

Nini, bloodshed, and *La marescialla d'Ancre*

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An odd advocate of so much operatic blood and tears, the mild Alessandro Nini was born in the calm of Fano on 1 November 1805, an extraordinary centre section of his musical life was to be given to the stage, the rest of it to the church. It would not be too disrespectful to describe his life as a kind of sandwich - between two pastoral layers was a filling consisting of some of the most bloodthirsty operas ever conceived. Maybe the excesses of one encouraged the seclusion of the other? He began his strange career with diffidence - drawn to religion his first steps were tentative, devoted attendance on the local priest then, fascinated by religious music - study with a local maestro, then belated admission to the Liceo Musicale di Bologna (1827) while holding appointments as Maestro di Cappella at churches in Montenovio and Ancona; this stint capped, somewhat surprisingly - between 1830 and 1837 - by a spell in St. Petersburg teaching singing. Only on his return to Italy in his early thirties did he begin composing in earnest. Was it Russia that introduced him to violence? His first operatic project - a student affair - had been innocuous enough, *Clato*, written at Bologna with an milk-and-water plot based on Ossian (some fragments remain), all the rest of his operas appeared between 1837 and 1847, with one exception. The list is as follows: *Ida della Torre* (poem by Beltrame) Venice 1837; *La marescialla d'Ancre* (Prati) Padua 1839; *Christina di Svezia* (Cammarano/Sacchero) Genova 1840; *Margarita di Yorck* [sic] (Sacchero) Venice 1841; *Odalisa* (Sacchero) Milano 1842; *Virginia* (Bancalari) Genova 1843, and *Il corsaro* (Sacchero) Torino 1847. There was a runner-up, *Angiolello da Carignano*, composed for the inauguration of the Teatro del Poletti of his native Fano in 1863 but not performed “*per deplorable contingenze locali*” or so it was reported (extracts were sung at Bergamo in 1906).

These operas prided themselves upon some of the most appalling dénouements ever to appear on the Italian stage, beside them *Trovatore* and *Tosca* pale into insignificance, it is as if the putative priest had gone beserk. *Ida della Torre* was gory enough, true to the tradition of Donizetti's *Maria de Rudenz* – a stage-contemporary whose style it echoes - but purely up-market fiction in fact and therefore (more or less) acceptable. The historical basis of his next opera and major success, however, *La marescialla d'Ancre*, was devastatingly factual. Set in 1617, the violent death of the Italian royal favorite Concino Concini *maréchal* d'Ancre, followed by that of his wife, was one of the most sickening episodes in French history and a painful witness to the anti-Italian xenophobia that long supplicated in Paris - climaxing with the butchery in the street of the *princesse* de Lamballe (née Carignano) during the Revolution. This last tragic heroine, like Leonora (or Eleonora) Luisa Dori, *dite* Galigaï, *maréchale* d'Ancre, was far too close to the Queen of the day and thus too was accused of occult dominance, lesbianism and a perfectly disgusting series of wholly imaginary sins. After Concini, Gran Maresciallo of France, abandoned by Marie de Médicis who had fled into enforced exile, had been trapped and cut down brutally his widow was led to the scaffold, decapitated and her body thrown on a bonfire, her principal detractor being the *connetable* de Luynes, unscrupulous mignon of Louis XIII (and first husband of Marie de Rohan) who got hold of her fortune. This ghastly example of homoerotic revenge had been romantically embroidered by Alfred de Vigny into a play 'La Maréchale d'Ancre' of 1831, and then versified by the distinguished poet Giovanni Prati who had befriended the young Nini.

It was, to say the least, a grotesque choice of plot for the saintly Nini. Historic indeed, but history with plenty of embellishment. Though the background of seventeenth-century France was conscientiously sustained and pervades throughout, the opera in fact is an account of the bitter in-fighting between two ill-assorted marital couples trapped in a grimly hostile Paris: Concini, vainglorious and sensual is universally detested and believed to be responsible for the murder of Henri IV; his wife who has distanced herself from his lifestyle, Luisa - as she calls herself – is compromised by her role at court and her children. But then her one-time lover Michele Borgia (whose sole ambition is to kill Concini) arrives with Isabella Monti, a ravishing *fiorentina* he has recently married and who, in turn catches the eye of Concini. From then on their various permutations form the antagonistic hub of the drama, their private struggles somehow taking precedence over the deluge about to sweep them all away. There is one additional character, the treacherous alchemist Armando, whose soothsaying activities give a surprisingly glimpse of a certain Madame Arvidson before long to rise on the Verdian horizon.

