

A Prelude

Rossini's response surprised none of their friends

“Sei un gran diavolo. Tu hai sempre la vena giovanile; che Iddio te la conservi per lunghi anni...”

With this affectionate rebuke the *pesarese* took his fellow maestro to task at the end of both their lives. He had a familiar target, born almost on the stage Giovanni Pacini's impact on Italian opera singled him out from all the rest. Relentless, inexhaustible, admired and feared equally as the most prolific the most tenacious operista of the day, always ready with music under his arm at any length in any style and at the drop of a hat, beloved of impresarios with a deadline to keep he might have been a great favourite had these disconcerting characteristics not put an end to the hopes of so many rivals. Omni-present on the *locandine* the length and breadth of the Italian peninsula, mischievous and provocative, the very epitome of unimaginable invention, even his friends quailed at Pacini's rejection of every kind of obstacle to operatic favour treating the musical world like an oyster to be swallowed whole and trembling at a time when the art they loved was at its most singular and vulnerable.

It was fame, and fame alone, that would fail him.

The reputation of this composer has long been sacrificed on the altar of one facile quip in his memoirs:

“...tutti seguirono la stessa scuola, le stesse maniere, per conseguenza erano imitatori, al par di me, dell’Astro maggiore. Ma, Dio buono! Come si faceva se non vi era altro mezzo per sostenersi?”ⁱ

Not one of the scholars eager to quote this aside has taken note of the rejoinder of the “*Astro*” in question. Rossini took umbrage at this unwelcome resurrection of a futile exaggeration of their youth knowing all too well he was a target for mockery on the part of his friend.ⁱⁱ

Abramo Basevi, in part responsible for commissioning these memoirs, complained bitterly to their author:

“Io non la consiglierei di tentare altro verso Rossini. Basta leggere la lettera che ultimamente le scrisse, per convincersi dell’enorme distanza che corre in lui fra il cuore e l’ingenuo. Non basta

chiarmarsi Rossini per scriverci con tanto cinismo."ⁱⁱⁱ

Adding that Alessandro Biaggi^{iv} to whom he had shown the jibe was dismayed at a repeat of a foolish denigration to which they had all been heirs. He should not bait Rossini - even for passing entertainment.

Giovanni Pacini - as he knew well - was among the very first to contest these Rossinian expectations.

His musical reminiscences: *Le mie memorie artistiche* - a five-decade-long parabola of the stage replete with truths, half-truths and fantasies has led many into believing it to be a measured account of his life and times. Printed under the ægis of the Florentine musical press in regular instalments of the Journal of the *Società del Quartetto di Firenze: "Il Boccherini"* between 1861 to 1865, subsequently issued by his friend Guidi in the form of a brochure followed by a posthumous compilation "*continue dall'avvocato Filippo Cicconetti*" in 1872^v and finally crowned by a hardback edition "*Le mie memorie artistiche (edite ed inedite). Autografia del maestro cav. Giovanni Pacini, riscontrata sugli autografi e pubblicata da Ferdinando Magnani*" - considerably revamped that is by his son-in-law in 1875 with unauthorised additions^{vi} it had now become a substantial tome with some of the hints of a testament. An eager absolving of a long and troublesome career but a mine of misinformation, a harvest of wrong dates, imperfect historical sequences and wilful errors - a leisurely saunter up a socio/historical path of the composer's own choosing intended to divert and mislead, fascinating, irresistible even, replete with overlooked occurrences, events dimly recalled, forgotten people, names and places misspelled and mis-directed but whose motivation has to be respected.

It was when the 1864 printing of *Il Boccherini* with his infamous quip fell on his desk in his Parisian exile at Neuilly that Rossini responded with the heartfelt reproof at the head of this Prelude.

Pacini's valedictory saga is a bittersweet resumé of the resentments and regrets of a composer with a career in ruins at the onset of the Risorgimento. His lifework relegated to the archives, his astonishing torrent of stage-works together with the honorary distinctions of the princely states he had once adorned so brilliantly coldly dismissed in a purge of everything deemed antipathic to national advance.

Opera houses threatened with a loss of access to the music of Verdi if they staged his works, his musical persona denied continued existence the composer felt obliged to take steps to confront a brash

new Italian establishment determined to collect the tangible rewards of its internationally exploited hero. Deprived of his former status, indignant at a political decision to deny him his years of fame, these reflections ill-conceal the well of resentment beneath the *désinvolture* that was his public face “*Sauve qui peut*” he set out to secure as much as he could of his former musical status with a literary cabaletta of his own devising and more than a hint of the pace and colour of his once famous trademark.

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Maria Malibran’s violinist husband, a dispassionate observer, pointed out that two operas were *never* booed or hissed in Naples despite years of revivals; they were Donizetti’s *L’esule di Roma* and Pacini’s *L’ultimo giorno di Pompei*^{vii} thus throwing a revealing light upon the contemporary reception of music by rivals whose names now are so fêted. As *maestro delle cabalette* Pacini’s career should have ended brilliantly - with an increase of pace and tempo worthy of his flamboyant lifestyle and unbelievable flood of compositions: he had added immeasurably to the urgent musical impulses of his day.

But this has not been the case. To omit a key composer is one of the more extravagant feats of the Italian genius. Rossini and Donizetti would have been astonished to find that Giovanni Pacini was not among those listed as a leading maestro. Alongside themselves.

ⁱ Giovanni Pacini *Le mie memorie artistiche* (Guidi, Florence 1865), 54

ⁱⁱ Letter of 8 April 1864 from Gioacchino Rossini “*Al Cavalier Giovanni Pacini, celebre Compositore di musica*” upon receipt of the current installment of his memoirs [in the] *Appendice alle Memorie Artistiche* (1875 Edition) 254-5

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter in the Fondo Pacini of the Biblioteca Comunale Carlo Magnani di Pescia. Abramo Basevi (1818-1885) had abandoned medicine to found both the musical journal *Armonie* and the Florentine *Società del Quartetto*. He would become a noted Verdian scholar. The letter was written in response to the instalment of *Il Boccherini* as described above and is dated 15 April 1864 [Cat. 2 – 22]

^{iv} Girolamo Alessandro Biaggi (1819-1897) studied in Milan under Nicola Vaccai. A composer and conductor he was the passionate critic who founded and directed *L'Italia musicale*, a notable patriot he was one of the most exacting advocates of music theory of his day with an academic post at the *R. Istituto musicale di Firenze*. His contributions to the journal *Nazione* were a major feature of Italian musical life between 1866-1895. His early life was very curiously entangled with that of Pacini: when appointed *maestro concertatore* as a very young man at the opera house in

Messina his initial operatic incarico consisted of being required to fabricate a cut-price version of Pacini's *Saffo* in order to save the expense of hiring the score. This fake was so successful and so much applauded that the truth came out and he was sacked. [Cfr Leonardo Pinzauti *Un critico dell'Ottocento: G..Alessandro Biaggi* (in) *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana* 3/4 (Turin, Luglio/Dicembre 1973) 388-401]

v The avvocato Filippo Cicconetti (1820-1887) was a biographer both of Bellini and Donizetti

vi Olympe Rossini had stipulated that her husband's letters to Pacini should *not* be included in this revised edition!

vii *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* was revived in virtually every theatre of Naples – even on the very smallest stage in the city – quite how this was achieved in view of its utterly traumatic *scena finale* is a mystery