

Federico's prison

Alexander Weatherson

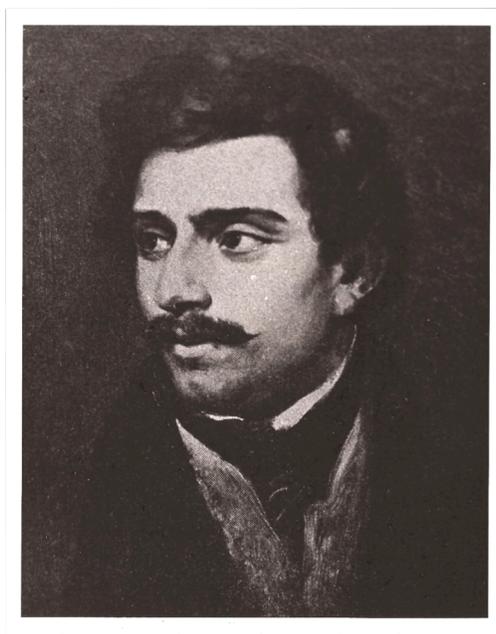
The fact is, Federico Ricci never completed his musical education. Born in Naples on 22 October 1809, sibling and shadow of the irrepressible Luigi Ricci, born 8 July 1805, music ran like fraternal ink in his veins. Both brothers studied at the side of Vincenzo Bellini, indeed Federico had Bellini as his *maestrino* (a sort of pupil-teacher) at the Conservatorio di S.Pietro a Majella so both can be said to have received the very best that Naples could offer. In real life both learned nearly everything on stage, both began as streetwise teenagers furnishing scatological musical additions to the scrofulous parodies of the theatres in the backstreets; as a result both antagonised the long-suffering Zingarelli, Director of the Conservatorio: Luigi - after impudently staging an opera before the King at the S.Carlo when professional engagements were expressly forbidden to students (a blind eye had been turned to a whole series of ribald farse on dimmer stages but a Royal Gala could in no way be ignored) was expelled without a diploma. Federico, nineteen years old, went too. Shrugging, they set up in Rome instead.

This would seem to imply a close relationship, but these brothers could never have been so unlike: Luigi was reckless, expansive and prodigal, Federico was cautious, calculating and prudish. The *ainé* was sensual and gregarious, the *cadet* kept himself to himself. Luigi went bald as a teenager, Federico covered himself with whiskers. This schism was not so obvious in their first youth. At the start the younger brother was compliant, helping his brilliant senior to complete his stream of scores, they wrote them together side-by-side at the same piano, Luigi on the left, Federico on the right, Luigi improvising, Federico embellishing, passing melodies from hand to hand, two creative intelligences thinking as one.

Federico's name, as an independent maestro, did not appear in print until the first of their four composite operas, this was *Il colonello* a melodramma giocoso (performed in two acts) with a libretto by Jacopo Ferretti given at the Teatro del Fondo in Naples on 24 March 1835 as an overdue olive-branch to their native town. With its starring heroine in soldierly drag it was intended to feature the super-virile Maria Malibran whose military laurels were blunted when her carriage turned turtle after colliding with a pig. She was obliged to take to her bed. Carolina Ungher replaced her and the opera had the best of receptions. Federico's true solo début came some three months later with *Monsieur de Chalumeaux*, a one-act opera buffa of traditional facture also with a Ferretti text which was staged resplendently at La Fenice in June that same year, its brittle score serving to announce the arrival of a newcomer of note on the springboard for fame.

Those who believed that he was cut-out for comedy, however, made a mistake, Federico's intellectual ambitions had taken flight in Rome. A handsome face had assured him a host of admirers in the artistic gratin, he was painted by Horace Vernet, most memorably perhaps as a prostrate Holophernes about to be decapitated by Madame Rossini (Olympe Pélissier, not Isabella Colbran as is sometimes reported) and he cultivated poets and scribblers of all kinds, following all the fashionable overtures - seeking to distance himself both from his Piedigrotta past and his embarrassing brother whose amorous exploits he found excruciating. It was in this refined cultural ambiance that he alighted upon the plot of the opera that brought him renown. Its literary credentials were

