

Pariah, purdah and protest: Michele Carafa in the opera house

Il paria

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With much the same plot, the same characters, and much the same outcome as the opera with the same title by Donizetti of three years later the ill-fated *Il paria* of Michele Carafa di Colobrano, a *melodramma tragico in due atti*, outdid its successor in one respect only: it vanished. Vanished completely. Not one trace of Carafa's autograph score remains. Whereas almost all his cherished manuscripts - even those from his most tender years survive in the capital city of his gilded youth, this poignant essay, this point of no return,¹ this exercise in pain and injustice upon which he pinned all his hopes and fears, embellished with all his passions and protest, even with the state of his soul - is not in Naples, nor is in Venice² where it should be. No doubt it was burned, buried, or flung with fury into the grand canal.

A review in the London music magazine *Harmonicon*³ spelled out the calamity:

This was followed by a new opera by Carafa, La Paria (sic), which was treated most unceremoniously, not being allowed even a second representation. The Journals attribute this distressing failure to the fault of the singers, to cabals, to an ill-contrived distribution of the parts; but those more behind the curtain say that this composer, possessed of no great funds of genius on which to draw at pleasure, has fairly written himself down.

This last recurrent theme of the *chauvin* publication should not be taken without a substantial pinch of salt - the composer's Napoleonic brevet could scarcely ever have ensured a measured opinion behind the British curtain but the facts are true enough: *Il paria*, a commission from La Fenice, was performed just once on 14 February 1826⁴ before it sank below the unforgiving surface of the surrounding waters.

¹ He never wrote an opera for Italy again

² Composers supplying stage works for La Fenice were required to deposit their autograph scores with that theatre, most of them did so but a detailed search of Venetian archives has confirmed the complete non-existence of this blighted score

³ *The Harmonicon* XLIV London August 1826, 182 "Foreign Musical Report from Venice"

⁴ *Il paria*, melodramma tragico in due atti. Libretto by Gaetano Rossi.

Sources: 1) Jean-François-Casimir Delavigne *Le Paria* Paris 1821

2) Gaetano Barbieri *Il Paria* (Italian translation Milan 1823

Cast: Ester Mombelli (Neala), Domenico Donzelli (Zarete),

Domenico Cosselli (Akebare), Brigida Lorenzani (Idamore), Giuseppe Binaghi (Alvaro), "N.N" (Empsaele), Signora Lang (Mirza)

Michele Enrico Francesco Carafa di Colobrano is a composer of a very singular kind, blessed with inherited eminence, successor to popes and prelates, to feudal fiefs, duchies and principalities across the whole of the *mezzogiorno*, with ephemeral military glory of his own gestation at the battle of Borodino as the befeathered, booted and spurred equerry to Murat, ephemeral King of Naples, then all too suddenly deposited on the same ungrateful streets that failed his idol. Fated to become a backroom protagonist with covert musical gestures of defiance, to have a stiff-upper-lip, an elaborate disdain for material misfortune, to be a caricature, a butt for the poor jokes of Parisian wits at his self-abnegation in the shadow of Rossini - a simple smokescreen not just for contempt at his fate but also for the closet radical whose dark distinction he had assumed in the wake of military, dynastic and operatic defeat. Fighting his corner in bourgeois Paris on behalf of his beloved soldiers, a key player - all this notwithstanding - in the dramatic panoply of the day whose operatic contribution cannot actually be disputed, the term *pariah* is an odd distinction for such a remarkable maestro, but it is one he chose for himself.

The *Restaurazione* that succeeded Napoleon was greeted operatically with themes of alienation almost everywhere his marauding armies had laid waste. With its roots in romantic posture, in the effete stance of a foreign literary intelligentsia with operas and plays extolling proud isolation: *Il solitario*, *L'esule*, *L'orfano*, *La straniera*, *Il proscritto*, *Le r n gat*, *Il paria* and so on, together with titles proposing eccentric anomaly: *Il sonnambulo/La sonnambula*, *La selvaggia* etc., or offering a cult of the *excluded* - of the detailed examination of outsiders and the rejected: *pirates*, *corsairs*, *masnadieri*, *zingari* and so forth, began to crowd the stage and went on doing so without irony for four decades at least. That these plots were almost always pulp only encouraged the interest of an emergent generation of composers - not on account of any burgeoning democratic enlightenment but simply because seclusion, outcasts and solitude offered a welcome excuse for poignant melody, minor keys and stretches of elegiac reverie. An indulgent excess dear to a disinherited youth that rejected the superannuated triumphs of the past.

