

Lorenzino... de'Pacini?

Lorenzino de'Medici

Alexander Weatherson

[As silence fell during rehearsals in the vast shadowy auditorium the tiny figure of the composer came into view scribbling furiously on a bundle of papers in his lap, with the music of his new opera still hanging in the air, another was taking shape. A day-or-two later, laurel-wreath in hand, plaudits still ringing in his ears, the tireless Pacini paused on the step of his carriage to hum a snatch of the aria finale of its successor to a little group of fans...]

In mid-career, with Verdi at his heels the musical tempo had become frantic. Operas came two or three at a time. They were not *cloned* as his detractors liked to pretend, though it is true that 1845 boasted a succession of spectacular tragedies sparing no one and ending in a fashionable mayhem each and every opera pinpointed a quite different *topos* and a quite different conflict. All gloried in a spectacular orchestration and a vocal extravagance at once hugely-relished and highly-despised by the noisy audiences of the day. *Saffo* had revived his reputation at the start of the decade, soon imposing convoluted scores began to appear at four-monthly intervals - it was as if a whole family of musicians was jointly in assault upon the Italian stage: 'Figlio di truppa' he had been called - in Florence his *Bondelmonte* had succeeded *Lorenzino de'Medici* in Venice and was followed by *Stella di Napoli* in Naples - three immense operas in one year, a mammoth trio framed by the milanese *L'ebrea* a year earlier, as an hors d'œuvre, and the torinese *La regina di Cipro*, eight weeks later, as a dessert. All the great cities were waiting to be consumed.

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In all probability, as the historical Lorenzino had been murdered in Venice in 1548, it was the composer's wry sense of humour that selected *Lorenzino de'Medici* for that particular city. He was ready for the same fate. Only twelve months before his universally triumphant *La fidanzata corsa* had not even got to the end of its second act in a disorderly La Fenice owing to the relentless jeering of a bunch of thugs. Verdi, even, had felt obliged to protest on Pacini's behalf, but such unwonted charity did not

prevent him from trying to get hold of the plot of *Lorenzino de' Medici* at the start of the next year - its cowering poet Francesco Maria Piave the subject of a tug-of-war between the two embattled maestri. Whatever the claims of the *bussetino*, however, the older composer was in prior position, it was Pacini who had first inveigled a shrinking Piave into the thorny world of grease-paint and *acuti* to complete the text of his *Il duca d'Alba* in 1842 (the contracted librettist having fallen ill), as a consequence this odd pair remained inseparable for the rest of their lives despite the millstone of Verdian disfavour - addressing each other as 'Piavino' and 'Pacinetto' [can anyone imagine anything of the sort with the composer of *Macbeth*?] It was with two Piave libretti in fact (*Don Diego de'Mendoza* and *Berta di Varnol*) that Pacini made his farewell to the stage in 1867.

Verdi's basilisk eye notwithstanding, it is not clear who alighted upon the plot of *Lorenzino de' Medici* in the first place. Did Piave suggest it to Pacini or Pacini to Piave? Or was it someone else? No one seems to know, but the browbeaten poet felt obliged to unburden himself tremblingly to his dreaded mentor on his shameful commitment to the detested rival. With unconvincing moderation Verdi had replied

"By all means agree to write for Pacini, but try not to do Lorenzino, because this we can do together some other time. But if you can't avoid it, then do Lorenzino. Act in your own interests" (Letter of 22 May 1844),

With His Master's Voice ringing in his ears Piave did just that. Such a plot had undoubted merits, the real-life Lorenzino had more colourful possibilities than any other on the operatic stage, a fabulous Renaissance anti-hero, at once handsome, noble and deceitful, a brilliant memorialist, playwright, incestuous lover, traitor, assassin and dissident, all at the same time. The perfect model for those shifts of tempo, *crescendi*, cadenzas and codas integral to Verdi, a Brutus with a vicious political acumen yet with a radical edge that could be seen as an augury of the Risorgimento to come.

