

Il falegname v Il falegname

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If anyone can be in any doubt why Donizetti's *Il falegname di Livonia* (26 December 1819) was called *Pietro il grande, Kzar delle Russie* on its first appearance, then the explanation is simple: it was because Giovanni Pacini's opera *Il falegname di Livonia* of that same year (12 April 1819) had been a real hit and went on to be a real hit for two decades. It had made a *furore*. Another choice of title was mandatory. But there was another and even more fundamental reason, the libretti were not really comparable: Felice Romani's brilliant text for the mischievous Pacini was truly engaging, sly, witty, replete with delirious literary fantasy, every character a vignette of sorts and supplied with verses so apt that they could be savoured as well as sung. Pacini's starring role (not in fact Peter the Great, Tsar of Russia, but the *Magistrato* - a role written specifically for his famous buffo father) was at the very apex of the theatrical poet's art, hilarious, imbecile, with patter at a level of inspired drivel and not a moment of boredom in sight. Certainly not in Act I, and even the plot's utterly contrived Act II - a *Cenerentola*-in-trousers may be the right description - snobbish and old-fashioned, had sufficient surprises, ingenuity (and sparkling music) to keep the house on the edge of its seats until the curtain fell.

Much praise then for the ribald collaboration between the prolific Pacini and the precious Romani. They had shown themselves united in a electric offering of such impetus that it won a *buonissimo* from the theatrical chronology of Pompeo Cambiasi at its La Scala prima. The opera had forty-seven performances on its opening run and innumerable revivals in other theatres later. It became something of a corner-stone in his repertoire, capping even his *Il barone di Dolsheim* which had been given exactly the same number of performances on that same stage just six months before.

As could be expected, Donizetti took a different view of exactly the same plot. His music too was witty but much less a prone to brio and catchy rhythms, his storyline is more confused and introspective and his roles - Madame Fritz and the Magistrato (Ser Cuccupis) in particular - protracted almost to excess, indeed Donizetti's Magistrato is eked-out interminably as if the composer knew well that his bumbling village tyrant would have to live-up-to the challenge of Luigi Pacini in a role perfectly designed for his talents. Not only this, Donizetti's characters are less pointed, more ingratiating, more bent on sentimentality (which was not Pacini's *forte*).

Though his poet, the dilettante *marchese* Gherardo Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini, borrows a bit of his text, he cannot be compared with Romani, he does make some good points, the duet between the Magistrato and the incognito Emperor after the latter has turned the tables by pulling rank is deft and invites a seductive setting from the celebrated composer (to be) but as we soon are aware - though the sequence of events in this copycat libretto is more-or-less identical - the comedy has not the same finesse, nor has the music, Pacini's experience shows.¹

Bevilacqua's plot is more earthbound, he short-circuits the theatrical fuse quite painfully at the end of Act I; his hero Pietro is no *deus-ex-machina*. There is little deference. But this factor alone may be seen as something of a sea-change in the theatre, Donizetti is bent on a recognisable humanity in his roles while the gilded grandiloquent post-Metastasian kitsch of Romani/Pacini [*Oh! generoso!* *Oh! grande!*] such as then still engaged even the great Rossini, seems a trifle out of date. To this important extent, Donizetti emerges as a composer of a later generation than his irrepressible rival (despite their more-or-less concurrent dates of birth). A confrontation of the two operas is instructive:

Il falegname di Livonia

Pacini/Romani

Melodramma in due atti (12 April 1819)

Act I

Sc 1. *Introduzione coro*/Carlo
 Sc 2 *cntd* Carlo/coro/Tutti
 Sc 3 Recit
 Sc 4 Recit
 Sc.5 Coro
 Sc 6. *Duetto* Caterina/Pietro
 Sc 7 Recit
 Sc 8 Recit
 Sc 9 *Cavatina* Sofia
 Sc 10 Recit
 Sc 11 *Duetto* Pietro/Carlo
 Sc 12 Recit
 Sc 13 *Scena e cavatina* Magistrato/coro
 Sc 14 Recit
 Sc 15 *Quartetto*
Caterina/Pietro/Sofia/Magistrato
 Sc 16 Recit
 Sc 17 Coro
 Sc 18 Recit
 Scena Ultima