Iconic figures were soon to win the attention of the public with this rich vein but before them came Michele Carafa with his bitter list of

grievances. Extravagantly educated, endowed with sophisticated tastes by the best teachers he surrendered to an international range of passions and opinions almost from the start. Naples was a foreign crossroads, its population of threadbare expatriates from above the Alps enhanced by an unruly diplomatic corps and a noisy colony of outsiders of all nations, indeterminate refugees, mulattos, far and near-easterners together with expatriate maritime traders and their kith and kin living near the port with their troublesome lifestyles, mistresses, moeurs, and frightening religions. A foreign host that made a lasting impact upon the impressionable Carafa.

The moment of truth for this composer came around 1818. A number of life-changing factors led to a personal revelation. Though it was his unwilling alienation in Naples that laid the seeds of his pariah assumption its style and consequence became a reality a year earlier when *Lanassa*⁵ an opera by Johann Simon Mayr - failed at La Fenice on the same stage that *Il paria* sank some ten years later. But *Lanassa* did not disappear beneath the waves. Carafa's flirtation with Indian castes began at that moment. In accordance with the discretion he courted after the trauma of the Napoleonic wars it manifested itself initially in highly coloured choreography. After a gestation of two years *Lanassa* was reborn in the form of a ballet composed jointly by Michele Carafa in company with Pietro Raimondi and Luigi Carlini: *Il sacrificio indiano*, a *ballo in tre atti* with book and choreography by Luigi Henry was given a successful prima at the Real Teatro S. Carlo on 9 November 1819. The plot - a scarifying account of widow-snatching from the flames of the funeral pyre of her Rajah-husband was substantially that of Mayr, its roles the same - Lanassa, Radjah (sic), Brahmin and so on - true to both horrific tales, its idealistically uplifting conclusion almost identical. Under the banner of terpsichore the terrors, assumptions and social barriers of this plot made a far more dramatic impact upon spectators than in its operatic guise. Carafa's role in the rescue⁶ was undisguised, its Indian affiliation would have long-term significance for his future.⁷

⁵ "*Lanassa melo-dramma eroico da Rappresentarsi nel Gran Teatro La Fenice il carnevale 1817, Poesia del Signor N.N. (Gaetano Rossi), Musica del Sig. Gio Simone Mayr*"

⁶ The ballet was revived in Paris, re-choreographed with added music by Carafa as *Le Sacrifice Indien, a pantomime en trois actes*, première Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 9 July 1822 with a cast of *Defresne, Henry-Quériau, Télémaque, Livaros, and Viassot*

⁷ 1819 also witnessed the music he supplied for Gaetano Gioja's 5 act ballet *Acbar gran Mogol* marking a further Indian signpost - while a few vestiges of *Lanassa's* cast could later be detectable in his *Il paria pace* its Delavigne source: Akebare (Mayr's *Gran Bramino*), Idamore (Mayr's *Palmore*), Zarete (Mayr's *Zorai*); Carafa added an *Alvaro* to his own taste (*Alfonso* in *Il sacrificio indiano*)



Michele Carafa di Colobrano in a print of the 1820's
(coll. the author)

How and when did Carafa join forces with Silvio Pellico and Piero Maroncelli? It is easier to answer *where*: it was in Milan. Far more difficult to know is the exact date when all three were together face-to-face. Possibly Maroncelli came backstage to compliment Carafa at La Scala during the surprising revival there in the early summer of 1819 (22 May 1819) of his *début* opera in Murat-bereft Naples: *Il vascello l'Occidente*. (prima Teatro del Fondo, Naples 14 June 1814).

