

Refugee, Renegade or Recluse? Carafa à Paris

*"J'ai connu les honneurs et la mollesse des cours; le monde m'a banni de son sein,
les portes des palais se sont fermées sur moi" Le Solitaire Acte I^{er} Sc^{IX}*

Alexander Weatherson

Exiled - if this should be the appropriate term - in the musical metropolis of his dreams, to his surprise warmly welcomed by its resident *operisti*, after an initial *sortie* the dissident imperial *écuyer* gave all the appearance of being at a loss, of needing to fight his corner so to speak with a technicoloured *opéra-comique en trois actes et en prose* clearly devised to display his fabulous range of theatrical skills. Could it be that *Le Solitaire* - a retro farago of rocky peaks, thunder-storms, splashing torrents and cave-bound hermit ensconced in a *mise-en-scène* of notable incredibility, its title-role confided to the *grey eminence* of a superlative Louis-Auguste Huet - have been anything but a politically oportune *carte de visite*?

Could Marie's lyrical eulogy to the opera's evasive hero...

*Qui traverse à la nage
Nos rapides torrens?
Qui, sur un roc sauvage,
Va défier les vents?
A l'ours dans sa tanière,
Qui donne le trépas?
De la biche légère
Qui devance les pas.
Chut! C'est le Solitaire
Il fait tout
Il voit tout
Il sait tout
Est partout*

...have been merely an gratuitous selfie by the composer?

However else can it be explained that this patrician expatriate had allowed himself to fall so abjectly upon one of those absurd romantic effusions reclining on every contemporary sofa?



Charles-Victor Prévot *vicomte d'Arincourt*
“*Prince des Romantiques*”

Michele Enrico Carafa di Colobrano has long been credited with an especially innovative repertoire. In no way could it have been in character for him to feel it necessary to stoop to conquer. *Le Solitaire*? An aberration? Whatever dissidence had been his lot - not even in Naples where he had found himself perilously at odds with the establishment - had he failed to ensure that his musical role should be both radical and challenging. His landmark *Gabriella di Vergi* (1816) alone was responsible for putting paid to the rigid convention that operas should terminate bloodlessly on its stages and a novelty that would have the most dramatic effect conceivable upon his contemporaries. Its gamechanging impact had been preceded by a prentice offering *Il vascello l'Occidente* (1814) that was not much less than deliberate provocation. This intrepid approach would be due to continue in France, but his *Masaniello* (1827) - the hottest potato of all where his family antecedents were concerned - was promptly smothered by Auber's *La Muette de Portici* the following year; his fervent and ravishingly moving Walter-Scott essay *Le Nozze di Lammermoor* (1829) provoked an unforgettable *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) from a rival that its composer could never tolerate as a consequence; while his *La Prison d'Edimbourg* (1833) - a bitter fable of cruel injustice - was unjustly dismissed by the *La prigioniera d'Edimburgo* (1838) of Federico Ricci giving rise to much bitterness on the part of its original maestro.

But *Le Solitaire* was not innovatory in the least. Not even subjectively. The reverse if anything is true; Weigl had written an *I solitari* in 1797, followed by Carlo Coccia in 1811 and Vaccai in 1815, and this species of argument was to fall happily at the feet of both Pacini and Bellini. Anguished isolation was a fashionable topic and there is no reason to suppose that in the hands of these rivals either its meaning or content could ever have betrayed any undisclosed conflict in the psychological background of its current champion.

A far more introspective personality than most of his operatic contemporaries with both a politically and socially encumbered past his chosen themes weighed heavily on the vocation he had chosen. Michele Enrico Carafa di Colobrano had a longer and more extensive cultural background than any of his immediate candidates for musical renown. It was in the Palazzo Carafa that the first comic opera *in Neapolitan dialect* was given in honour of Don Tiberio Carafa, principe di Chiusano, this was *La Cilla*, with music by Michelangelo Faggioli and libretto by Francesco Antonio Tullio, performed on a make-do stage in the family salon on 26 December 1707. A witness to the common touch that would not fail his descendant in the future. From then on, as was proper to the aristocratic enlightenment of the age the involvement of the family in musical innovation came to be accepted: a Don Giuseppe Carafa *dei principi di Colobrano* was Paisiello's first patron; later, a grander cousin, Marzio Gaetano Carafa, principe di Colobrano would become an accomplished and respected church musician and another kinsman, Giovanni Carafa, Duca di Noja was to preside over the fortunes of the Conservatorio di S. Sebastiano as its *Sovrintendente* doubling this duty with the even more onerous *incarico* (up to 1820) of controlling the turbulent comings and goings of the Royal Theatres of Naples. It was against such a background that Michel-Henri's own foundation as an international composer of note came about. It showed itself both in his manner and in his technical dexterity.

His apparent prostration before d'Arlincourt's muse must have been purely expedient. But it led to his firm placement among established colleagues at the Théâtre de L'Opéra-Comique that would serve him in good stead for the rest of his Parisian orbit.