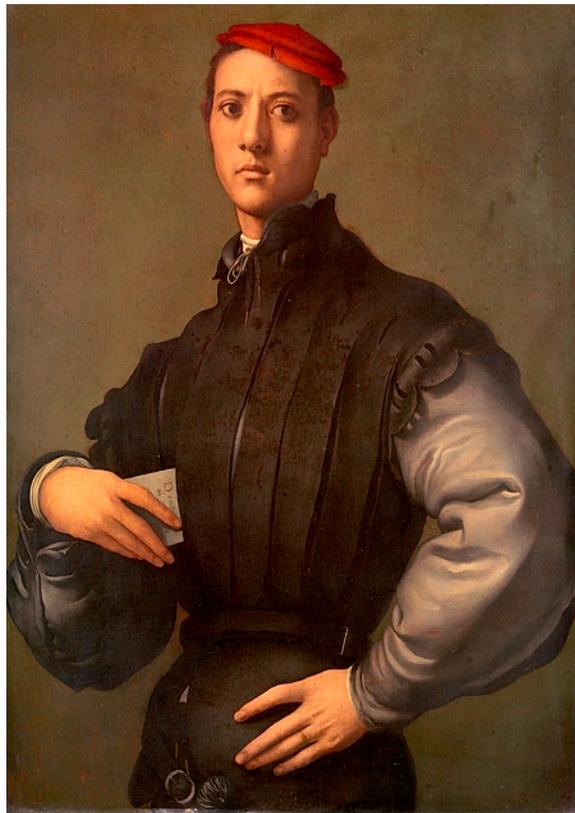
All this asks a very tantalising question. Could Piave have supplied an identical libretto to both these maestri? The answer is certainly no. Their theatrical priorities were much too far apart: Pacini - like most of his generation - needed an amorous frisson to keep the empathy flowing, an empathy to be extracted even at the expense of the impact and power of historical fact. As with Donizetti's librettistic credo: *'Voglio amore, che senza questo i soggetti sono freddi, e amor violento'* Pacini made his

requirements clear from the start. There could be no common ground between him and his younger rival. Happy to avoid the kind of overlap he would live to regret Piave offered no objection, his friend needed to triumph - not on the altar of social polemics - but to move his audience to tears of sympathy and identification, to have his admirers leave the theatre overwhelmed and enhanced by dramatic exhaustion.

This is not to say that either he or Piave were free of the past, even unbridled love had its limits, history was even more amoral than the myths. Many of the printed libretti contain the following apology:

Avvertimento

Pella decenza della Scena e pel maggiore interesse dell'azione mi sono permesso di sostituire agli incestuosi e ben noti amori di Lorenzino con sua zia, la Ginori, quello puro e cavalleresco per Luisa Strozzi, la quale non lo ha mai amato, ed era anzi morta all' epoca in cui si trucidava Alessandro.



Lorenzino de' Medici (1514-1548)

It is true that Lorenzino (1514-1548) had flaunted a scabrous liaison with his cradle-snatching aunt Caterina Soderini, sister of his mother, and wife of Leonardo Ginori. In the twentieth century this would have supplied a magnificent libretto, but in her place poor Luisa Strozzi had been brought back to life out of necessity - not only resurrected but betrayed - and not just for a love-affair that never occurred but obliged to take poison in a noble gesture of political enlightenment that she never felt. In fact in 1537 she had been dead for three years following an indigestible buffet at the house of her sister, at the time it was claimed that she had died of poison and opinion pointed a finger at Lorenzino's former crony and *bête noir* - "Il Moro" the arrogant, swarthy and unpopular *duca di Firenze*, Alessandro de'Medici.

Dealing as gingerly with chronology as with the truth, Piave invested in a fictional *affaire du cœur*, turning his back as much on the sordid underside of his hero as on the political torment that would have drawn the hawkish Verdi like honey to a bee. Set in Florence during a nasty moment in the Carnival, Lorenzino is shorn of his intellectual background, nothing at all survives in Piave's libretto of his literary accomplishment - his 'Aridosio' for example (nor of his 'Apologia' of course) - and only hints of his political involvement, he is unstable, ambitious and duplicitous, of his altruism (if it existed) there is scarcely a mention. There is violence and vehemence throughout the opera, some authentic settings (the Bargello prison), political passion has been diverted primarily to Filippo Strozzi, Luisa's pushy father (the Strozzi were rival bankers) rather than upon the title-role, while the opera's final dénouement, the off-stage murder of Alessandro, is actually due to all those familiar sentimental circumlocutions of the *melodramma romantico*, love, jealousy and revenge. Piave's libretto owes scarcely anything to its 'official' source (the prima libretto claims it to be Giuseppe Revere's staid 'Lorenzino de'Medici', a dramma storico in 5 acts published in Milan in 1839) but this was no more than a ploy intended to disguise the fact that much of the argument is derived from the libretto Pietro Beltrame wrote for the *Luisa Strozzi* of Pietro Combi staged at Genoa in 1841 (Beltrame came from Venice) together with a passing glance at the 'Lorenzaccio' of de Musset - one of those endemic republican fantasies that thrived in the reign of Louis-Philippe.