This strange work was the very first of Carafa's operas of protest. Written in anger, a searing drama⁸ set wholly on board ship carrying a cargo of deported exiles across the Atlantic - it is a precocious essay in the alienation mode soon to overwhelm opera plots everywhere in Europe. It was also a revival sufficiently alarming and radical at the unyielding Imperial and Royal caravanseraï to attract the attention of the severe carbonaro. From letters exchanged between Pellico and his dissident colleague it is clear that some aspects of Carafa's more spirited repertoire had already made their mark; most probably they knew of the staging of *Elisabetta in Derbyshire ossia Il castello di Fotheringhay* at La Fenice in the carnival of 1818/1819 whose coded endorsement of Mary Stuart, decapitated *Queen of Dissent*, could scarcely have escaped their notice. The motive for such a backstage visit was both timely and interrogative.



Piero Maroncelli

How long had he known Piero Maroncelli? The facts are obscure but the celebrated radical had been a gifted student at the Real Collegio di S. Sebastiano in Naples in 1815 not long after Murat's ex-écuyer had returned to find musical rather than military honours. Did Carafa move in student circles? He certainly paid court to his kinsman the sovrintendente Duca di Noja at that Conservatorio now and then. In the interim Maroncelli had put in two years study at Bologna with Padre Mattei (and become a friend and companion of Donizetti who was impressed enough by the music of the rebel hero to come that he took the

⁸ Cambiasi, who obviously knew nothing of the text, describes it as "*buffo*"

trouble to copy it)⁹. In any event Carafa and Maroncelli met again in Milan and as a result Carafa was to find himself in company so troubling to his peace of mind (and so compromising) that he fled Italy almost for good.

In the May of that same year an even more prominent and daring radical, Silvio Pellico had fallen in love with a young actress Teresa Bartolozzi.¹⁰ He was often in love but this affair was unusually serious, under the name of "Gegia" Marchionni she had been in the Lombard capital almost from the beginning of the year where together with her celebrated cousin, Carlotta Marchionni, she formed the nucleus of the Marchionni troupe of players whose vaudevilles at the Teatro Re kept Milan vastly amused¹¹. It was, ironically, this idyllic love affair that brought together two of the most famous and ill-used protagonists of the political underground – Maroncelli, living on his wits and charm as a singing teacher had been employed by Carlo Re to “*mettere in iscena le farse in musica*” and he and Pellico met first it would seem in the Marchionni house under the kind of amorous auspices no one could ever imagine would lead to the horrors of Spielberg, to the devastating calm of *Le mie prigionie* with its account of civilised man confronted by torture and death¹². These two thorns-in-the-side of indecent authority met together in laughter and love.

⁹ Piero Maroncelli (1795-1846) in Bologna wrote “*a Laudamus ... that Donizetti thought enough of to copy out for himself*” [William Ashbrook *Donizetti and his operas* (Cambridge 1982), 12]. It is interesting to reflect that this *Laudamus* of Maroncelli may indeed supply some actual credence to his assertion that the *carbonari* were defending - at least in essence - Catholic interests in their political stance, as too their reverence to the legend of the “martyred” Mary Stuart

¹⁰ Silvio Pellico (1789-1854) . Poet and political activist, secretary to Conte Porro who was instrumental in founding the radical Journal ‘Il Conciliatore’ in 1818, an outlet for romantic insurrectionary ideas upon which Pellico worked. Together with Maroncelli he became a *carbonaro* in 1820 but an indiscretion by the latter led to his denunciation and arrest - first in Milan, then Venice and finally Spielberg from which he was released in 1830. He was far from enthusiastic about Vincenzo Monti [Cfr A. de Latour (“Introduction Biographique” - *Mémoires de Silvio Pellico* (Bruxelles 1835), XIII-XV] and shared some of the librettistic revulsion by Anelli which had earlier led to the anti-Monti *farse* in Milan with music by Pacini at the Teatro Re. This may have prompted the whole rationale for *La festa di Bussone* on that very same stage

¹¹ Pellico’s play ‘Francesca da Rimini’ had been first performed at the Teatro Re on 18 August 1818, its title role was written for Carlotta Marchionni

¹² Silvio Pellico *Le mie prigionie* (Turin 1832)

It was one of those curious juxtapositions that typify the Romantic Age in its infancy, Maroncelli was twenty-five years old and a passionate dissident of some years standing; Pellico was thirty-one and a poet celebrated for the beauty of his verse as well as for his forthright views; Carafa was thirty-two and an ex-officer with a musical career that was not in any way a blot on his escutcheon but enforced a lifestyle whose inconstancy and disappointments never quite accorded with the status with which he had been born.