Quintetto/ Recit
Duetto Caterina/Carlo
 Tutti (*insieme*) coro

Act 2

Sc 1 Coro
 Sc 2 Recit
 Sc 3 Recit
 Sc 4 Recit
 Sc 5 *Duetto* Magistrato/Carlo
 Sc 6 *Duetto* Pietro/Caterina
 Sc 7 Recit
 Sc 8 Recit
 Sc 9 Recit
 Sc 10 *Recit e terzetto*
 Carlo/Pietro/Caterina
 Sc 11 Recit
 Sc 12 *Recit ed aria* Pietro
 Sc 13 Recit
 Scena Ultima *arietta finale* Magistrato/tutti

**Pietro il grande, Kzar delle Russie o Sia
 Il falegname di Livonia**

Donizetti/Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini

Melodramma burlesco (26 December 1819)

Act I

Sc 1 *Introduzione coro/arietta* Carlo
 Sc 2 Recit
 Sc 3 *Cavatina* Madama Fritz/Recit
 Sc 4 *Cavatina* Pietro/Recit
 Sc 5 *Duetto* Pietro/Carlo
 Sc 6 Recit
 Sc 7 *Recit/Duetto* Carlo/M. Fritz
 Sc 8 *Coro/Cavatina* Cuccupis
 (Magistrato)
 Sc 9 *Duetto* Magistrato/Pietro
 Sc 10 *Recit/ Cavatina* Annetta
 Sc 11 *Scena* Magistrato/Carlo
 Sc 12 Recit/Tutti

Act 2

Sc 1 Coro/Recit
 Sc 2 *Duetto* M.Fritz/Magistrato
 Sc 3 Recit Carlo/Firman
 Sc 4 *Terzetto buffo*/
 Magistrato/Carlo/Firman
 Sc 5 Recit/ Aria Carlo
 Sc 6 Recit
 Sc 7 Recit *Sestetto/Quintetto*
 Tutti
 Sc 8 Recit/*Aria* Caterina
 Sc 9 Recit
 Sc 10 *Duetto* Carlo/M.Fritz
 (banda)
 Scena Ultima
Scena Magistrato/Pietro
 Tutti

But in several ways is misleading. The apparent disparity in length of the two operas is a red herring: Pacini's opera has fewer items and his recitatives are perfunctory, Donizetti's opera has much more padding, is far more static and his dialogue is flat, though not lacking in Metastasian intimations in parallel with those of Pacini (and with some lively musical allusions in addition) it falls on stony ground. Pacini is quite fleet, Donizetti takes his time. Pacini is sparing with showpieces, just about everyone in Donizetti's opera, large and small, has a turn of some kind at the footlights.

These disparities certainly reflect the original casting. At the vast Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Pacini had a series of high profile artists to placate, each to be given a run for his moneyⁱⁱ while his secondary roles are minimal. At the modest Teatro San Samuele in Venice, Donizetti had no real starsⁱⁱⁱ and thus was ready and willing to be open-handed with everyone. In revival this led to real problems, Pacini was obliged to stomach the insertion of *arie da baule* to beef-up the roles of those people he had simply left standing and not singing at La Scala. And not just comprimari: at a revival of his *Il falegname di Livonia* at Casal Monferrato, for instance, in 1823, Giuditta Schiroli in the role of Caterina (who has no aria surprisingly in Pacini's original score) interpolated Rossini's 'Tanti affetti' from *La donna del lago* into Act II^{iv} with the opening words of the rondò changed to 'Fra lo sposo e fra il germano' thus wrongfooting the plot and letting the dramatic cat-out-of-the-bag prematurely (presumably Carlo was out of earshot).

At some unspecified date [after 1825 it would seem] Pacini put the record straight and completely re-organised his vocal priorities; a manuscript score in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris^v reveals that he has not just capitulated, he has expanded the music of Caterina to a point where she has now the leading role in the opera! She now has a '*Gran scena ed aria*' (the aria 'Splende, in quest'occhi, un raggio' to replace 'Tanti affetti' in Act II); enhanced participation in duos and terzetti throughout; and so dominates an incredibly enlarged and transformed *quintetto finale* to Act I that she becomes its focal point (the manuscript quintet is headed "*Quintetto ossia Aria di Caterina*") thus putting everyone else in the shade, including her husband. It is a *rifacimento* of the over-the-top kind favoured by this restless composer - in this instance specifically intended for popular consumption and focused on the prima donna. After the retirement of his father (1827) this version ensured a further series of revivals.

