

Vaccai: un capolavoro decapitato (The headless masterpiece)

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"Poor Vaccai" they said after his opera *Giulietta e Romeo* had been cut-off in its prime by Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* - but in the belcanto Hall of Fame his name would be inscribed in letters of gold. Scion of a comfortable dynasty of local dignitaries, magistrates, advocates, doctors and explorers with a leavening of priests and nuns, he was not cut-out for competition – or not with the likes of Rossini, Pacini and Bellini. One of the teeming musical progeny of the Marche, named for the patron-saint of his native Tolentino, Nicola Vaccai grew-up in the echo of many great names in the operatic round, born between the 15th and 16th March 1790, modest, book-bound and dutiful, he came to the stage via Metastasio and Alfieri in the paternal library. Intended for a career in medicine (like his father) or in law, he longed for the footlights. The family moved fatefully to Pesaro in 1797 where the shadow of Rossini was first to fall on him, and here he spent a staid youth writing portentous tragedies (one of which, a *Manlio Capitolino*, written at the age of fourteen was staged at the Teatro del Sole in Pesaro in 1807). In Rome, later that same year, he began to spend more time before the theatre curtains than before the tomes of jurisprudence in the University library as decreed by his parents, and instead began surreptitiously to study music. He kept this up for years and only won over his reluctant family to a change of vocation in 1811 when he astonished them by displaying his Diploma from the Accademia di Santa Cecilia. The celebrated Paisiello took him as a pupil in Naples in 1812, happy to welcome such a well-heeled *studioso*, but as was noted at the time, Paisiello turned all his pupils into lesser versions of himself a factor Vaccai's succession of virtuous cantatas (*Dafni ed Eurillo*, *Andromeda* and an *Omaggio della gratitudine* all composed between 1813-14) together with some religious trifles and an aria or two written for insertion into *farse*, did nothing to confound.

The *Omaggio* at least was received with an appropriate gratitude, sung in the salon of an Anglo Neapolitan potentate it was passed-off as music by his celebrated master – the latter standing-up proudly at the end to announce that it was the work of the bashful young maestro standing by his side. This senile quadro had a happy sequel: Vaccai was commissioned to write an opera for the Teatro Nuovo in the forthcoming carnival.

To begin a career with *I solitari di Scozia* was bold. New for Naples, Andrea Leone Tottola had revamped a text supplied by Gaetano Rossi for Carlo Coccia at Venice in 1811, it had a modish theme (as geographically challenged as that of Bellini's *I puritani di Scozia* which was set in Plymouth) Rossi's solitary Scots had taken-up refuge in a Hermitage at Windsor (!) within whose walls they were sheltered from the perfidious presence of women, in true *semi-seria* fashion, however, an alpha soprano eventually succeeded in breaching their defences in order to effect a less misogynist solution in the final bars. Vaccai wrote the music in forty days and the opera had a happy prima at the Nuovo in Naples on 18 February 1815 at the same time as the flagging régime of Gioacchino Murat was falling apart in the streets outside. The opera proved a welcome diversion, bringing solace to an old school audience brave enough to carry on undaunted and was singled-out for praise by Queen Caroline Murat alone in her box. This promising start, despite its timing, might have carried his fame further afield had his name not been printed "Nicola Vaccari".

The last slight ignored, Vaccai asked Gaetano Rossi for a text of his own for his next opera, and the resulting melodramma di sentimento *Malvina* was staged at the Teatro San Benedetto in Venice the following year. It was the first of his many disasters. Though not without praise for its suave orchestration *Malvina's* first appearance on the stage on 8 June 1816 was also her last, a shocking row behind the scenes with the mezzo-soprano in the title role (it was the abrasive Rosa Morandi) caused the opera to be dropped like a hot cake. The next venture was as bad. After a wait of two years he accepted a quite dreadful libretto (its poet Bartolommeo Merelli had been recommended by Mayr - a name to conjure with in Venice) and in an access of cynicism he had shelved his arcadian instincts in favour of the gloss and glitter of the great *pesarese*, thus his *Il lupo d'Ostende ossia L'innocenza salvata dalla colpa* only succeeded in shedding his earlier patrons while winning no new ones. The music was unwarrantedly vivacious, full of energetic syncopation, but the plot was absurd - an ambitious tearjerker with duplicity and poisonings in the sort of setting that would be in vogue in the era of silent films. It had a dull prima on 17 June 1818 before a bored audience in the same Teatro San Benedetto - a meal for the critics but a blow to the composer's innocence! It was followed by repeats of the first act only - paired, insult of insults - with the second act of *La cenerentola* in place of his own.

