

Stella di Napoli

To Naples with love?

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A poet *nell'imbarazzo*; a lyrical *impasse* no less - with a Scylla et Charybdis of a problem - on one side an intransigent Giovanni Pacini digging in his heels over the two operatic texts he had been offered and on the other an intrusive Saverio Mercadante - angry and impatient for a decision, Salvatore Cammarano made his opinion known in a letter of pained reproof to the difficult *catanese* maestro on 5 September 1845:

*"...I hoped that all your unfortunate prejudice against the plot [Orazi e Curiazi] had vanished, but your silence has led me to suspect the opposite... with one bold stroke we can put everything to rights. Stella di Napoli, which so much appealed to you, serves as my excuse: when you regretted having left me to choose between Stella and Orazi, you wanted to return to Stella, but I could not, because I had not yet then overcome the obstacles which the role of the father put before me. Afterwards, while versifying Orazi, my thoughts turned every now and again to the beloved Stella, and these obstacles fell away, and now I can undertake the poetry. It is late, you'll tell me; no, it is not late when two men fervently desire something, one of them daring to want a great success, the other being Pacini, strong in the inexhaustible power of his genius..."*¹

Late indeed it was, but launched with this letter Pacini's *Stella di Napoli* would open at the S.Carlo exactly as scheduled, the composer's incredible scribble deciphered, parts prepared, sets painted, costumed and rehearsed and making a tremendous splash on 11 December 1845 when unknown to anyone (except his unhappy rival) the plot had only been clinched twelve weeks before!

The musical press had a field day, with applause for Eugenia Tadolini, Filippo Coletti and Gaetano Fraschini so protracted that the opera was scarcely allowed to continue: "*Neither Foscari nor Alzira [by Verdi] was ever staged again at the S.Carlo, after this Stella paciniana.*"²

¹ Cfr John Black *The Italian Romantic Libretto: A study of Salvatore Cammarano* [Edinburgh 1984], 100

² 'La Fama' (Milan) review of 29 January 1846: begun with an initial eight performances in 1845, *Stella di Napoli* received thirteen more in 1846, the

This innocent seeming missive, however, opens a real can of worms. Cammarano had hoped Pacini would change his mind. But why *should* the unfortunate poet have been so upset? He speaks of “*obstacles*” of Pacini’s rejection of a classical plot eminently worthy of his iconic *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (and leaving *Orazi e Curiazi* to fall to Mercadante). We hear of the composer's unswerving insistence upon “*Stella, Stella, and nothing but Stella.*” But why so put out? Why such concern? Why did Stella “*so much appeal*” to the recalcitrant *Sig. maestro cavaliere Giovanni Pacini*?

The reason, alas, is alive with comedy, mischief and malice: the argument of *Stella di Napoli* is based upon the very same *ugolian* plot as that of Mercadante’s one-and-only real triumph, *Il giuramento*, and Pacini proposed it for a starring production in Mercadante’s own backyard! No wonder Cammarano was appalled.

To escape a nightmare of recrimination the famous librettist knew only too well that the issue would have to be fudged, smothered within the guerilla boundaries long-festering between these two irreconcilable composers in his beleaguered city.

The proposed cast for *Stella di Napoli* was as follows:

GIANNI da Capua	sig. Coletti (Primo Baritono)
STELLA, sua figlia	sig. ^a Tadolini (Prima Donna Soprano)
OLIMPIA D'ACRI	sig. ^a Buccini (Prima Donna Contralto)
MARTA	sig. ^a Salvetti (Seconda Donna)
IL GENERAL D'AUBIGNI	sig. Arati (Secondo Basso)
ARMANDO	sig. Fraschini (Primo Tenore)

The source in question is none other than Victor Hugo's lurid epic ‘Angelo, tyran de Padoue’ first staged in Paris in 1835. The distribution used by Amilcare Ponchielli based upon this same play best helps identify the roles in their Pacinian guise:

Stella is *La Gioconda*
 Olimpia d'Acri is *Laura*
 Marta is *La Cieca*
 D'Aubigni is *Alvise Mocenigo*
 Armando is *Enzio*
 Gianni da Capua is *Barnaba*

quoted claim by the press did not prove quite true as there was a S.Carlo revival of *I due Foscari* in the 1857-8 season (but it appeared on one only evening)



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IL CAVALIERE

GIOVANNI PACINI

*Maestro di Cappella al Servizio di S. A. R. Il Duca di Lucca e Socio
corrispondente della R. Accademia di Belle Arti di Napoli.*

*Proprietà dell'Editore
Vienna presso Pietro Mechetti g^{no} Carlo.*

Under the aegis of Giovanni Pacini these roles would be sung in the same vocal range as that of his celebrity successor thirty years later, but more than this, Cammarano's problem - as he makes clear in his letter ("*the role of the father*") parallels that of Arrigo Boito for Ponchielli: how to disentangle this cat's-cradle of a drama, how to conjure-up a *causus-belli*, how in fact to revamp the amoral star-turn, Homodei the spy who becomes the sexual predator *Barnaba* in *La Gioconda*, and turn him into Pacini's heroic Gianni da Capua?

Cammarano applied himself to the making of red-herrings; Gaetano Rossi's convoluted libretto for *Il giuramento* was of great assistance (even repeated hearings do not make the plot of Mercadante's warhorse much more than dimly comprehensible). He further obfuscated the high-profile setting and chronology³ while throwing in a few local landmarks of his own, upstaging Rossi (and Boito) he bent the action to Calabria and a historical never-never land thus adroitly pulling wool over the eyes of the Mercadantian fringe agog in the great opera house.

