AN OPERA GUIDE TO

ANDREA CHÉNIER

ANDREA BOCELLI LE OPERE

WHAT IS IT?

This is a "historical drama" in four acts which was first performed at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on 28th March 1896. It is the most important opera inspired by the French Revolution, a story about love and death but also about political zeal and disillusionment. Andrea Chénier is conceived in accordance with the canons of musical Verismo. The story, which was inspired by the life of the eponymous French poet who lived from 1762-1794, is full of adventure. The music is charged with emotion and powerful effects and allows the characters to express themselves with a previously unseen thrust and vigour. The action is very fast, events following upon one another in breathless succession. The libretto, which was produced by Luigi Illica, presents a plot which is essentially a story of love and jealousy combined with a historical thriller.

WHAT DOES IT TELL US?

We are in France in the throes of the French Revolution: first in 1789 at Count de Coigny's castle and later in 1794 in Paris. The poet, Andrea Chénier, once a supporter of the revolution, has now become one of its victims. The aristocratic Maddalena de Coigny seeks refuge at his house to escape from the revolutionaries. The couple fall in love but the young poet is imprisoned and sentenced to death. Maddalena follows her lover into prison to die with him.

WHO WROTE THE MUSIC?

Umberto Giordano (1867 - 1948), born in Foggia, in Puglia, developed his artistic talents in Naples under the guidance of Giuseppe Martucci and Marco Enrico Bossi. He was the son of a pharmacist and pursued his musical vocation against his father's will. Later he worked mostly in Milan where he spent most of his long life. Giordano was a prolific composer although only two of his works, Andrea Chénier and later Fedora (written in 1898), achieved lasting success. Andrea Chénier is an accessible opera which doesn't hold back from theatrical gestures, sentimentality or even shouting. But it is a score which never "goes out of date", it avoids slipping into banality or vulgarity by virtue of its extraordinarily rich melodic invention and rare qualities such as concision, fluidity and an intuitive sense of dramatic effect. This is an opera that always "works": it may have made a few critics wrinkle their noses in disdain but it never disappointed the expectations of the public.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

Before Andrea Chénier, the young composer, recently stung by a resounding flop (with his opera Regina Diaz in 1894), had considered abandoning his musical career in order to set up a fencing school.



At the time Italy was searching for an heir to Giuseppe Verdi (who had written his last opera, Falstaff, in 1893). Verdi's operas were published by "Ricordi", the same house that published the work of the young Puccini (such as Manon Lescaut), while the publishing house of Sonzogno had struck gold with Pietro Mascagni's Cavalleria Rusticana and Ruggero Leoncavallo's Pagliacci. Penniless and prone to depression, Umberto Giordano came to hear of an operatic theme the rights to which had been acquired by Baron Alberto Franchetti (the composer renowned for his opera Cristoforo Colombo). Franchetti ceded those rights to his struggling colleague and Luigi Illica, who at the time had been working on La Bohéme with Puccini, was commissioned to produce a libretto. As a result of his penury, in order to work with Illica, Giordano spent some time living in the warehouse storing funerary statues for the Milan cemetery!

The opera, which was completed on 27th January 1896, was deemed "unstageable" by Sonzogno's musical consultant. It took pressure from friends such as Ruggero Leoncavallo, to make the publisher change his mind. Notwithstanding all these problems, Andrea Chénier premiered at La Scala on 28th March 1896 and it was a triumph. It was performed 11 times to packed houses and as many again the following season.

THE REAL ANDRÉ CHÉNIER: POETRY AND THE GUILLOTINE

André Chénier was born in Constantinople where his father was the French consul. He was an important member of the French literary scene and one of the victims of the Jacobin "reign of terror". As a poet he was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolutionary ideals but he opposed the decision to execute the king. His career was thus brutally interrupted by the guillotine following an accusation of "crimes against the state". A friend of the poet and playwright Vittorio Alfieri, Chenier was considered a forerunner of the romantic movement. In France he was an important reference point for the poets of the "Parnassus" movement. In Italy Chénier's verses became known thanks to the literary movement known as the "Scapigliatura Lombarda". Asteroid 12701, a small planet in the solar system which was discovered in 1977, was named after Chénier.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This term embraces a decade of French history which – in spite of its substantial failure - had an enormous influence over the western world. The historian Eric J. Hobsbawm said: "Alone among all contemporary revolutions, the French revolution was ecumenical. Its armies rose up to revolutionize the world; its ideas truly revolutionized it. (...) Its indirect influence is universal, because it supplied the model for all subsequent revolutionary movements, and its lessons – seen from a particular viewpoint – are contained in socialism and in modern communism".