For Pacini it was of course Luisa who was the *fons et origo* of the plot, it was the primadonna soprano needless to say who would hold all the cards. In 1841 Pacini had sent an outline libretto of a 'Luisa Strozzi già Luisa Capponi' to Count Mocenigo of La Fenice for his consideration, but nothing came of it. Four years later she was brought out again, this time by Piave;

it was immediately clear that the heroic Luisa Pacini had in mind needed a supremely conquering voice and it soon emerged as that of the stupendous Marianna Barbieri-Nini, Lady Macbeth to be, an authentically Tuscan ‘Cantante di Camera di S.A.I. e R. il Granduca di Toscana’ who would be both the triumph of *Lorenzino de’Medici* and the principal stumbling-block for its successful revival. Pacini himself said of her: “*Questa eletta cantante, oltre ai doni di cui fu prodiga natura, concendendole una voce che niun mi ricorda, flessibile, toccante nelle corde medie, ed estesa, possedeva tale maestria (acquisitata col perenne studio) da farla a buon diritto proclamare una gemma del Teatro italiano.*” Later sopranos found the role as created by her impossible to follow. In the opinion of one of them, Caterina Hayez: “*To sing this opera you need an extraordinarily powerful voice such as the Signora Barbieri can boast, but I, instead of force, have a graceful timbre, as you know very well.*” (Letter to Alessandro Lanari of 27 October 1847). It was a refusal many others would be obliged to echo. Indeed, the first cast of *Lorenzino de’Medici* at La Fenice on 4 March 1845 was relatively restrained in spite of its glorious heroine. Filippo Strozzi was sung by Sebastiano Ronconi and not by his more famous brother; Alessandro de’Medici was sung by the basso profondo Giuseppe Miral; and Lorenzino was created by Andrea Castellan, a singer not wholly to the taste of the composer so it seems, his name was willfully omitted by the maestro in his memoirs (who mentions only Giacomo Roppa). Moreover, even though musically triumphant this important opera had a freezing début: Donizetti who passed through Venice at that time reported: “*La neve, la neve...inverno - così rigido che interpidisce il genio in certi mesi ... anche Pacini fece tre quarti di fiasco*” (note the “anche” Pacini) [Letter to Teodoro Cottrau 19 March 1845]. Semi-freddo, indeed, not a semi-fiasco. With nine performances to its credit, despite the cold and ending an icy *carnevale*, Pacini's *Lorenzino de’Medici* was soon to inflame imagination throughout Italy and abroad.

The composer's characteristic response to the challenge of Verdi was to write absolutely tremendous arias. He had confronted Bellini with cantilena: squared-up-to Donizetti with imposing concertati; but as the hue and cry of the *bussetino* became really strident he garnered-up all his vocal skills to invest his plots with solos to kill. Barbieri-Nini's cavatina ‘Povero cor!’ which opens the second part of Act 1 is not only almost superhuman - one of the most arduous arias ever to confront a trembling soprano - but remained more or less intact throughout a long series of revivals, clearly it was a Pacinian favourite, despite the nightmare proportions it took-on for a whole generation of *primedonne*. Then she has a second huge aria in Act Two.

Both Alessandro and Filippo have tremendous vocal stunts, many *con coro* (Filippo even retaining his coro in prison). But these monumental solos, the very antithesis, it would seem, of the urgent dramatic propulsion of his great antagonist, are not in fact backward-looking or anticlimactic as they might seem, instead they anticipate the verismo mode to come: the artist is alone on stage - cynosure of all eyes and ears - engulfed in a technical surge of unrestrained lyricism, so much so that it is sometimes impossible not to hear the full-throated super-eloquent display of a Caruso or a Battistini of the very different world at the end of the century.