impeccable, Sir Walter Scott's novels sat on every sofa in Italy, his 'Heart of Midlothian' (1818) happily translated into Italian - unreadable as it is in English, supplied the plot and Gaetano Rossi the text. As a vehicle for climbing the ladder of operatic fortune it could not have been bettered, it was one of those antiquarian literary confections in which *mezzo-carattere* roles co-existed side-by-side with high drama, the epitome casting of French *grand-opéra* then in vogue Europe-wide. But Federico's *La prigioniera di Edimburgo* - described as a "*melodramma semiserio*" - is nothing of the kind, its terminal rescue notwithstanding, the opera has no *lieto fine*, it is a romantic tragedy with an emotional range that spares no-one and nothing, not even its passing engagement with a series of fickle characters in order to point the devastation of the dreadful *dénouement*. This ending, with its crazy prima donna soprano in flames like a candle at the window of a burning campanile above a crowd of desperate onlookers, is frankly the stuff of gothic melodrama at its very peak. Horrific to witness and fascinating to hear, the perfect recipe for success in an overstuffed era avid for sensation



Federico Ricci (Horace Vernet 1831)

LA PRIGIONE DI EDIMBURGO *melodramma semiserio, poesia del signor Gaetano Rossi, musica del signor Maestro Federico Ricci, da rappresentarsi nel Gran Teatro di Trieste, La Quaresima del 1838.* This long opera, surprisingly, manages to encapsulate both the impact and the emotion of Scott's complicated novel, it also brings the schizoid soprano in nightgown and trills to her apogee to the dismay of the legion of detractors of Italian Opera. In this historical fantasy the theme of 'Nina pazza per amore' takes its last real stride into nineteenth-century alienation. The demented Giovanna - Madge Wildfire of 'The Heart of Midlothian' - imagines she has a child by Giorgio the tenor lover of her rival Ida who really has given birth, Giovanna steals Ida's baby and the desperate mother - unable to account for its disappearance - is accused of infanticide and condemned to death. At the last moment, when she is about to be led to the scaffold, her fellow inmates set fire to the prison in protest, Giovanna is trapped trapped in a tower adjacent to the prison,

surrounded by flames she recovers her wits *in extremis* and lowers the baby to its frantic father while going-up in smoke before everyone's eyes.

The score is carefully contrived so that each of the main protagonists has a key role. It is extravagantly cast, there are no less than three sopranos, that of the love-lorn Giovanna being a role of extraordinary length and stamina, the tenorial demands of Giorgio are far-from insignificant, while there are two other male roles - a starring basso-buffo and an imposing basso-cantante. This extravagance of casting did much to inhibit revival in all but the biggest theatres of Italy. At its prima in the Teatro Grande of Trieste on 13 March 1838, Giovanna was sung by Rita Gabussi, Ida by Giuseppina Armenia, and Fanny by Marietta Biondi; Giorgio was sung by Lorenzo Bonfigli; his father (Ida's hanging Judge, the Duke of Argyll) il Duca d'Argil by Lorenzo Biondi; while Tom, a seafaring buffo, was sung by Giuseppe Scheggi. *La prigionie di Edimburgo* was a success from the first notes despite the fact that La Gabussi - who was far from enthusiastic about her music, mounted such a display of non-compliance before the curtain rose that, after it fell, deafened by some of the most resounding applause she was ever to receive in a brilliant career - was obliged to make a humble apology to the angry maestro. Federico, having with difficulty swallowed his indignation, merely commented "...a Trieste ho tante lezioni, e si ben pagate..."