Mortally wounded, Vaccai remained in the city he found loathsome to teach singing while writing music for ephemeral ballets which left no trace.

That his operatic career survived at all was due to Queen Caroline Murat. In 1821 he decamped to Trieste in search of rich pupils. Soon after his arrival there he had the good fortune to attract the attention of Elisa Baciocchi former Grand Duchess of Tuscany (Maria Anna Bonaparte, Napoleon's eldest sister) by whom he was commissioned to write a votive mass for the newly defunct of St. Helena. Before the altar he encountered her heavily-veiled sibling the "Contessa di Lipona" (anagram of Napoli) in other words the refugee Queen Caroline who graciously invited the unhappy maestro to join her tiny group of retainers at Frohsdorf near Wiener Neustadt (where the Austrian Court liked to deposit its more embarrassing French exiles) under which consoling roof he remained from February to April 1822 writing songs and teaching her daughters to sing.

Vaccai's flirtation with Bonapartism (unlike that of Giovanni Pacini) was part to his heritage. Urged-on by Paisiello, it was not only a bequest from the liberal intelligentsia to which he owed his upbringing but also from Tolentino (near to which town Murat had been arrested and later shot) a local distinction that may have alerted the composer to the lost cause. Whatever its origins however, Caroline took up his case from her Austrian exile. In the event we can only speculate on how it was achieved: did the exQueen of Naples write a letter to the exEmpress of the French in her ducal refuge of Parma and urge the operatic commission that ended Vaccai's bitter silence? Once viscerally opposed to her sister-in-law Caroline had become reconciled to the widowed Marie-Louise in recent years, her own rapprochement with Austria predating even the loss of her Neapolitan throne. Whatever the circumstances Vaccai would come to bless her kind act.

In Parma Vaccai chose an appropriately imperial plot: *Pietro il Grande ossia Un geloso alla tortura* would be the true coronation of his own career as well as his first real triumph. He took care to attempt a stylistic unity, reconciling his conflicting modes - as the critics observed "*che occupiava alla venustà delle forme rossiniane i pregi e la scienza delle precedente scuola*" to which he added a recently acquired confidence and maturity - under the imperial ægis he even managed to insert an obsequious trio of suitable flattery for the gracious Marie-Louise smiling down at him from above. At the Teatro Ducale on 17 January 1824 he made a brand new start, he tapped a melodic vein that henceforth never failed him and though the opera had another Merelli libretto (with the author's name suppressed) and was quite without novelty (operas on the

same plot by both Donizetti and Pacini were currently in circulation) the reborn Vaccai's *Pietro il Grande* was discovered to be a worldly, well-shaped and extremely diverting score. Cleverly staged under the polished auspices of Her Majesty the Duchess's splendid showplace it soon went the rounds.



Nicola Vaccai (1790-1848)

The next decade would see the greater part of his successful composing, good fortune would come on a recurring basis and it was only an unwitting collision with the operatic furies that obliged him to flee his native soil.

At first there were promising ventures; late in 1824 came the highly praised *La pastorella feudatoria* with its bucolic dream and deliciously idyllic music, Vaccai found himself an ideal interpreter in Santina Ferlotti whose lyrical entrata 'Presso un ruscello limpido' found a place on every drawing-room piano in Italy. Again the plot was perfectly predictable but its undemanding charm and graceful sentiment amounted almost to a romantic novelty. Staged at the Teatro Carignano in Turin on 18 September 1824 it found itself sharing the *cartellone* with Antonio Cherubini's ballet *Le tombe di Verona ossia Giulietta e Romeo* which heartbreaking plot - quite inadvertently it would seem - laid a seed soon to germinate in momentous form.

