

Il duca d'Alba

Synopsis

One man and two events precede the opera, which is set in Brussels and Anvers in 1573. The man is the patriot Count of Egmont (1522- 1568) [cfr Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven] and the first of the events is his decapitation in the Grand Place of Brussels by the famous despotic Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (1508-1582). This execution has taken place the evening before the action of the opera opens (historically it took place five years before). The second event is less factual: it is the receipt by the Duke of a letter from a former mistress at the point of death informing him that he is the father of a hitherto unknown son, and demanding clemency for this youthful firebrand of the Flemish Résistance to Spanish domination.

Act I With the complicity of Daniele, a dissident innkeeper, Amelia d'Egmont visits the very spot on which her father lost his head; taunted into singing a song in honour of the hated Duke she invokes her fellow citizens into defiance, provoking an uproar which is quelled only by the arrival of the Duke himself. A young man bursts in, full of revolutionary insults paying no attention whatsoever to the Governor standing quietly by. He is the fiancé of Amelia. But the tyrannical Governor fails to react; to the astonishment of his soldiers he merely sends the others away and questions the young man, he already knows the answers, he has recognised the features of this hot-headed youth, it is his son. The Duke invites him to join the Spanish soldiers, but Marcello refuses indignantly, amazed of course at the nature of the invitation. Once again the Duke is restrained, simply warning him to keep away from the rebels but Marcello defies him to the last and turns away to enter Daniele's tavern.

Act II Amelia who has dedicated herself to vengeance for her father is joined by Marcello, for whose safety she prays for her father's protection - and a company of patriots under the leadership of Daniele; together they swear a solemn Oath to free their country from the Spanish yoke but this has hardly been accomplished when Spanish soldiers burst in and arrest them all - with the exception of Marcello. When he asks why he has not been arrested with the others, Sandoval replies that the "Duke does not wish it". The boy almost pleads to be arrested but Sandoval replies coldly "You are free!" To the horror of the young man, his fiancée, Daniele, and his friends are led away all eyeing him with the utmost suspicion.

Act III In his study overlooking the Grand Place the Duke re-reads the letter from his former mistress, with regret for his past but overjoyed to recover a son he never knew existed. Told that the conspirators are being prepared for execution he asks that Marcello should be sent to him immediately. Marcello, still appalled to be singled-out for clemency is shown into the study with its vast windows and is completely devastated when the Duke hands him a miniature of his dead mother, and then the letter itself. Overwhelmed, horrified, Marcello can only cry out that he has lost all his friends and the love of his life. The Duke, while moved at the distress of his son, is relentless; they hear the sound of a *De profundis*, the conspirators are being led in procession to the scaffold mounted in the Square outside, Amelia at their head. Marcello pleads for them, the Duke says he can do nothing for rebels against his King but a father can do everything for a son: all he has to do is to acknowledge the Duke as his father. As Amelia sets foot on the scaffold in desperation Marcello falls at the feet of his implacable genitor crying "Father! father! pity!" With a sign the Duke calls-off the execution. Brought before the appalling Governor Amelia and her friends treat Marcello with contempt.

Act IV Marcello goes to try to find Amelia in the chapel where she prays daily for her dead parent, she is almost persuaded of his innocence but when she hears that the Duke of Alba is his father they separate with mutual malediction.

At the port of Anvers the Governor hands over his powers to a replacement, he is returning to Spain taking Marcello with him. A procession of girls brings flowers as a last tribute to the Duke but his son keeps an eye on Amelia who is among them. Hidden in the flowers is a dagger, when Marcello sees her approach and raise the dagger to strike the Duke he pushes himself between them and she stabs Marcello instead. The Duke cries "What have you done?" He replies "I was doing my duty: she was avenging her father, I was defending mine!" As Marcello dies, with Amelia weeping over him, the Duke curses the land he has governed amid the cries of joy of the populace at his departure.