This sort of set-piece for example, applies to Lorenzino's huge *scena ed aria* that begins Act Two, a quasi-credo set in his own study decorated with busts and statues, scientific instruments and manuscripts lying on tables (the only hint in Piave's text of the preoccupations of the historic Lorenzino). An epitome aria of Pacini's maturity, dark and dramatic, a stand-and-sing item far nearer to Ponchielli than to Verdi with its Caruso-colouring fully intact, backed by an energetic orchestration not un-reminiscent of his earlier seductive styles but sustaining a vocal line that is far more independent and eloquent. An uneasy splendour - despite the triple-time *andante grazioso* of the cantabile, and an occasional fleeting sweetness. (Its original impassioned cabaletta: 'La tua immagin/pari al sole' soon upstaged by a far less emotive replacement 'Dammi un'aura', and later still by a rocketing test-piece 'Parmi già dell'infelice' supplied at the very last moment for the tenor Giacomo Galvany to sing in the Neapolitan revision of 1858 as *Rolandino de'Torrismondi*, not in the printed libretto for this version but in the manuscript score at Naples)

Such solos in no way excluded the weighty duets that feature in all Pacini's operas, such a duet appears between Lorenzino and Filippo and two very long ones between Luisa and Filippo. If the plot is airless, indeed claustrophobic, it sustains in compensation an expansive vocal sequence, stint-after-stint of monumental facture, including a finale primo with a giant summation and a finale ultimo in the form of a sensational trio. None of these exclude a deliberate dose of irony such as the moment in her strenuous Act Two aria when Luisa swallows poison in response to the hated chorus of Guelphs in the street outside singing 'Beviam, A godiam di Bacco e d'Amor'.

After its Venetian defrosting *Lorenzino de'Medici* went on to a strenuous reception on the Italian circuit - both with and without its formidable primadonna and mostly without cuts. At Trieste on 14 February 1846 Anna De La Grange had a huge success as Luisa, with Luigi Mei as

Lorenzino, a performance made memorable by the fact that it was conducted by Luigi Ricci whose wife Lodomilla Stolz (“Liddy”) had been recruited to sing the role of Assunta. The temperamental Verdian primadonna Sofia Cruvelli sang Luisa at Rovigo in 1847. Here and there the assassination of a Florentine ruler proved too much for the censors and the opera ended with Luisa’s suicide instead (as at Reggio Emilia in 1845), a cut Pacini accepted philosophically. But many unclouded successes followed during the 1846-7 season, Pacini notes with pride that *Lorenzino de’Medici* was staged with such furore at the Teatro Pergolesi of Jesi that a bust of him was put in the foyer of the theatre. (It does not seem to have survived)

Some thirty initial revivals are recorded. The 1858 re-edition as *Rolandino de’ Torrismondi* mentioned above (with a revised text jointly by Domenico Bolognese and Pacini himself and many changes to the music) had the curious side-effect of re-launching the opera in its original form elsewhere. At La Scala on 22 October 1859 for instance his *Lorenzino de’Medici* made a belated début (Cambiasi says ‘buono’) with Giacinto Ghislanzoni as Lorenzino, Giovanni Corsi as Filippo and Elisa Galli as Luisa, the latter clearly rejoicing in a freakish range as only three weeks before she had been singing Gilda in *Rigoletto*, scarcely a Barbieri-Nini role! This La Scala version was supplied with yet another replacement cabaletta for Lorenzino’s Act Two aria. There followed further revivals at Vienna and Barcelona that same year (this last with Barbieri-Nini, still singing Luisa after almost fifteen years in the role - something she did not propose for Lady Macbeth). According to Neapolitan sources the *Rolandino de’Torrismondi* version had revivals too: at Chieti in 1868 and another as late as 1899.

As an ultimate irony, perhaps, the most impressive account of the opera comes from across the Atlantic. If Pacini sought confrontation with Verdi he came face-to-face with him at last in New York. *Rolandino* was not the only version of *Lorenzino de’Medici* going the rounds. There was also an *Elisa Velasco* with the Florentine setting mutated to a less-politically vulnerable fifteenth-century Spain: Lorenzino is now rechristened Vellido Dolfos, Alessandro Don Sancio, Filippo Fernando Velasco and his daughter is Elisa naturally enough. Also a Donna Uraca degli Alcares (Assunta), Diego and Gomez. The libretto by Piave is more-or-less unchanged - only the roles and their off-stage problems. This hispanified version (with the blessing of the composer) had a wide distribution - opening the carnival season at Terni in 1853, at Pisa in 1857, and at Bergamo in 1859.

[The Bergamo revival could be said to have had a *Verdian* political career of its own: with Elisa Galli - a very resourceful patriot - in the title role at the footlights throwing the words of her electrifying cabaletta at a line of Austrian officers in the front row of the Teatro della Società '*con foga appassionata e con malcelate intenzioni*'

‘O fratelli, sorgete, sorgete,
d’amistade la man vi porgete...’

With the result that the audience joined-in enthusiastically. An indignant stand-up protest from one of the officers led to a violent demonstration outside the theatre, sufficiently bloody for at least one of the participants to head promptly for the frontier...]