A more personal heartbreak began with the following opera – a *dramma per musica* that Rossini's considered to be Vaccai's very best work (not unreasonably as *Zadig e Astartea* was a Tottola-inspired travesty of *Semiramide*). It is at this point that Vaccai emerges as something of a vocal didact, his *Zadig* combined stage wizardry with incredible melismatic acrobatics and had as its stars such expert voices as Andrea

Nozzari and Adelaide Tosi under whose banner almost any opera would have succeeded. More significantly for the maestro however the cast also included his former pupil Anna Corradini, a headstrong mezzo soprano who sang under the name of Adele Cesari and a rising star he trailed hopelessly from Trieste, to Naples and Milan, and would go on trailing hopelessly for years to come. Despite her stage rivals her role of Zadig had the most brilliant music in the score. With its prima on 20 February 1825 in a royal gala in the superlative Teatro S. Carlo resplendent for the brand new king, prefaced by an honorific cantata by Donizetti, everyone and everything in his *Zadig e Astartea* was cheered to the echo and most especially his former pupil who even surpassed her Arbace (in Rossini's opera) which had made her name. This triumphal *Zadig e Astartea* was the first of a quartet of operas commissioned by the Cavaliere Giuseppe Glossop a prominent member of the discreditable tribe of impresarios who managed to wield great power in Europe at the time. *Zadig* was for Naples, the remaining three were for Milan. His *Giulietta e Romeo* - now about to come on stream - with a libretto by the celebrated Felice Romani was destined for the Lombard capital in which city he was the reigning poet. But it was not only an offering on this particular altar of money and fame, it was also laid on that of his hopeless love for La Cesari. Alas the devotion (and the major roles) he placed at her feet did not persuade her to return his affection.

It is a curious fact that the soon to be famous *Giulietta e Romeo* was not scheduled for La Scala, though that important theatre too was in Glossop's hands. The reason is not hard to find: Giulietta was to be sung by Glossop's bigamous wife Joséphine de Méric (Giuseppina Demeri) and a gale of scandalous whispers blew her away to the more modest Teatro Canobbiana. Both the prospective Romeo (La Cesari), and Vaccai, pulled faces at hearing of her engagement it seems and according to rumour the composer made cuts to the role of Giulietta after hearing her sing, such rumours were certainly correct, but they were not cuts - only changes - Vaccai always tailored his roles for specific voices. Whatever the blips and setbacks in the opera's conception however, whatever the uncomfortable relationship the composer had with its overweening poet, he excelled himself with this score, the libretto was fluent, the plot sparse, a stark tragedy endowed with an agonisingly dramatic series of tableaux leading to an occult confrontation between the two lovers in a terminal encounter of such unbearable tension that an impressionable swathe of the audience fainted during the astonishing first performance. This major score, innovative in its severity, contains a large slice of all the more

effective music of his entire career. And because its dramatic content had a poignant relevance to his own frustrated romance it struck a vein of truth that rendered completely irrelevant his unhesitating acceptance of the formulae of the day. For many years to come key arias from *Giulietta e Romeo* were inseparable from his name while the opera's instrumentation impinged on the arcane, its unusual tints defying convention with a flair almost never to be repeated by this maestro and sufficiently marked to be imitated by even his most important rivals. The swooning horns that accompanied Giulietta's dreaming cavatina were copied shamelessly for decades. Against all the odds, a plot *vecchio come Noé*, last minute casting and his own overwhelming despair, the resounding *furore* made by this opera during its unexpected prima on the stage of an ecstatic Teatro Canobbiana on 31 October 1825 was such that *Giulietta e Romeo* was swept in triumph to La Scala on 1 April 1826 as soon as sufficiently grandiose sets (Alessandro Sanquirico was obliged to enlarge his originals) and more lavish costumes (Antonia Binaghi had to do the same) could be got together for a reworked production with the great Alessandro Rolla once again at the helm before the outsize proscenium arch. The opera tapped a romantic vein from this maestro never again to flow so disturbingly. It was both the high point of his love-affair with the theatre as well as with that of its Romeo. Its dark mood of desperation spilling over into his life and fortunes. If *Giulietta e Romeo* proved a climacteric for the composer - his one and only true claim to fame - it also proved a lodestone for his fickle innamorata who could still be found singing her *musico* role some twenty years later. For his part Vaccai would be adding and subtracting music to the score for a decade to come. The unbearably harrowing tomb scene for the doomed lovers - to be the warhorse of Maria Malibran - would still be in print in the twentieth century. It was this fatally triumphant opera, this well-worn brush with malign destiny, that brought about the cruel encounter with the operatic nexus that nearly ended his career. But more of this later.