LA MARESCIALLA D'ANCRE tragedia lirica di G.P. Musica appositamente composta dal Maestro A.Nini da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Nuovo di Padova La Fiera dal Santo del 1839 was put on more in honour of the poet (even if he chose to remain anonymous) than that of the composer. Not that it made any difference to its outcome, the opera made Nini's reputation immediately. Given a brilliant staging it was received by a *furore* of legend. From the very first notes - despite what proved to be a very harrowing evening - applause was continuous to the very end. Few casts in that theatre had ever been more promising, there was the soprano Adelaide Kemble in the title role - one of the most testing ever conceived; the mezzo-soprano Fanny Goldberg as Isabella Monti; the high-baritone Orazio Cartagenova as Michele Borgia; and the tenor Giovanni Battista Verger in the historically ungrateful (but musically grateful) role of Concino Concini. Altogether a good slice of the vocal *gratin* of the day.

From the muffled drums at the start of the Preludio no one had any illusions about the solemnity of the plot. Though it soon emerged that Nini's score would not astonish by its form or structure - there were the usual cavatine, concertati, duetti, and so on and in the usual kind of order - but there was also a rush of truly unexpected forward momentum from the very start and virtually no moments of stasis at all. Nini had succeeded in invoking an, as yet, unknown Verdi before Verdi had even appeared on the stage with an impact that was devastatingly appropriate to the horrific nature of the plot.

Even this did not supply the distinction of the score however. It was the real dramatic content, scarcely to be expected in such a conventional configuration and from a "new" maestro, but the sheer audacity, vehemence, vocal and acoustic aggression. There are some sixteen numbers in the opera, nine of which are in Act I, seven in Act II. The "closed" numbers are mostly cori but Nini contrives to bridge the major vocal episodes with an ensuing explosive ensemble: thus Luisa's entrata [*Cavatina Eleonora* - the heroine never quite manages to keep her name in the various editions of the score] develops into a violent duet with Michele which was completely irresistible, while Isabella's tripping *Romanza* - a delectable showpiece and exceptionally praised - that follows, begins as an andantino romantico - then turns abruptly into a highly sinister encounter with Concini. Nini has a penchant for extraordinary key changes, sometimes brutally underpinning the argument, sometimes permitting him to work through a progression of different keys and

ending – once again with perfect justice considering the desperate nature of the argument - in the musical equivalent of no-man’s-land - a kind of melodic suspension which keeps the opera on its toes. Above all, especially where audiences were concerned, this opera had considerable assets, he was able - as were only his greatest rivals - to pull out a “big” tune as and when it was required. This, of course, fulfilled all the parameters for success of the day. The music for his ill-treated primadonna is effective from beginning to end, her sortita ‘Oh! vane pompe’; her Act II duetto with Isabella ‘Trema il passo...’, and - above all - her terrifying aria finale, as memorable as that of Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* and indeed more desperate, beginning with the lyrical ‘Odi i supremi accenti’ and its gentle resignation, then a larghetto cantabile *preghiera*, separated by a tempo di mezzo (and by the sight of the headless trunk of her husband dangling by his feet at the back of a cart) from the concluding cabaletta - one of the most devastating ever conceived by any composer - an allegro moderato “con accento straziante” in which the doomed maréchale points out to her son the pale face of Luynes and asks him to confide it to his memory for all time (‘Guarda, figlio quell’uom: guardalo in volto!’) one of the most terrible moments in all opera – as appalling as the history it was recreating. This cabaletta ‘Tu per esso più padre non ha’ is a very remarkable creation, alternating a dolce G Major with a wrenching gear-change to a fortissimo E Major of descending quartine with which heart-stopping fioriture she is led off to the stake.

