

# Michele Carafa e la sua Gabriella

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Can any composer ever have had a longer pedigree - or shorter claim to fame - than Michele-Enrico-Francesco-Vincenzo-Aloiso-Paulo Carafa dei principi di Colobrano? Born on 7 November 1787 of a dynasty of mathematicians, territorial potentates, and larger-than-life Cardinals whose gilded tentacles touched the papacy (Paul IV) while taking most of the powerful positions the Renaissance had to offer, the second son of Don Giovanni Carafa, duca D'Alvito could have expected nothing less than a happy life of privilege in Naples. His cultural credentials were impeccable. It was in the palazzo Carafa that the first known comic opera in Neapolitan dialect was given in honour of Don Tiberio Carafa, principe di Chiusano in 1707; Don Giuseppe Carafa was Paisiello's first patron; a cousin, Don Marzio-Gaetano Carafa, principe di Colobrano, was an accomplished church musician, while a yet more distant kinsman, Don Giovanni Carafa, duca di Noja, presided over the fortunes of the redoubtable Conservatorio di S. Sebastiano as its *Sovrintendente*, doubling this responsibility with the precarious task of guiding the destiny of the Royal Theatres in Naples (until 1820). Thus, Michele Carafa's own career as a composer was neither demeaning nor odd, nor in fact totally unexpected.

Until, that is, Bonaparte took a hand and turned him into a soldier. But while at military college in Naples, the inevitable destiny of a second son, Carafa studied music with Francesco Ruggi and in 1802 wrote two juvenile cantatas for home consumption, *Achille e Deidamia* and *Il natale di Giove*, which were of such significance to his early ambitions that the manuscripts were still in his possession at the time of his death some seventy years later. His particular stirpe of the family had become increasingly disenchanted with the Bourbons, from the time the Conte di Ruvo (a Carafa and Jacobin sympathiser) had been executed as a traitor in 1799 a distinct split had become apparent in its ranks, some family members stayed put, but the disaffection was quite enough to persuade the Cavaliere Don Michele Carafa - as he is called on the privately-printed libretto of a scenic cantata *Il fantasma* staged for an audience of friends in 1805 - to decamp to Paris the following year where he joined a troop of hotheaded admirers of Joachim Murat. From this moment, Michele Carafa's attachment to France would be unwavering (that of France to *Michel* Carafa would be less sure).

Even in Paris in ferment his life was divided between army and *armonia*, he took lessons from Cherubini and Kalkbrenner, went to the theatre every night and wrote his first completed opera *La musicomania* [1806] with a text parodied from that of Gaetano Rossi for Mayr's *Che originali*, whose title might well describe its author's own state of mind. He married in 1808, then returned briefly to the Parthenopian capital in the wake of Murat whose acolyte he had become. The frenetic manoeuvres of the day did not keep him from the Teatro S. Carlo, naturally, but all this was broken off abruptly by the theatre of war. Scuffles in Puglia and Calabria followed by a long cold journey to Moscow and his appointment as *1<sup>er</sup> Ecuyer* in the Hussars of the Bodyguard of the Emperor (1812) capped - more dramatically still - by his decoration with the *Légion d'Honneur* on the battlefield by Napoleon himself together with his elevation to the rank of *Cavaliere dell'Ordine delle Due Sicilie*, the brevet of which was signed in a Moscow in flames.

His life was to go up in smoke. He trailed back to France with the remnants of the grand army, in 1813 the collapse of the Empire saw him deprived of his spurs and his juvenile glory. He made his way back to Naples only to find that even if the spoils of war were denied him a consolation prize awaited, a solicitous Murat had included him in the *cartellone* for the coming season at the Teatro del Fondo. In a flash a score took the place of a sword. But this initial professional opera was an oddity: *Il vascello l'Occidente* with a libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola was set entirely on board ship crossing the Atlantic (the fate of many of his comrades). Unconventional in its *sceneggiatura* it was even more unconventional in its mood - an uneasy voyage is depicted, anchorless and indeterminate, the music too - part-brio, part-dependent upon the declamatory legacy of the tragédie-lyrique and curiously ill adapted to Tottola's strange text it was staged in the summer of 1814 in the presence of Murat's Queen. It was not particularly successful, but nor did it fail. It was merely puzzling.