It was an opera full of good tunes. Ironically the piece that set the city humming was the infectuous *barcarola* 'Sulla poppa del mio brich' (Act I Sc VII) whose brio is sardonically underlined when, from his vantage point on the poop of his Brig Tom unwittingly spies Giovanna clambering out of a window with something hidden under her shawl. Thus, the theft of the baby is adroitly timed to coincide with the most light-hearted moment in the score! This *barcarola* has survived to our day in early scratchy recordings, in company with Giovanna's gentle lullaby 'Dormi, dormi, bel bambino' (Act II Sc X) addressed to the purloined baby - popular fare throughout the Victorian era. But Federico's imposing opera is more than a source of catchy tunes, it contains no less than three full-length *finali*, in which the first of these, Ida's *cri du cœur* 'Innocente...ed esecrata! Infelice abbandonata!.. Non mi resta ormai che la morte' manages to sum-up the entire melodramma romantico in one single moment of anguish; the second finale features a wonderfully disturbing scene when the mad Giovanna clings to poor Ida in totally uncomprehending female solidarity; while the third finale, the last - a *gran'scena* spreading over several scenes with a chain of ariosi and bizarre duetti, running the gamut of every conceivable emotion as the deranged Giovanna drifts in and out of fantasy, alternating frenzied declamation '*con estremo trasporto*' with heartbreaking cantabile - is not only poignant but leads directly to the great spectacle that brings down the curtain: "*La piazza di Edimburgo rischiarata dall'incendio ed affollata di gente: Nel fondo si vede il campanile. Le fiamme attingono la piccola scala interna che è di legno*" reads the libretto: from her eerie high above the stage, Giovanna cries out 'Prendi, o Giorgio, è sangue tuo!' lets down the baby in a basket then crosses her arms across her chest and perishes in an agonising imolation, purifying and penitential for all to see.

Few operas can be said to have had a more potent climax. It was the kind of dénouement that could be said to be a logical culmination of all the spectacular envoi that had gone before in one single coup. In *La prigionie di Edimburgo* Federico Ricci succeeded in harnessing all the operatic elements - not just fire and water but irony, madness, injustice, cruelty, pathos and human heartbreak. He created a vivid score, tolling bells, divisi-

strings, percussion, massed-choral lamentations and imprecations in one truly amazing tour-de-force that was his own baptism by fire. His brother Luigi held the conductor's baton at the prima and the opera remained in the repertoire for some forty years. Among the Ida's were Eugenia Tadolini and Erminia Frezzolini; among the Giovanna's Desiderata Derancourt, Fanny Goldberg, Sofia Schoberlechner and Irene Secchi-Corsi. The buffo smuggler was sung many times by Giuseppe Scheggi who made his mark with this role. The list of revivals outside Italy is impressive. It reached Barcelona in 1840, Warsaw in 1844, Palma di Mallorca in 1851 and Montevideo in 1853. Denmark, Brazil, Mexico and Malta all saw stagings. There were few failures astonishingly; at Parma in 1839 it fell as a result of a wretched cast; Naples refused to stage it at the S.Carlo as they did "*not accept semiseria operas*" (the composer was still *persona non grata*); at his home town of Rome in 1840 (with Scheggi and Secchi-Corsi), the press was enthusiastic about its flair and vivacity but claimed to discover "*reminiscences*" and hated the libretto ("*è orribile*"). Despite such passing quibbles it was *La prigioniera di Edimburgo* that put Federico Ricci on the map.

It also enclosed him in a prison of sorts. Once only in his subsequent career was he able to write another opera with the same imposing impact. Huge efforts to repeat his success see-sawed erratically: *Un duello sotto Richelieu* [1839] at La Scala the following year had good moments only; *Luigi Rolla* [1841] with ecstatic verse by Salvatore Cammarano as well as a superior dramatic scope pleased at the Pergola in Florence (where plots about Michelangelo made everyone happy) but was far too literary and proved far too hard to revive; *Corrado di Altamura* [1841] put the record straight at La Scala and emerged as his second important offering. With this plot - disturbingly reminiscent of Verdi's *Oberto conte di San Bonifacio* (and perhaps from the same elusive source) cobbled together by Giacomo Sacchero - Federico managed to emulate the melodic fascination of *La prigioniera di Edimburgo* with a vehemence that was scarcely less imposing. His *Corrado* is challenging, vocally imprinting on the minds of listeners many of the quirks now believed to be the hall-mark exclusively of the emergent *bussetino*: the pounding bass, the angelic cori, and the terminal flick of virtuosity to the tail of the cabalette - that Verdi appreciated Federico Ricci's musical skills is on record and the two men remained close (almost an unique feat) to the end of the latter's life. With Felice Varesi in the title role, Carlo Guasco, Luigia Abbadia and Marietta Brambilla this imposing opera went round the world having won a memorable one-off *rifacimento* in Paris in 1844 (with six added numbers that remain to be uncovered)

