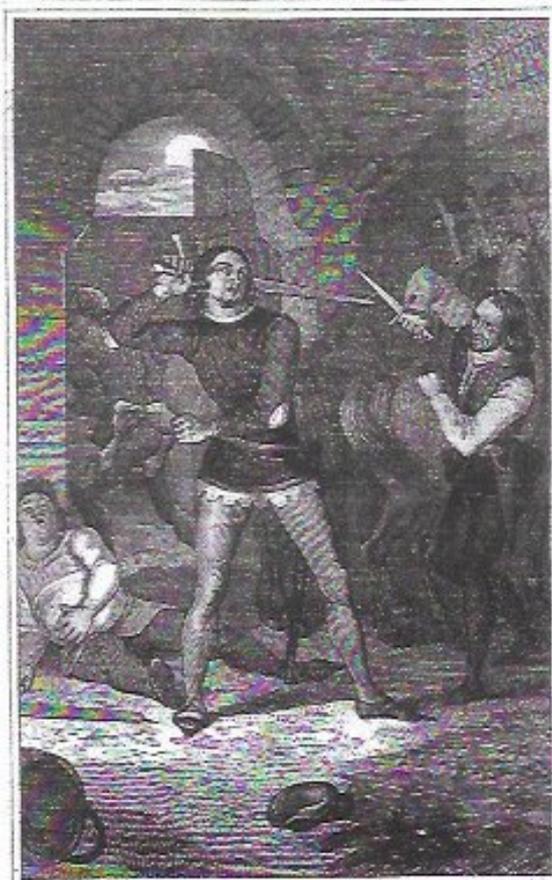
<sup>3</sup> Cfr Alexander Weatherson: Chapter Four *Giovanni Pacini His life and works* (published online 2020)

<sup>4</sup> The trickery that led to the prima of this opera on 11 March 1830, was made clear immediately to almost all its neighbouring opera houses by La Fenice Romani was never welcomed again without reserve - ultimately putting a term to his career as librettist

<sup>5</sup> Romani was direttore of the Gazzetta Ufficiale Piemontese between 1834 and 1849

That the gestation of Vaccaj's opera was complicated by an unusual motivation is evident in the composer's correspondence.<sup>6</sup> The yoke to which he found himself attached is evident from the start. In a spirit of rectitude Torino had presented Vaccaj with almost a take-it-or-leave-it situation, the *plot*, the *poet*, and the *cast* were offered to him on a plate in an almost unparalleled affront to the integrity and independence of an artist. Of the poet Vaccaj observed meekly: "*il libro sarà scritto da un certo Toccagni... di molto abilità, e talento, ma non ha mai scritto*"<sup>7</sup> As regards the cast, it is clear that Domenico Donzelli had been intended for the title role from the outset with of course no objection from the composer, but the rest of the singers were mostly unfamiliar.

Though he was well acquainted with Grossi's *romanza* it is evident that he hoped to be allowed a *lieto fine*: this is evident from the same letter where he adds "*ha però intanto fatto una buona disposizione del Dramma, che finirà lietamente, e non come il Romanzo termina*".



*— Ah, se tu? — gli gridò il Lanciatore — è av.  
saffina a questo modo i esistere? —  
Torino 1837*

<sup>6</sup> IL CARTEGGIO PERSONALE DI NICOLA VACCAJ a cura di Jeremy Commons (Torino 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Commons ibid Letter No.369 13 August 1837

In each case the librettist presented these two maestri with a vast approximation of the Grossi tale. This alone gives a real insight into the needs of the maestro in question as well as those of his initial patron. Whereas Petrella's librettist Pietro Bolognesi ended his opera predictably with the heroine dead in convulsive arms, just like those of innumerable operas of his day, Luigi Toccagni, librettist for Vaccaj and Torino was obliged to offer an authentic literary dénouement with the most dubious dramatic accomodation conceivable. His original disposition printed in the libretto as a NOTA aid to understanding and dramatic, protracted, emotional – which, who can doubt it - failed the litmus test of the current operatic mode. That is, to offer the listener a domestic catharsis that had a direct bearing upon his everyday hopes and dreams...

None of this implies that Vaccaj's opera was a failure. Far from it. His letters itemise its happy reception. On 2 February 1838 he could write I returned from Turin on Tuesday last after the happy success of my new opera *Marco Visconti*: "*Marco Donzelli vi fa una bella figura, e sostiene benissimo la sua parte; la sua grande Scena ed Aria fec molto effetto, ed un Duetto fra Bice e Marco, che chiude il primo atto fu straordinariamente applaudito; Oltre questo due I pezzo più applauditi furono l'introduzione, la Cavatina di Bice la Palazzesi, il sestetto, ed un Duetto fra Contralto e Soprano; ed anche una preghiera di Bice..*"<sup>6</sup> Adding "*I did not expect to be so fortunate this time, because as you know well I had to write this Opera!*"

Vaccaj, loyal to the belcantist tradition, wrote his opera with one elect vocal star in mind. As will be seen from the letter above, his opera was conceived as a triumphant vehicle for the celebrated tenor Domenico Donzelli in the title role.

That he "*had to write this opera*" is something else. Of course. All this notwithstanding the list of pieces he itemises above have a certain curious parallel with similar pieces, in similar positions in the opera of Petrella..

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<sup>6</sup> Commons ibid Letter No. 374 2 February 1838