After this erratic beginning, Carafa set his mind upon something far bolder (in the interim stooping to conform with a cynical but slight *La gelosia corretta* [1815] at the tiny backstreet Teatro Fiorentini which left an encouraging trail of murmurs. The operatic coup to follow, however - after the unprecedented political convulsion and return of the *ancien-regime* which he watched with dismay, not only made an extraordinary *furore*, containing as it did the most innovatory music he was ever to conceive, but was a savage and provocative exercise in *grand-guignol* entirely worthy of the boulevard sub-culture he had witnessed in the Parisian capital where it had been relished for decades.

Even in France the story of 'La Chastelaine de Vergi' was considered shocking, as the source of a musical offering to the restored Bourbons it was little short of infamy. Luckily the Real Teatro S. Carlo had burned down (on 12 February 1816) so for one whole year the eyes and ears of Fernando I delle Due Sicilie were elsewhere, thus the engagingly entitled *Teatro del Fondo della separazione de'lucri* found itself on course to stage novelties that would otherwise have been rejected on the spot. Its authors knew they had the chance of a lifetime. That a blow to Neapolitan complacency was intended is without question, but not only this, the opera Carafa and Tottola created together (the poet's priestly garb notwithstanding) was fated to crack the mould of the Metastasian *opera seria* and supply a brutal reality in its place - as the *melodramma romantico* - in which guise it would prevail for a half-century to come. An operatic form that would be subversive and pragmatic both at the same time, daring, destructive and dissident, dismissive of heroes and heroism, its protagonists defined by their own distortions and lost to emotional excess. There would be no submission to the intellectual evasion that had thrived even under Murat, no shrinking from blood or pain or tears and nothing for public good. Even though its procedures would be predictable, its melodies seductive, the *melodramma romantico* would choose disorder, violence and contempt as its *modus vivendi*. That this was the personal choice of the composer is an inescapable fact, the disaffected aristocrat Michele Carafa breathed life and death into the *melodramma romantico* in the face of the despair he felt at his fate, at his future, and at the fall of his slaughtered idol (Murat was shot by Bourbon soldiers at Pizzo on 13 October 1815). Above all he proposed to dismay a despicable Naples to which he had returned with disgust and disdain.

*GABRIELLA DI VERGI*, azione tragica di A.L., posta in musica da un dilettante di distinzione, e rappresentata nel Real Teatro del Fondo, nella Estate dell'anno 1816 is a score in two acts, divided unequally, the first much longer than the second. The authors took care to take refuge in anonymity but true to the nature of that sanguine city need not have bothered. On a stifling 3 July 1816 *Gabriella di Vergi* was received with an eruption of enthusiasm that brought down clouds of dust from the lofty ceiling of the dingy theatre. The cast was possibly the most brilliant then available in Italy: Isabella Colbran - Signora Rossini in due course and incomparable in the title-role, together with Giovanni David and Andrea Nozzari as lover and husband respectively. all three as devastating as could be conceivable in that age of vocal splendour. In retrospect it is astonishing that no-one seems to have complained to the King (possibly the Duca di Noja extended a benevolent blanket of insider reassurance). But one thing was certain, the era of "noble" tragedy so long cherished by the Bourbon régime was over for good, disaster and debasement were now at a premium, divinities and decorous dramaturgy had dissolved into infinity.