Then followed a very grey period, brought to a head only when Federico and Luigi composed their joint triumph *Crispino e la comare* of 1850. This half-decade of disappointments is perplexing, the serious operas Federico staged were full of appealing music but none made any lasting impression. It is true that their libretti were consistently ineffectual but they all had casts that included the greatest singers of the day: *Vallombra* [1842] at La Scala was hurried on stage and the roster of Erminia Frezzolini, Achille De Bassini and Carlo Guasco could not save it from oblivion; *Isabella de' Medici* [1845] lavishly mounted at Trieste was received almost with exasperation, even the towering Teresa De Giuli-Borsi (in the title role) fell flat; *Estella* [1847] with a text by Francesco Maria Piave had some really important music but Federico's hopes for an Italy-wide triumph did not materialise: the opera was fêted at La Scala, the Irish prima donna Catherine Hayes excelled herself, it was published, praised, and then vanished without

explanation. *Griselda* [1847] - at least where the plot was concerned - was a curiosity, an Arthurian antipasto heralding *Tristan und Isolde*, she sank in the Venetian lagoon without even a ripple. The success of *Crispino e la comare* brought all this to a term. It was the fourth comedy he and Luigi had written together and the last (*Il colonnello* had been followed by *Il disertore per amore* of 1836 and *L'amante di richiamo* of 1846) Unlike those congenial scores it was not written side-by-side - not even at the same piano - but divided up piecemeal and different sections allotted coldly to each brother who wrote his contribution apart. The celebrated symbiosis was no more, Luigi's bedroom entanglements had finally been too much. But in what can only be described as a feat of extra-sensory perception their combined creativity survived, they responded to Piave's black-comedy with an equal flair and the joint opera brought them the international renown to which they had both aspired. Staged at the San Benedetto Theatre in Venice on 28 February 1850 *Crispino e la comare ossia Il medico e la morte* has never quite left the repertory.

Post *Crispino* Federico's finances improved materially but his stageworks faltered. *I due ritratti* [1850], based on a French farce in the same theatre in which *Crispino* had triumphed, vanished without a trace: Federico took himself off furiously to Vienna where his *Il marito e l'amante* [1852] had a honeymoon reception, its clever mixture of sentiment and erotic inuendo captivated the Viennese. He was lionised and carried around like a trophy from salon to salon, but *Il paniere d'amore* which followed [1853] dropped dead in the water even with the same brilliant cast! In an access of pessimism he accepted the compensation prize offered by the sympathetic Russian Ambassador to Vienna - agreeing to fill the post of Inspector of Singing at the Imperial School of Music in St.Petersburg and took himself off to a wintery exile for fourteen years writing nothing for the stage.

It was an imprisonment of his own making as well he knew. In 1867 he asked for his release and took the train straight to Paris where he rebounded with an energy and enthusiasm that amounted to a rebirth. In Italy they thought he was dead and the news of his resurrection came like a thunderclap. *Une Folie à Rome*, the most important opera of his second career, an *opéra bouffé en trois actes* with a text by himself, staged at the Théâtre des Fantaisies-Parisiennes on 30 January 1869 made a furore of the kind that only the brilliant audiences of that fervent city could even contemplate. The tiny theatre bulged - besieged by the biggest crowds in its history. Federico found himself a star at sixty years of age, with a new *persona*, cheerful, debonair, liberated, a boulevardier in demand with a train of sycophantic admirers. The following decade unfolded full of excitements, Paris continued to be his chosen venue, in this sunset glow he staged comedy after comedy almost all of them *rifacimenti* of sorts, including a repolished version of *Crispino* (as *Le Docteur Crispin* with some new music) and touchingly, a French revision of Luigi's resounding farsa *Chi dura vince* (of 1834) which thus lived up to its name. The only really new music was represented by *Le Docteur rose* [1872] which failed to please - two doctors in a row was asking too much it would seem. If he regretted the innovative mood of his *Prigione di Edimburgo* it no longer showed, picturesque insanity, exaggerated emotional response and the outré vocal demands of yore had been replaced by a shameless willingness to be in the swim...

Federico Ricci, successful, fêted, died at his country home near Conegliano on 10 December 1877. One feature only of his abrasive fraternal relationship with Luigi was

always in evidence: a social success everywhere he had been loaded with honours, medals, ribbons and crosses of all kinds. Magnanimous in maturity, affable, rose in buttonhole, curled and primed to perfection, never - not even after the breach that had driven them apart - had he sported these decorations in the presence of Luigi, the model and mentor of his golden youth.