It had been a climax it is true, but after *Giulietta e Romeo* his operatic fortunes did not go into a steep decline as many believe. Certainly the opera that followed, *Bianca di Messina*, though well conceived proved a damp squib at the Teatro Regio of Turin on 20 January 1826 even with the current super-star Henriette Méric-Lalande then at her zenith in the title role. This inexplicable set-back was painfully underlined a few months later in Naples when the novice Vincenzo Bellini's *Bianca e Gernando*, with the same plot, won all the acclamation he had been denied. Next came *Il precipizio o Le fucine di Norvegia* which in no way deserves

to be forgotten. This exotic and faintly bizarre travelogue (how many operas ask for a representation of the Aurora Borealis?) had a successful run at La Scala, the new impresario Crivelli gave it an usually responsible staging on 18 August 1826 and it held up well against all the odds - even though the prima donna soprano and the primo tenore contrived to be ill alternately throughout the run - it survived and was applauded night after night. But owing to its scenic demands, no doubt, it was never revived. The opera that came next was more mainstream and more significant and once again proved to be a template for later composers: *Giovanna d'Arco* a melodramma romantico with a libretto by Gaetano Rossi based on Schiller was at first an unalloyed triumph, staged at La Fenice on 17 February 1827, despite some critical sneering (Italian critics never came to terms with women in armour) “*troppo lunga, troppo piena di cori, troppo faticosa per la protagonista*” Vaccai was called out repeatedly. Everyone and everything was applauded and it had a stage baptism worthy of any newborn opera in that city of important musical débuts. At Naples in 1828 however disaster struck. *Giovanna d'Arco* sank in a shipwreck of truly squalid ignominy. In order to placate the notorious Naples *censura* Vaccai had denied his heroine her tragic destiny and the opera was given a *lieto fine*, but a “happy ending” she would not get at the S.Carlo. She did not get an ending at all. Staged for a royal gala once more in a brilliantly illuminated house with everyone who was anyone in Naples present and with the King and Queen and a host of guests in full fig in the royal box, the opera began without even a hint of trouble to come. The first act was applauded with a nod from the monarch. But at the start of Act II the vast tasselled stage curtain stuck fast, and would not move either up, down or sideways despite all the efforts of a cat's cradle of struggling limbs, red faces, muffled invective, and a frieze of unlovely posteriors protruding through billows of offending cloth, the opening *coro* to be spotted dimly crouching down in the background frozen with terror. After some twenty minutes of thumping and bumping, the orchestra mute, with an icy silence from above and some inaudible excuses from a spokesman at the footlights, an arctic wave of dismissal from the royal box sent the bejewelled gala audience shuffling out in total disarray allowing King Francesco I to storm forth in fury ordering the entire stage staff to be flung into jail. An Alice in Wonderland glimpse for all lovers of opera to come. Poor Vaccai. Four subsequent performances were cold-shouldered by the court and everyone else.

A penitent revival of the opera was mooted for Genoa later that same year but the project was dropped when Bellini's *Bianca* was chosen in its place. Yet another strand in the web due to embroil these two composers.

His *Saladino e Clotilde*, had no happier a fate. In a kind of synthesis of further disasters to come it fell foul of La Scala in one of its moods of complete ineptitude. Once again there was a troublesome curtain, the plot was promising (that of Verdi's *I Lombardi* more-or-less) and a superior distribution with Henriette Méric-Lalande, Giovanni David and Adele Cesari. Alas, however - La Lalande - the great diva had taken advantage of a moment of weakness by the new manager Giuseppe Crivelli and had foisted her baritone brother on the cast. As if this was not enough, at the hopelessly muddled prima on 4 February 1828 the curtain rose prematurely revealing the *coro* standing around chatting; Carlo (Charles) Lalande in the role of Armano was simply terrible; Giovanni David as Saladino – then in jealous competition with Rubini the house favourite – threw himself into his role with such extravagant cadenzas and artificial acuti that everything he sang was jeered; La Cesari, once more in a musico role as Ruggiero, did her best to pretend she was not there, while Mme Méric-Lalande, as Clotilde attempted to cover for her brother by up-staging everyone else with a series of arias of such brilliance and heart-stopping vocal seduction that the newspapers commented sarcastically on her “*esuberanza dell’amor fraterno*” (Carlo was supposed to be her father in the opera). The music was found to be interesting, even excellent, but the performance was decreed to be beyond any hope of salvation. It had five performances then vanished for good.