The story of the opera has become well-known if only from later versions - like those of the *Fayello* of Carlo Coccia of 1817 or the *Gabriella di Vergy* of Donizetti of 1826 and 1838-1842 as well as the *Gabriella di Vergy* of Mercadante of 1828 - all of which retain the argument and some fragments of Tottola's text while the Mercadante score also retains a stretch of Carafa's music. The boldest of these clones incorporates the gruesome climax in which Raoul's heart - which he unwisely insisted at the outset "*belongs to Gabriella*" - is handed to her still warm and bleeding in a drinking cup in the *Scena ultima* thus bringing about the devastating scene of horror that leads to the final curtain. In 1816, even in the wake of so much Napoleonic blood and gore, this notorious spectacle was found to be utterly repulsive. The score has some twelve numbers rather oddly disposed: in Act I the heroine has no entrance aria, despite her primacy she arrives on stage quietly in a *duetto*, and there is a full-scale ballet of three movements confirming the "French" credentials of its origin; in the second act - the more dramatic of the two - there is a severe paring-down to essentials: a *recitativo e duetto* for the two tenors where the conflict between Raoul and Fayel is compressed into bellicose *fioriture*; a *recitativo, coro and aria* in which the vindictive husband pleads for sympathy (introduced by a romantically coloured *preludio*); and a monumental *scena del carcere* for Gabriella which proves to be quite the most important music of the score. The fusion structure of these relics of Parisian vaudeville, *retro* in form and structure, made a novel impact in 1816, there is wilful asymmetry and almost no elegance, in its place is compression and a shocking immediacy with little reliance on technical skills as befits a "*dilettante*" composer. Above all, there is a foolhardiness which Rossini could never have essayed and which succeeds against all the odds.

This unpolished offering, basic and full-frontal, in fact had the honour of setting an example to the great *pesarese* whose suave *Otello* - the *prima* of which would follow five months later in that same theatre and whose conjugal disaster of premeditated murder on stage would formerly have been totally unimaginable in a Naples - came to fruition in the wake of Carafa's uncouth precedent. More than this fraternal accolade, the interminable *gran'scena finale* of *Gabriella di Vergi* supplied a prototype for many composers of the future, such a protractedly indulgent finale, such an elaborately paced display of anguish and remorse came to be a blueprint of choice for endless operas to come - its chain of arias and ariosi, its *ritornelli*, dreamy recitative, its anguished nostalgia, leading to a

*cantabile ballata* ('Ombra! che a me d'intorno' in this instance with its deft choral responses capped when Gabriella stutters-out her horror at the bloody offering in her hands) came to be the prototype cri-de-cœur of the future, no longer belcantistic but expressionistic in root and branch and thus investing Carafa's *Gabriella* with a contemporary voice valid to our own day. It is no surprise that the a series of great singers soon made the role their own.

Defying the Bourbon censorship in both Naples and Sicily, this opera kept its *lieto tragico* in a wave of popular endorsement for more than two decades. In time the score was revised and adapted for Vienna in three acts and the voice of the remarkable Joséphine Fodor in which new form it was repeated on innumerable occasions. More importantly still, the *dramatis personæ* of *Gabriella di Vergi* was destined to capture the imagination of the whole theatre of the primo Ottocento: the furiously reproachful tenor-lover would become a standard feature of Italian opera (Agobar; Gualtiero; Arturo; Ugo; Edgardo; Gerardo, Foresto; Ernani), as too would the rabidly-jealous husband hounding his *vittima* consort to destruction (Azzo; Don Alfonso; Nello; Nottingham; Chevreuse; Abayaldos); Gabriella herself too would reappear in recurrent guise, emerging from prison or *durance vile*, a victim of marital injustice or male abuse, etiolated, pallid, dishevelled, deranged, distraught, poisoned or stabbed but stating her case with an unforgettable vocal ease throughout the nineteenth century - a supreme focus for tears and applause for the next decades in opera houses throughout the world, expiring momentarily in the last measures of music. The "*finali, lunghi lunghi lugh*" so sumptuously described by Verdi in the operas of Bellini and Donizetti, owe their impetus to the *Gabriella* of Carafa.