The Vienna revival on 18 May 1859 also was given as *Elisa Valasco* (sic) and performed 13 times (irrespective of politics) while at the Teatro Apollo in Rome in 1854 there was a variant title all of its own, *Luisa Valasco*, but with Barbieri-Nini as the fabulous focus of the score.

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Curiously, it was a review of the revival of *Elisa Velasco* on 26 December 1857 at the Teatro Ferdinando in a Florence whose Medici past was fading, that got transatlantic endorsement: 'Dwight's Journal of Music' (New York 1858), 395-6 contains the most unstinted accolade ever to be addressed to Pacini. It makes refreshing reading:

“The Carnival Season of 1857-8 opened on Tuesday...with Elisa Velasco a superb opera by Pacini, and one that for a time made me stagger in my Verdi faith. It is so fresh, so original, and combines musical science so well with ear-haunting and simple melody that it appears to me astonishing that it has not obtained a reputation out of Italy. Even here it does not seem to be fully appreciated for it is only performed during the present Carnival at Pisa and Florence, while Trovatore and Traviata occupy each over a dozen of the Italian lyric stages”.

The reviewer itemises most carefully the very remarkable features of the score. The *“delicious prelude... followed by a brilliant yet simple chorus to the accompaniment of a band behind the scenes”*; the Act 1 *“... duo for tenor and baritone, which is so different in style, and so superior to the duos in ordinary Italian operas, that of itself, it ought to stamp the composer as a musician of the very highest order of merit. In the second act the soprano appears, opening with a grand scena and aria, followed by a duo*

by soprano and baritone. *A concerted piece in the style of the favorite quintet in Lucia, only vastly superior to this master-piece of Donizetti, closes the act.*” In Act 2 he praises *“the striking air for tenor: Del lungo fingere”* [ie the *Scena* for Lorenzino/Vellido described above] then continues with a truly memorable description of the Filippo/Fernando prison scene, which he prefaces by saying: *“where is music that once heard can never be forgotten”*

...

“Imagine, then, the interior of a Moorish prison sustained by massive columns and heavy Moriscan arches, and illuminated by a lamp depending from the ceiling. The walls are partially covered with mosaic work... The scene is at first deserted, but soon enter a company of men, with chains on their hands, who have been imprisoned with Fernando Velasco, for supporting the claims of their rightful prince, Alfonso, against the usurper, who now occupies his throne” (The plot of *Elisa Velasco* having been more than a little doctored). *“Ferdinand now appears, and then follows some grand music for baritone and chorus, which is, in my opinion, only excelled in Italian opera by the wonderful chorus writing in Guillaume Tell.”* The reviewer praises to the skies the duet between the doomed father and his daughter, especially his *“blessing of Elisa with its ‘cello obbligato”* which he describes as *“unparalleled”*.

The primadonna Ghirlanda-Tortolini, Francesco Cresci and Giuseppe Limberti as Elisa/Fernando/Vellido respectively come in for unqualified praise, especially the latter *“an immensely high tenore robusto voice, and a fervidness of style and intensity of expression that makes him a singer of the first rank, and deserving a more extended fame than the lazy and much overrated individual, Mario.”*

It is the envoi, however, of this New York review that makes the most fascinating reading:

“But Elisa Velasco has been withdrawn to make room for I Lombardi, and Pacini is forced to yield before Verdi. It must be said the latter shines but poorly in comparison ... there is a constant striving after effect, and a vehemence of noise, and a repeated bolstering up of puny melodies by resorting to effects of brass, of bands behind the scenes, that have a corresponding effect on the ear to that of very sweet brown, second quality sugar on the palate.”



Alessandro de' Medici (1510-1537)

Sadly, this championship from the other side of the Atlantic failed to find a permanent echo in the Vieux Continent. Pacini had only one more real success after that date, *Il saltimbanco* (Teatro Argentina, Rome 24 May 1858) which flared-up brilliantly but for a short time only. The commercial undertow was just too strong for those swimming against the Verdian tide. After this there was only decline and deliberate exclusion. But he went on writing operas to the very end. It was in these very years, however, that he began writing his memoirs which were to be published in installments between 1860 and 1865 in a Tuscan magazine. Maybe he was thinking of his *Lorenzino* aka *Elisa* when he wrote:

Dunque coraggio! e daccapo
Rammentati, Giovanni,
Non valgono i pretesti...
Che il fatal si dicesti!
Ritorna al tuo mestier.

(*Le mie memorie artistiche* (Florence 1865), 92) :