But as a result, the motivation of *Stella di Napoli* is not only as obscure as that of *Il giuramento* but is as zany and improbable as that of the irresistible forthcoming *Il trovatore* for a far-more important rival. It is a development not without significance. The fact is, viewed objectively, *Stella* offers a genuine foretaste of the Verdian masterpiece to come - an opera plunged in Aragonese gloom, unreal, vindictive, despairing, extravagantly lyrical and heavily dependent upon gypsies, poison, prophesy, prisons and self-immolation.

That *Stella di Napoli* was the *third* new Pacinian opera in one single year is an extra factor. All three of them highly potent offerings, 1845 marked a key moment in the compositional parabola of the maestro, when, in fact, the Verdian challenge first became clear. Each of his scores boasting a compositional conjuring trick - but not all of them pulled from the hat with quite the same flourish. There had been unusual preparation for this starring trio. Francesco Maria Piave had begun work on the first - *Lorenzino de' Medici* in the summer of 1844; *Bondelmonte* - the second opera with a text too by Cammarano had been selected as early as November 1842 and its verses had been in Pacini's hands since the summer of 1843. Nor was *Stella* quite the bolt out of the blue as the letter quoted above might suggest, Pacini had cherished the idea of

³ Irrespective of Mercadante's support group in the S.Carlo, complete disguise was mandatory, the Bourbon censors literally crossed-themselves at any mention of Hugo's plays - his name was anathema

baiting Mercadante in one way or another for some considerable time, indeed, long enough, and openly enough to oblige the impoverished poet to gird his loins in advance.⁴

Once there was an agreement to go ahead, however, the actual writing of *Stella di Napoli* set out at a hectic pace...

On 10 October 1845 Pacini wrote to Cammarano:

*“...vi aspetto domani mattina alle ore 12 per rivedere la Stella, si tratta di cambiare alcune parole. Tutto il resto non ammette eccezione, Laus Deo. Avete pensato al vostro Pacini?”*⁵

To have been able to dismiss the incredible maestro from his thoughts at this time might have been difficult, indeed the poet must have dwelled long and painfully upon his tormentor. The completed libretto of *Stella di Napoli*, however, with the role of Gianni da Capua to their satisfaction was ready for submission to the *censura* on 6 November 1845 by which time almost all the score had been composed. This was usual. Few operatic composers, Donizetti and Verdi among them, felt constrained to await censorial permission to write their music. In any event no one with any experience of contractual strictures felt free to delay their muse in anticipation of the wayward permission of the odd and illogical royal and imperial surveillance censorship of the Kingdom of Naples.

Nor did anyone expect to get a lesson in real history from the opera house. The period from 1442 when the King of Aragon, Alfonso the Magnanimous, conquered Naples - until the French invasion of 1495 - was wonderfully confusing despite its cultural importance, and thematically - as the reign of his illegitimate son Ferrante I (1458-1494) was a goldmine for romantic theatre - it offered a period of eager resort for local composers. The epoch indeed had its merits, very few of the events that took place at that time were clearly enough defined to be identified by the censorship as politically inadmissible. True, a *French Invasion* (invoking that of Murat) was a potential thorn, but the historic

⁴ Cammarano needed the money. Giovanni Pacini was one of the few composers who paid for his libretti promptly and without even a murmur. The poet, naturally, paid him special attention in return

⁵ *Cfr* Gallini catalogue Inverno 2006/7. Item No. 575. (Where the date - and the opera - have been misread)

roust of Charles VIII (which is more-or-less the setting of *Stella di Napoli*) must even have been considered propitious by the current dynasty in the Royal Palace in Naples hostile to any mention of France and its international ambitions - ancient or modern.

Whatever may have been its views, the libretto passed through security almost without a twitch, nonetheless the poet thought it prudent to supply a long prefacing *Argomento* to the printed libretto whose content deliberately throws very little real light on the plot and is designed to divert the eyes and ears of the Mercadantian caucus.

The three *parts* of the opera follow a familiar path for this poet:

- Parte I. LA ZINGANA**
- Parte II. IL PADRE**
- Parte III. AMOR SENZA PARI** ⁶

The creaky storyline is a conflation of improbabilities, a confusing tangle of near-historical persiflage, actions and situations whose *ugolian* motivation is flagrantly compacted derisively enough (at least where Pacini is concerned) to offer a covert mockery dressed in what would emerge as delicious music. Its original characters bent to alien dramatic ends with only a provocative 'Angelo' outline remaining.

As usual with Pacini, once the joke was he over set himself to write an imposing score. Did his provocation pay dividends? In fact it did not. Mercadante wrote a splendid *Orazi e Curiazi*. Of the trio of operas of 1845 *Stella di Napoli* was the least successful: *Lorenzino de' Medici* had almost forty stagings and was in the cartellone for thirty years; *Bondelmonte* did even better with an extensive foreign showing and more than eighty-five revivals while *Stella di Napoli* could boast scarcely twelve, with an important staging in only one other major Italian city (Rome in 1858).⁷ Did he regret his flippant adventure? Probably not, but he has had to wait some one hundred and seventy years for anyone to take a look at its wonderful music!

⁶ *Cfr* the Quattro Parti of *Il trovatore*:

II DUELLO/LA GITANA/II FIGLIO DELLA ZINGARA/II SUPPLIZIO

⁷ *Cfr* Thomas G Kaufman *Verdi and his major contemporaries* (New York and London 1990) 135-143