This check to his career led to a bout of pessimism, he refused invitations to write for London and Madrid and several offers of revivals. This was a composer who would never have the resilience of a Donizetti or a Pacini. There was one final opera before a period of angry silence, and it, paradoxically, was a success. *Saul* had been written in 1825 as a chaser to *Giulietta e Romeo* with a libretto by the same poet and conceived easily and rapidly in a full flush of creative optimism, but so many leading ladies had been proposed by Glossop, each one more inferior to the one before that Vaccai had refused to go on stage. For Naples four years later he returned to *Saul* as Luigi Lablache had declared himself willing to sing the title role. It is at this precise point that the momentous dispute with Felice Romani begins. There were two tight-fisted-protagonists in play: *Saul* had not actually been staged and Vaccai had *not paid* for Romani's libretto as he was contracted to do, this middle-class bohemian was *careful* with money (he was a son of the stethoscope) and prone to counting the change, while the equally middle-class Romani, as touchy as he was stingy, proud of his lofty status, upon receipt of Vaccai's request for small changes to the text refused flatly, unless Vaccai paid-up there and then.

It is at this moment that Vaccai made the mistake he would regret for the rest of his life. With contemptuous disregard for the famous librettist he asked the despised Andrea Leone Tottola to make the changes instead. In this way Romani's prized verses were "blighted". On 11 March 1829 *Saul* reached the stage at the S. Carlo in a production not only starring Lablache, but also Rubini and his wife. It was the happiest of successes, Vaccai always responded well to bizarrerie in opera and Romani's libretto was bold and innovative, there were some of the composer's most deft ensembles and the dramatic music for the Witch of Endor – a species of malignant pantomime worthy of any number of Azucenas and Madame Arvidsons – was given a convincingly blood-curdling frisson. The score was wholly engaging, everyone enjoyed the dramatic encounter between the two male protagonists that somehow adroitly skirted the religious foibles of the *censura*. The opera was highly praised, by Donizetti amongst others, but the damage had been done as far as Romani was concerned, and the cruel upstaging of Vaccai by Bellini was set in motion.

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When, exactly, the decision was made to kill two birds with one stone, is cleverly concealed. The ingenuity of Romani and Bellini jointly in suborning the masterpiece of one, and grabbing the contract of the other, in one single masterstroke, is blurred by a clever smokescreen of misinformation. But the facts are simple enough: the Teatro La Fenice supplied the venue and Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* the means, together they put paid to two *nemici* at once even though their targets differed; Bellini's target was Pacini, that of Romani was Vaccai.

The tormenting of Bellini by Giovanni Pacini had given much amusement to the audiences of the day but the latter's unrelenting pursuit of contracts had become unbearable to his rival *concittadino*, Pacini had accumulated two contracts for the *carnevale* of 1829, one of them for Venice with a libretto by Felice Romani while the envious Bellini found himself with no contracts at all. A just redistribution was planned: Bellini travelled to Venice at the end of the year to stage a scheduled revival of his *Il pirata* taking with him everything he needed for the coup. It was put about that if Pacini was unable to fulfil his commitment Bellini was on the spot ready and willing to supply a replacement score. His rival in distant Naples, however, was waiting fruitlessly for the second half of his contracted libretto. He had set the first half but after vainly bombarding the poet with requests for the rest arrived in Milan on 5 January 1830, the

first act of his opera (it was called *Olga o L'orfana moscovita*) under his arm with the intention of prising the remainder of the verses from the errant Romani forthwith. But the latter of course – as had been arranged in advance - had disappeared, he was nowhere to be found, not anywhere at all, no one knew where he was! In fact the so-called “*last minute*” replacement of the opera by Pacini by a rewritten *Giulietta e Romeo* is nothing but fiction. Vaccai had long been aware of Romani’s intention to punish him by deleting his masterpiece. Advised by a grapevine of singers he had left for Paris in the autumn of 1829. As for Pacini, taken off guard for the first time in his life, he found himself in Milan with no other choice but to recognise the *fait accompli*. Bellini was in Venice with Romani’s heavily rewritten text of *Giulietta e Romeo* already set as *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and after continual pestering and petitioning, the *Presidenza* of La Fenice (a *Presidenza* not in the least taken-in by the conspiracy, but cut off from all contact with the mainland by a winter of incomparable snow and ice) eventually capitulated and on 20 January agreed to substitute Pacini’s *Olga* with Bellini’s re-confection of music from his abandoned *Zaira* - a substitution that proved to be the expected triumph.

It was not the end of *Giulietta e Romeo*, however, to the fury of the precious pair. Vaccai’s indignant allies rallied. At the suggestion of Rossini (or so it has always been reported) at Bologna on 27 October 1832 the irrepressible Maria Malibran appeared in a version of *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* in which Vaccai’s hyper-dramatic tomb scene (that is Act II Scenes 12 and 13) was re-interpolated into what was left of his libretto in place of the predictable cantilena of Bellini (together with music by Mercadante and Filippo Celli). This “improved” version of Bellini's opera by such a champion diva soon became the norm and not only upstaged the usurping Bellini but remained the standard version of *I Capuleti* until the twentieth century.