Not one of the principals is denied a “big scene”, the anti-hero Concini has splendid music (especially his Act II aria con coro ‘O sogni miei di gloria’, in triple time with a disturbing rhythm underpinning the text and a defiant conclusion); both Michele Borgia and Isabella Monti have important roles and imposing music. The ensembles are grand and impressive, most notably the terzetto which immediately precedes Concini’s big aria (for two sopranos and baritone). Memorable cori abound (for *Prigionieri* and then for *Giudici*) and a fine Coro funebre ‘Il perdon delle tue viscere’ just before the climax of the opera. The Act I finale is no poor relation of the terrifying finale ultimo as not only does it come to a pounding unison but does so with a switchback of alternating fortissimo and pianissimo passages punctuated with offstage threats and cries, the whole with a stereophonic spread that seems more twentieth than nineteenth century. The whole opera is hugely impressive, but it was the perfectly horrific final scene that led to repeated revivals - some seventeen are recorded in Italy shortly after the Padua prima and the opera soon surged abroad to Spain, Portugal, and most of the Latin-American countries. But never to France of course.

A few months after a Genoa revival in the carnevale of 1840 with Eugenia Tadolini in the title role (for whom Nini supplied a new stretta in the *finale primo*) the opera was savagely cut for a production at Florence. Not by Nini in an access of discretion, but by the censor Orlandini who crossed-out several challenging scenes with fine music (in Act I Sc.V for instance with its highly ironic encounter between Concini and Armando); refused any mention of names like “Galigai” or “Monti fiorentina” (likely to arouse negative passions amongst his fellow citizens) as well as the description “Isrealita” for the *alchimista* soothsayer, not, it would seem, as a consequence of any specific racial prejudice but because any hint even of usury at the court of a Medici Queen of France would not endear him to Leopoldo II, Grand Duke of Tuscany. He also prohibited any sight of the scaffold and blacked-out most of Concini’s colourful views of the Queen’s Parisian subjects.

This whitewashing, this mutilation, was continued into many of the subsequent productions (those at Torino in 1841 and Venice in 1842 for instance). Indeed a “sanitized” version of *La marescialla d’Ancre* became the norm, to Nini’s dismay, even the Ricordi vocal score follows the same pattern. It would have surprised many enthusiasts - as the opera continued to be a triumph - to know that the composer had dutifully set every word of Prati’s rather too literary text in the first flush of enthusiasm and that cuts had been imposed even before the prima. The opera had always been much longer than they thought. Thus, even though the Florence edition became the norm for later productions, in a few of the later staging’s the printed libretto included the texts for long stretches of music that had never been performed at all (for example at the Civico Teatro of Tortona in 1842). It would seem that poor Nini lived in eternal hope that his opera would one day be staged complete, he loved the score and knew it to be his masterpiece and sent the whole of the music every time he could but was doomed to continual disappointment. In consequence of which he himself made an edition of the score with some more tactful modifications which was first performed at the Teatro Canobbiana of Milan in May 1847.

He had made his reputation. What then of his remaining operas? They are remarkably consistent; the forms and structure of the successive scores remain unremarkable - never exceeding the conventions of the day but the plots are a succession of horror-stories. *Christina di Svezia* [1840] (with a libretto partly by Salvatore Cammarano and partly by Giacomo Sacchero) is a torrid fantasy built round an unbalanced queen, revenge, and illegitimate children and ending in the predictable bloodbath. *Margarita di Yorck* [1841] (Sacchero) is a completely unbelievable historical fantasy and not without some echoes of Donizetti’s *Roberto Devereux*, the cast included Desiderata Derancourt, Giorgio Ronconi and Ivanoff and is a trifle more sentimental than usual (though not much). *Odalisa* [1842] (Sacchero) composed for La Scala, has the virtue of brevity though neither its text nor its music can be described as exceptional, this stiff, troubadouresque account of the unbalanced court of Giovanna I of Naples (rather too familiar for the taste of the audiences at that great theatre) treachery, disguises, floods of tears and murderous assault, failed to keep the audience awake despite a cast including Luigia Abbadia, Marietta Brambilla, Lorenzo Salvi and Felice Varesi, Nini had written some appealing arias but the reception was modest. *Virginia* [1843] (Bancalari) is a rather better account than usual of this operatically well-worn tale of benevolent infanticide (Vaccai set the plot again in 1845; Mercadante in 1846), Nini supplied an unexpected dignity to the tortured argument and managed a genuinely afflicting if grand-guignolesque *finale ultimo*. *Il Corsaro* [1847] (Sacchero) was given both a mediocre cast and reception, this Byronic triad of doomed lovers left the torinese public cold it seems. Like so many others of its day, the opera was a victim of unimaginative production. Not one of these operas made a lasting impression, but even if further renown eluded him the press invariably praised his professionalism, solid technique and pungent instrumental colour. In a very short time, however, only *La marescialla d’Ancre* was left to sustain his reputation.