The main plot of both operas centres on a lost brother. Peter the Great takes his unsuspecting Latvian wife Catherine to a village incognito - he has got wind of a long-lost sibling of the Empress - a carpenter who is unaware of this happy turn of events. This brother Carlo's cheeky treatment of Pietro and the interventions of the pompous local bigwig, a Magistrate, supply the gist of the comedy. Of course everything ends happily and the Magistrate gets his come-uppance.

There may even have been a certain historical basis for this fantasy but the

snobbish insistence upon Carlo's blue blood - his innate 'noble bearing' - is hard to take in all the versions. Even if it existed the taste of the egalitarian tyrant for low-life is well-founded and did not make Caterina [Empress Catherine I of Russia as she became after the death of Peter the Great] a candidate for the Almanac de Gotha, nor her brother either. A recent article makes this brutally clear: "...it was nothing new for a Tsar to have a dalliance with a commoner, but only Peter had the gall to make a Latvian serving-girl, Catherine, his second wife; he sought out the company of common men, even travelling incognito as a peasant... Yet his campaign to discomfort the establishment had a serious purpose - to renew his country's fortunes." Opera-goers may be entitled to believe that there was also a serious democratic purpose among European composers in offering so many operas with Peter the Great as a star performer in order to renew their fortunes,^{vi} no doubt it was the social leveling of the post-Revolutionary era that gave this perfectly ruthless Emperor an unique foothold in opera houses for so many politically confused years. It may even be claimed that the egalitarian distribution of Donizetti's opera gave him an unexpected edge in succession to Pacini!



Pierre le Grand.
Portrait attribué autrefois à Aert de Gelder. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.
Photo du Musée

But while Pacini was soon to abandon farce and turn to real Metastasian plots - not just to their mannerisms^{vii} the opera began something of importance for his younger contemporary. Donizetti's Ser Cuccupis seems to have sown a seed for future gestation, his sadistic self-importance was due to recur engagingly in Vambett of *Il borgomastro di Saardam* (1827), in the Gran Siniscalco of *Gianni di Parigi* (1828/31), in the would-be seducer Marchese di Boisfleury of *Linda di Chamounix* (1842) (with more than a sideways glance at Olivo (1827) and Dr Dulcamara (1832) not to mention Don Pasquale (1843)). In any event the sense of ridicule of the Bergamasc in the face of the hilarious frailties of buffo importunity seems never to have failed him to the very end of his career.

The composer never commented upon this no doubt involuntary contest with his pro-active contemporary,^{viii} but the residual legacy of the encounter does little justice to either maestro. Pacini's more profound success has simply been put aside. In the many theatrical chronologies printed after the mid-century when an *Il falegname di Livonia* is listed it is almost invariably ascribed to Donizetti when an examination of the press notices of the day reveals that the music was by Pacini. 'Santi Numi del Ciel!' as Cuccupis exclaims. It is an obscene retrospective reverence simply in respect of a great name. In our day *Pietro il Grande, Kzar delle Russie o Sia Il falegname di Livonia* by Donizetti has been revived and recorded, applauded and commended, while its precursor, *Il falegname di Livonia* by Giovanni Pacini, with its remarkable music and text, is left to gather dust on the shelves.



- i Pacini's *Il falegname di Livonia* was his twentieth opera, it was Donizetti's fifth
- ii Gaetano Crivelli sang Pietro il Grande, Francesca Maffei-Festa sang Caterina, Raniero Remorini sang Carlo, Serafina Rubini sang Sofia, but the really big star was the *sommo buffo* - his father Luigi Pacini - as the Magistrato
- iii Giovanni Battista Verger sang Carlo Scavronski, one of the Amati sisters sang Annetta, Vincenzo Botticelli sang Ser Cuccupis (the Magistrato), Luigi Martinelli sang Firman, the other singers are not currently known
- iv In Scene 7 of Act II
- v Coll. Malherbe D.12046 (1-2) sections are in Pacini's autograph
- vi To be noted especially are *Pietro il Grande = Il trionfo dell' innocenza* by Nicola Vaccai (Parma 1824), and *Zar und Zimmermann* by Albert Lortzing (Leipzig 1837)
- vii *Cesare in Egitto* (1822), *Temistocle* (1823) and *Alessandro nell'Indie* (1824) for example
- viii The opera appears to have unleashed amorous inclinations instead: it is upon the autograph manuscript of his *Il falegname di Livonia* in the Museo Donizettiano at Bergamo (on a Recitativo e Duetto!) that the young man has scribbled a number of erotic musings in French about his chances with a certain Giuditta Paganini!