It was Maroncelli who induced him to write music for a *farsa* that needed his name and skill. Pellico would provide the text. In an early letter to Maroncelli (still addressing him formally) Pellico wrote to his new friend:

“Sto lavorando i due ariette ora, nella mattina le avete: perdonate il ritardo. Quanto vi sono grato di avere indotto Carafa a scrivere anche un coro! Questa gentilezza per me nel vostro bel cuore! Tutto ciò che fate onde Gegia brilli e trionfi m’empie di gratitudine. Il vostro vero amico. Silvio Pellico”

The three were proposing to collaborate together upon a joint project: *La festa di Bussone*, one of those provocative vaudeville-like satires with undisguised political targets of the kind Anelli had masterminded with Pacini some four years earlier on this same stage, but this time specifically tailored to the Marchionni troupe and boldly hostile to the current régime. A *comédie mêlée d'ariettes* is the polite term and Maroncelli was to supply some songs and: *“metteva assieme la musica anche in parte gli dovette esser fornita dal maestro Carafa”*.¹³

With its argument by Pellico and the music of Maroncelli and Carafa, its roles distributed among Carlotta Marchionni, Teresa Bartolozzi pseud. Gegia Marchionni (in the role of *Pini*), Luigi Marchionni, Elisabetta Marchionni and Giuseppe De Marini it remains a mystery who acted, who sang, and who both acted *and* sang in this *La festa di Bussone*. How much music Carafa actually supplied too is unknowable.¹⁴ As well as the *coro* mentioned above there must have been an overture or *preludio* of sorts, *intermezzi* and at least one of his renowned *arie*. Staged, acted and sung by the beloved Marchionni cousins *La festa di Bussone* made a hilarious showing at the Teatro Re (a theatre whose foundations are buried beneath the famous Galleria) on 28 June 1820. For a brief moment in time, and with his *I due Figaro* playing in the big theatre now across the square that fatal summer (La Scala 6 June 1820) Carafa held Milan

¹³ The following sources need to be cited: Alessandro Luzio *Il processo Pellico/Maroncelli* (Milan 1903), 54. H.Ritter *Silvio Pellico in Mailand 1809-1820* (Berlin 1907), 41. Giuseppe Roberti *Silvio Pellico geloso* [in] ‘Gazzetta letteraria’ 1894 (24 February), 88

¹⁴ The score has not survived

to account. It went the way of all such topical offerings, ribald, daring, dangerous, laughed-at, relished and then put aside. Forgotten by everyone, except the Austrian police.

It was on 13 October of that same year of 1820 that Maroncelli was arrested and condemned to death, but the sentence was not carried out and he was sent to prison instead in the company of Silvio Pellico.

On hearing this devastating news, the composer - whose very first work had been an *Il prigionero* (1805) took ship for Paris, beating a hasty retreat from the long arm of Austrian inculpation. He was never to live in Italy again. It was no seductive Rossini that - according to mistaken legend - drew him to the French capital - it was the other way round, Carafa was entrenched there well before the arrival of the *pesarese* who in due course came to dwell temporarily beneath his same Parisian roof.

With head below a musical parapet, taking note of events from the security of the Rue Montmartre, he accepted life-saving commissions like his wry *Jeanne d'Arc* at the Opéra-Comique in 1821¹⁵ and put himself to write an agonised Pellico-inspired *Eufemio di Messina*¹⁶ in tandem with the Paris version of his ballet *Le Sacrifice indien* - both these items in 1822 with *Eufemio* destined for Rome. Both painfully emblematic of a state of mind unhappily divided between despair and self-reproach, juxtaposing Parisian distraction with an alienation he felt anew and emerging in the French language *Le Solitaire*¹⁷ of 1822 and in the Italian language *Il sonnambulo*¹⁸ of 1824 sleepwalking miserably from the poignant events of the recent past.