And his subsequent career? In the same year as his poorly received *Corsaro* Nini was appointed successor to Simon Mayr as Maestro di Cappella at the great church of S.Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, at that precisely poignant moment when Gaetano Donizetti was slowly taking leave of the world in a palazzo nearby.

It was one of the most prestigious posts the church had to offer and in his wake the post would be held both by Amilcare Ponchielli and Antonio Cagnoni. He also took the opportunity to shake off the dust of the theatre for good. Apart from the unlucky *Angiolello da Carignano* (which may well have been composed in the interim and the music rehashed for the 1863 project) he wrote nothing more for the stage. He assumed the teaching of Mayr's School for gifted boys in the two modest rooms for the five classes of students, making few changes apart from obtaining a large room for concerts. After some years he succeeded in getting new premises. Surviving political and financial crises, he made his life an oasis of tranquillity - only very rarely giving permission for his students to sing an aria or two from one of his gruesome operas to show off their skills (amusingly, at end-of-term concerts he encouraged these pupils to sing extracts from a resoundingly forgotten *I masnadieri* by Maestro Golinelli - in preference to the more familiar version on the operatic circuit - such was the antagonism the great Verdi aroused in the injured bosom of one of his obliterated contemporaries). For the great basilica itself he composed an immense quantity of now dusty and neglected music, including some ten *Messe*, assorted *Kyrie*, *Qui sedes* and *Quoniam*, 12 *Laudamus*, 12 *Qui tollis* and so on, as well as two very imposing Requiem Masses one of which was sung on the death of Vittorio Emanuele II (and revived later to mark the death of Ponchielli his successor at S.Maria Maggiore). In our day almost all we have of this golden age of tranquility from Alessandro Nini is the beautiful *Ingemisco* with its magnificent tenor solo that he contributed to the multi-composer *Messa da Requiem...in onore di Gioachino Rossini* in 1869, masterminded by Verdi, a revelation of musical worth to all those who know so little of the maestri that took part. It shows that none of his skills and none of his melodic command had diminished by long exile far from the limelight.

Nini's post in Mayr's school came to a messy end in 1874 when Donizetti's ex-pupil Matteo Salvi set his heart on the role for himself. The authorities tactfully displaced the old composer on the grounds that his great talent did not extend to discipline over his students. There was lengthy as well as an angry discussion as Nini was a much-loved person in Bergamo, but it was conceded that he was more a contemplative romantic than a born educationalist. He was a man from the past: "*un poco sordo ai fremiti di un'arte nuova*", or so they said, and it is true that under Salvi the school took its first steps towards becoming a modern institution. Nini was demoted to become *Direttore onorario* of the school but remained effectively Maestro di Cappella at S.Maria Maggiore until his death on 27 December 1880, a post he had held for 33 years. Amilcare Ponchielli took over in 1882.

Like other almost forgotten maestri, Alessandro Nini clings to fame by one score. It would be easy to maintain that *La marescialla d'Ancre* is dated on account of its easy acceptance of the formulae of the day. But the strong emotion engendered by its priestly composer, the furious passions so well-expressed, so compellingly thrust upon audiences ensure that everything in the score remains vividly alive today - as in 1839. The bizarre capacity of a mild man to describe in great detail the extremities of emotion, the most terrible anguish, incomparably depicting humanity in the face of cruelty and unreasoning injustice with a truth seldom to be encountered on a stage devoted to traditional artificialities imbues this operatic masterpiece with a unique relevance - whatever the framework he has elected to use. No one can make a greater claim for survival, as well as for its prospective revival, this autumn, at Jesi.