As a result Vaccai now emerged from his slough of despair. At precisely the same time that Donizetti was writing a “Malibran version” of his *Maria Stuarda* so Vaccai was writing a “Malibran version” of his *Giulietta e Romeo*. On 17 November 1835 at La Scala Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo* reappeared at the scene of its original triumph now enhanced by some of additional pieces supplied for Bellini reset for the occasion (thus there are Vaccai versions of Bellini’s 'La tremenda ultrice spada' and 'Oh tante volte' with extended instrumentation). Though given a "Buonissimo" by Cambiasi this reborn opera had only a slightly better reception than that of the famous Bergamasc, the diva was frequently out of voice and behaved

with an “ultrice spada” of caprice, singing down her Juliet (Sofia Dall’Oca Schoberlechner, who became voiceless with rage) and when reproved by Vaccai took refuge in sulks. But though it vanished promptly it had served its purpose, the composer from Tolentino had revenged himself. He could begin anew. Though neither he nor Pacini ever set another word by Romani again he went on writing operas to the end of his life. His *Giovanna Gray* (Lady Jane Gray) which followed was quite the best of these but in most ways the least successful. In a comment upon his new spirit of revenge he had taken another leaf out of Bellini’s book by engaging the librettist of *I puritani*, Carlo Pepoli, to write his text for *Giovanna Gray*, its theme of decapitation a reflection of the trunk which was all that remained of his *Giulietta e Romeo* after its treatment by his now detested rival. But *Giovanna Gray* at La Scala on 23 February 1836 proved to have almost as tragic a destiny as its heroine. A passionate and robust score with a brilliant *gran’scena finale* it had an inadequate staging and was removed promptly. A dispute with ownership impeded its revival and when an attempt was made to stage it anew in 1839 the score could not be found.

Three more operas remained. *Marco Visconti*, next in the sequence, was written for the tenor Domenico Donzelli, it had a solemn libretto (the first attempt at writing for the stage by Luigi Toccagni), given its prima at the Teatro Regio of Turin on 27 January 1838 Vaccai was able to get there only at the very last moment and to a poor execution was added a plot that was dry as dust with too many cori. But Donzelli did well and the opera was printed and revived. *La sposa di Messina* (not to be confused with *Bianca di Messina*) despite an unrivalled cast of Carolina Ungher, Napoleone Moriani and Giorgio Ronconi and a poem by a relative of his wife survived for one-half a performance only after a noisy prima at La Fenice on 2 March 1839. The audience was hostile, the violent words of the plot scarcely accorded with the mild music of this accomplished belcantist and the opera ended in the deepest gloom and utter disorder.

Vaccai became ill and retired to Pesaro. He still received invitations to compose but there was one final flare-up only: on holiday in Rome in 1844 he suddenly felt compelled to write a *Virginia*, a plot frowned-upon almost everywhere in the peninsula but a Roman subject, with a Roman heroine and a Roman librettist destined for the city where for him everything had begun. This final opera had the kind of reception he had always sought. An overjoyed Vaccai was called on stage at the Teatro Apollo more than twenty times on the opening night and the *gran marcia a due bande* brought the audience to its feet. On 14 January 1845 in fact *Virginia* won a Roman Triumph, the plot was not new, nor was its music, and the cast was

modest, but it was effective theatre with several important peaks set to an accomplished text by Camillo Giuliani (a distinct improvement on its peers). It was also the end. Vaccai died on 6 August 1848 deaf to the sound of revolution. Despite innovative scores like *Giovanna d'Arco*, *Saul* and *Giovanna Gray*, Nicola Vaccai has to be accounted a one-opera composer, his *Giulietta e Romeo*, reduced to a headless trunk by malice in an artificial age, unlike its rival, offered an intimation of authentic romance at the instance of real-life tragedy.

Today, opera houses with their faith in designer labels, have ears only for Bellini and Malibran's initiative in respect of the celebrated tomb scene is always considered an outrage, but outrage on the part of Vaccai is far nearer the truth. The *via Vaccai* in Pesaro is not named for the composer but for an explorer cousin decapitated by a tribe of cannibals. It does at least serve to record on a permanent basis the distinguished and tragic maestro from that musical city who lost his head to operatic cannibals.