Can this *Gabriella di Vergi* be described as a masterpiece?. As a phenomenon certainly it can. Did he understand what he had achieved? Perhaps. It has never been quite sure. And what of the rest of his career? More operas by this composer soon followed and spread over Europe but never with quite the same allure. He abandoned anonymity immediately with *Ifigenia in Tauride* [Naples 1816] thematically a backward step; *Adele di Lusignano* [Milan 1817] had a brief life and contained one *scena ed aria* that would still be in print at the start of the twentieth century but not one of the succeeding operas made any real effect even though he gradually became the polished maestro of his later years. There was a *Berenice in Siria* [Naples 1818] which passed almost unnoticed, an *Elisabetta in Derbyshire ossia Il castello di Fotheringhay* [Venice 1818] based upon Schiller which was in many ways a radical score but which launched the major tragedy of Carafa's compositional ill-fortune in that it simply anticipated the far-greater successes of his rivals: various *Maria Stuarda's* - in the hands of a whole host of later maestri - took the shine from his bold initiative. It was at this time that his music was accused of having all the Rossinian defects - too much noise and too much brio - but none of the same virtues which was a slight that stuck despite the fact that others found that his music was not Rossinian enough! Carafa held out for a time but after a stiff *Il sacrificio d'Epito* [in Venice 1819] and a remarkable *I due Figaro o sia Il soggetto di una comedia* [in Milan 1820] he feared that his situation in Naples was becoming perilous, after staging an anti-establishment *farsa* in Milan that same year drawing the suspicious eyes of the police, he left for Paris without retracing his steps. Was he formally a dissident? A *Carbonaro*? No one knows. More probably he was simply a dilettante even in political protest but his gradual retreat from the land of his birth began at that moment.

In Paris he found his feet immediately it seems with a defiantly confrontational *Jeanne d'Arc* which displayed both his command of the French idiom and his versatility. Staged at the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique early in 1821 it showed an eager rapprochement with local tastes. Indeed Carafa took to Parisian residence like an old hand. It was this composer who set about domesticating the Italian music of the post war generation on the French stage and not Rossini as historians would have us believe. He returned to Rome briefly at the end of the same year to present his *La capricciosa e il soldato* with a witty text by Ferretti; it was rather successful but he made no effort to stay. *Le solitaire* [1822], again for the Opéra-Comique in Paris made a splash with its romantic scenario and atmospheric music and supplied the confidence to begin making steps towards an endorsement of the extravagance he had proposed earlier with *Gabriella*. Boldly conceived operas followed: *Eufemio di Messina* [1822], an opera seria, again staged in Rome, was mutilated by the censors; *Abufar* [1823], a belated comedy, written for Vienna, had a contested reception owing to its ambiguously incestuous plot which upset the straightfaced Imperial court; *Le valet de chambre* [Paris 1823], a brittle one-act opéra comique demonstrated to his friend Rossini - now too in the French capital - that he had the edge on Franco-Italian relations; *L'Auberge supposée* and *Il sonnambulo* [both of 1824] continued a drift towards a more fervent romantic colouring - with the first at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, the second at La Scala in Milan.