¹⁵ *Jeanne d'Arc* drame-lyrique en trois actes. Libretto by Marie-Emmanuel-Guillaume-Marguerite Théaulon de Lambert and François-Victor-Armand d'Artois de Bournonville pseud. Armand Dartois based upon 1) Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* Berlin 1802. 2) Charles-Joseph Loeuillard d'Avrigny *Jeanne d'Arc à Rouen* tragédie en cinq actes et en vers Paris 1820. *première* Théâtre de L'Opéra-Comique, Paris 10 March 1821

¹⁶ *Eufemio di Messina* dramma serio in due atti. Libretto by Jacopo Ferretti based upon Lodovico Antonio Muratori *Annali d'Italia* 1744-49 [with an unspecified input from the unperformed *Eufemio di Messina* (1820) of Silvio Pellico] *prima* Teatro Argentina, Rome 26 December 1822

¹⁷ *Le Solitaire* opéra comique en trois actes. Livret by François-Antoine-Eugène de Planard based upon Charles-Victor Prévost vicomte d'Arincourt *Le Solitaire ou l'exilé du Mont Sauvage* (Paris 1821) *première* Opéra-Comique, Paris 17 August 1822

¹⁸ *Il sonnambulo* melodramma semiserio in due atti. Libretto by Felice Romani based upon Marchese Francesco Albergati Capacelli *Il sonnambulo* (1797) *prima* Teatro alla Scala, Milan 13 November 1824. It was not a success

It was his *Il paria* that would bring this period of self-torture to its climax. It was a mistaken venture in every possible way. Nothing in the opera made it easy for audiences, everything began on the wrong foot, Carafa's disaster-prone dialogue with his conscience was too challenging, too bizarre (and too long winded) for any audience, especially that of La Fenice. The ill-omened tragedy began without preliminary - without an *Introduzione* with its *musico* hero/heroine immediately on stage at the rise of the curtain with no warning and no soothing coro to assuage the inattention of the freezing patrons of the boxes still hanging up their coats and shuffling into their seats. Begun in error with the former soldier of Napoleon having much to live-down, the opera was barely rehearsed, it was an unparalleled succession of gloomy prognostications suffused with guilt in which military prowess counted for nothing (echo of his own fate as a discarded écuyer), loyalty and love led to death and disgrace (recounting *La festa di Bussone*), its inward-turned agony spun out in interminably wordy confrontations, few arias, and an almost total absence of the soulful melodic interventions that had always been his forte. The long long scene of emotion at the very end was really too much (though much of the audience had already gone home). As an essay in musical catharsis the opera was an utter failure.

Until 1830 when the martyrs were released from Spielberg, Carafa made sporadic returns to his stricken state of anguish. There was a major opera of protest the following year with his revolution-bound *Masaniello* of 1827¹⁹ together with a series of uncomfortable opéras-comique with uneasy plots and several aborted projects. It was left to his *La Prison d'Edimbourg* of 1833²⁰ to lay the agony to rest. In between came a period of purdah (is this the term?) when a succession of his truly remarkable creations was upstaged by other composers: the affectingly lyrical score of *Masaniello* was brutally upstaged by Auber with precisely the same plot just twelve months later - his inimitable *La Muette de Portici* carried all before it

¹⁹ *Masaniello ou Le Pécheur Napolitain* drame historique en quatre actes. Livret by Charles-Jean-Baptiste Moreau de Commagny and A.M. Lafortelle. Source: Johann Friedrich Ernst Albrecht *Masaniello von Neapel* 1789 (and partly on family documents). Première Opéra-Comique, Paris 27 October 1827