This last opera asked for a better response than it received. The libretto, by Felice Romani had real ingenuity, Carafa's music was carefully coloured while the plot anticipated the camp phantasmagoria that would soon underpin scores like that of Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche* [1825] and Bellini's *La sonnambula* [1831]. Its ungrateful reception was painful in the extreme. In its wake a mixed bag: *La Belle au bois dormant* [1825] at the Opéra, and a *pasticcio* *Gli'italici e gl'indiani* [also 1825] at the S.Carlo (Carafa did not attend) launched what can only be described as a series of genuine disasters: *Il paria* [1826] a suave proto-romantic offering at La Fenice, and a deft *Sangarido* [1827] at the Opéra-Comique laid the way for a score he may well have considered to be his masterpiece, *Masaniello ou Le Pécheur Napolitain* [1827] also at the Opéra-Comique, not only was one of his very best stage works with truly heartfelt music and a genuinely personal input but had the appalling misfortune to precede the far-greater success of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* with the same plot at the Opéra one year later. *Masaniello* was obliterated. Carafa's music was not inferior, it contained the best of him, in despair he felt that his birthplace had been denied him. Worse was to follow. *La Violette* [Paris 1828] had one successful number only; *Jenny* [Paris 1829] failed miserably; and as for the Scott-inspired huge and ambitious *Le nozze di Lammermoor* [1829] with Henriette Sontag as its star at the Théâtre-Italien, with its long stretches of memorable music, brilliant orchestration and series of dramatic effects of real note, it pleased, it was praised, La Sontag was superb, but it merely prepared audiences for the success of Donizetti on the world stage six years in the future..

His third decade of composition had been a disappointment. He went on trying, but with increasing disenchantment. Before the mid-century he had stopped writing almost for good. Italian scores vanished, but a series Parisian opéras-comiques continued to emerge for a time, scarcely one of which made any notable impact: *L'Auberge d'Auray* [1830]; *Le Livre de l'Ermite* [1831]; *La Prison d'Edimbourg* [1833] (which was notable for being a precursor of Federico Ricci's renowned *La prigionie d'Edimburgo* of 1838); then *Une Journée de La Fronde ou La Maison du rempart* [1833], *La Grande Duchesse* [1835] and

*Thérèse* [1838], all of which were well shaped and colourful scores, well cast and given careful stagings but received with only passing attention. They more-less sum up his remaining list of works. Not one of these late scores was without merit but all failed to stem the flow of indifference. A last effort, *L'Invisible ou Le farfadet*, of 1839, he did not bother even to stage.

By this time he had taken French nationality, not without regret it seems as in 1838 he published a collection of songs 'Mes Souvenirs de Naples' - a bittersweet backward glance at his past - but his Gallic affiliation now held him more closely than ever. At the end of 1837 he succeeded Lesueur as a member of the Institut (he was elected unanimously but the Italophobe Berlioz - a fan of Lesueur - was furious). In 1838 he was appointed Director of the Gymnase de Musique Militaire; and in 1840 Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire. a post he held until just before his death in 1872. It is in these years that he became a foundation stone of the band of apostles surrounding Rossini, cushioning a social life that had now become empty, and thus became prone to continuous personal attacks from people who did not dare to attack the Swan of Pesaro to his face. He is usually pilloried as accompanying his famous contemporary on his morning walk, Carafa on horseback with soldierly stance, the great maestro walking alongside gingerly, smiling in cynical repartee.

Who could have guessed, seeing this threadbare cavalier with cocked-hat and plumes on ceremonial occasions, harrassed by debts, at his rebellious past? That he could boast real battle honours and canon smoke as well as the affiliation and dissidence that had given birth to *Gabriella di Vergi* ?

But if he is to be considered a one-opera composer this *Gabriella* represents a victory more enduring than any of Murat - not only over poverty and obscurity but also over his humiliation on the coat-tails of his great predecessor. The grandguignolesque *Gabriella di Vergi*, by its style, its structure, its significance, its vehemence, its uncompromising description of human pain and torment is the one key opera that supplied the ways and means to take a step beyond the colossal Rossini. The unique loophole which enabled his successors to supplant the style and urbane accomplishment of his irresistible mentor. Carafa, the faithful shadow, the crony to be teased and patronised - "*Don Michele*" as Rossini liked to call him in naughty priestly metaphor - thus had the last word, and as so many operas by other composers attest, the longest.

Autograph score: Conservatorio di S.Pietro a Majella Napoli (rvsd version: Archivio Ricordi Milan)  
Vocal Score: Vienna 1820