²⁰ *La Prison d'Edimbourg* opéra comique en trois actes. Livret by François-Antonine-Eugène de Planard and Eugène Scribe. Source: Sir Walter Scott pseud. Jedediah Cleishbotham *Tales of my Landlord – The Heart of Midlothian* London 1818. Première Opéra-Comique, Paris 20 July 1833

everywhere its volcanic score erupted. *Masaniello* was left neglected and unperformed; the heartrending *Le nozze di Lammermoor* of 1829²¹ was turned to dust by the worldwide triumph of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in a brief space of time; even Carafa's valedictory *Prison d'Edimburg* was upstaged by a near-glorious opera of Federico Ricci (*La prigione di Edimburgo* of 1838). This was the period when Mercadante - self-exiled in Spain - and many others blatantly plundered the ex-soldier's earlier scores in a series of punishing borrowings and misrepresentations. With the two heros still in chains the unhappy Carafa may have believed such a punishment to be his due, nothing of his own really succeeded, his tuneful *La Violette* of 1828²² and his compulsive *Jenny* of 1829²³ with their engaging music were quite as swiftly discarded as his *Il paria*.

When was the purdah over? It is not clear, but he never completely consigned the fatal episode to the past. These upstaged scores were the last major statements of a musically inward career. When the two

²¹ *Le nozze di Lammermoor* dramma semiserio in due atti. Libretto by Giuseppe Luigi Balloco pseud. Balocchi. Source: 1. Sir Walter Scott *The Bride of Lammermoor* London and Edinburgh 1819. 2. Victor-Henri-Joseph Brahain Ducange *La Fiancée de Lammermoor* (Fr.trans.1828). Prima Théâtre-Italien, Paris 12 December 1829. Cast: Carlo Zuchelli (Lord William Ashton), Rosmunda Pisaroni (Lady Ashton), Henriette Sontag (Lucia), Joséphine Amigo (Elisa), Domenico Donzelli (Edgardo Ravenswood), Gabriele Santini (Colonello Bucklaw), Francesco Graziani (Caleb Balderston), Marianna Rossi (Misia), Luigi Profeti (Bidebent), Luigi Giovanola (Donaldo)

²² *La Violette* (its Act 1 finale was composed by Aimé-Ambroise-Simon Leborne) opéra comique en trois actes. Livret by François-Antonine-Eugène de Planard Source: 1. Louis-Elisabeth de la Vergne comte de Tressan *Le Prince Gérard, comte de Nevers, et la belle Euriant sa mie* Paris 1780. 2. Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier and Henri Franconi *Gérard de Nevers et la belle Euriant* Paris 1810. Première: Opéra-Comique, Paris 7 August 1828, Cast: Jean-Baptiste-Marie Chollet (Gérard), Geneviève-Aimée-Zoé Prévost (Euriant), Louis-Auguste Huet (Comte de Foretz), Jean-Baptiste-Prosper Boullard (Connetable de France), Louis Second dit Féréol (Richardet), Antoinette-Eugénie Rigaut (Marguerite)

²³ *Jenny* opéra comique en trois actes. Livret by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges Source: Jean Aumer *Jenny* (ballet) Brussels 1825. Première: Opéra-Comique, Paris 26 September 1829. Cast: Henri Deshayes di Henry (Lord Hamilton), Geneviève-Aimée-Zoé Prévost (Anna), Jean-Frédéric-Auguste Ponchard (Frédéric), Jean-Baptiste-Marie Chollet (Lord Mulgrave), Louis Second dit Féréol (Georges), Marie-Julienne Boulanger Halligner (Betty), Félicité Pradher (Jenny), Noël-Joseph-Augustin Belnie (Lord Edgard), Jean-Baptiste-Prosper Boullard (Lord Williams), Pierre-François Génot (Lord Erford), Jean-Pierre Louvet (Lord Sydney), Saint-Ange (Lord Seymour), Anais Fargueil (Péters), Jeanne Mariette (Femme de Chambre)

victims returned to life, his own languished permanently in the wake of Rossini.

The Pellico-Maroncelli collusion with Carafa: was it simply a matter of theatre or did idealistic issues seriously intrude from the very first? Was it a meeting of minds? Was there a *carbonaro* Carafa? It is a possibility. This well-born renegade, this alienated écuyer with exceptional musical gifts, this *pariah*, might well have set to music his own dissenting template had he cared to do so but instead chose to remain at odds with any real commitment. *An exile become outcast with a dissimulating lifestyle* - is this the plot he embodied but never set for our enlightenment? A plot with no pulp source and in minor keys.

It is unlikely that we shall learn any more than this.