THE PLOT

Act I – Winter 1789, within the castle of the Counts of Coigny in the midst of fervent activity for the preparation of a ball. Carlo Gérard (baritone), a servant, opines sarcastically about the life he has to lead. From the day when he was discovered reading Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists he has had no peace. But then his old father appears dragging a piece of furniture. At this point, through their tears, the irony turns into a revolutionary hymn. We then encounter Maddalena de Coigny (soprano) and her mother, the Countess, (mezzosoprano). Young Maddalena expresses annoyance to her loyal maidservant Bersi (soprano) with the fashions of the time which require corsets and little bonnets. The party guests include Andrea Chénier (tenor) and an Abott (tenor). The latter reports the latest worrying news from Paris referring to the rising up of the "Third State" (consisting of the bourgeoisie, the workers and the peasants, in opposition to the first two "states" of the clergy and the nobility). The atmosphere is calmed by a pastoral entertainment. Then Maddalena breaks Chénier's silence by asking him to speak of love. The poet sings an Improvviso which is intended to be a universal ode to love but which includes an accusation of the injustice of the clergy and the nobility in their treatment of the poorer classes. He talks about poverty and hardship and the young Countess is touched by his words. Gérard, the servant, makes his way through the dancers leading a group of beggars (whom he introduces saying «sua maestà la miseria!» /"your majesty here is poverty!"), and announces his own intention to leave. «Quel Gérard, l'ha rovinato il leggere», ("That Gérard, has ruined your recital") comments the countess.

Act II – Paris, June 1794. In the foreground there is an "altar" dedicated to Jean-Paul Marat (the revolutionary who had been murdered one year earlier who had been responsible for sentencing Louis XVI to death). We are in the period known as the "Reign of Terror". Chénier has fallen out of favour with the revolutionary government and is being kept under surveillance by l'Incredibile (tenor), sent by Gérard who has in the meantime become a revolutionary leader. Chénier receives strange anonymous letters that offer him advice but which at the same time seem to be asking for help. His friend Roucher (bass) advises him to flee but Chénier refuses. First he wants to discover the identity of the mysterious young woman who has been writing to him. Soon he meets her and immediately recognizes Maddalena. The proud young girl he met at the party has profoundly changed. The two fall in love. Gérard, who is still in love with Maddalena himself, learns of these developments from l'Incredibile and suddenly arrives on the scene. He and Chénier fight a duel. The poet wounds his rival who, out of love for Maddalena, advises Chénier to flee with the woman he loves. He denies knowing the identity of his assailant to the people who come to assist him.

Act III - We are in the first section of the revolutionary court. Gérard has recovered from his injury and is reflecting on the sad state of his country: «Lacrime e sangue dà la Francia!» ("France brings tears and blood!") Among the women who approach with public offerings we find Madelon (mezzosoprano), a blind old woman who is accompanied by her youngest grandson, a fifteen-year old who she "offers" for



the nation. The crowd, stirred by patriotic fervour, launches into the "Carmagnola". Gérard learns from l'Incredibile that Chénier has just been arrested. Gérard's henchman asks him to sign the indictment but the butler hesitates because he fears being the object of Maddalena's hatred. In the end, albeit with remorse, he signs the document. Maddelena arrives out of breath and looks for Gérard. He blackmails her: he desires her and declares his love which began when he was working as her servant. Maddalena is willing to give herself to him in order to save Chénier, but first she tells of her own tragedy in the beautiful "la mamma morta". Gérard is moved by such sorrow and decides to save the poet hoping thereby to win the girl's forgiveness. However the trial takes place and Gérard's repentance comes too late. His retraction of the charges is to no avail, nor is Chénier's proud defence. The public prosecutor Fouquier Tinville (bass-baritone) presents the charges as his own and, supported by the horrifying exultation of the crowd, the jury sentences the poet to death.

Act IV – The Saint-Lazare prison, the night before 25th June 1794. With the assistance of his friend Roucher, Chénier is completing some verses (("Come un bel dì di maggio" "As on a fine day in May"): it is a break from his poem, "ultima dea". Night falls while the strains of the "Marseillaise" can be heard outside. Gérard and Maddalena arrive. She is by now prepared to make the extreme sacrifice and in fact pleads with the prison warder to let her take the place of a condemned woman. Gérard, the revolutionary, weeps bitterly, still clutching in his fingers the note written to him by Robespierre, who, in response to his pleas to spare Chénier's life, had replied "Even Plato banned poets from the Republic". Together at last, Chénier and Maddalena are united in their only night of love, awaiting their death. The cart carrying those who are about to go to the guillotine approaches and a ray of sun lights up the prison cell. "Viva la morte insiem" ("Long live death!") - with this impassioned cry they make their way to the scaffold.

REVOLUTIONARY SONGS AND REFLECTIONS OF DISENCHANTMENT

As well as a tragic and passionate love story, the opera puts the French revolution onto the stage. In order to give the story greater verisimilitude, Umberto Giordano introduced a number of references such as the Gavotte, a French dance which was very popular in the XVIII century, which is used as an auditory symbol representing the dying embers of a world which is fading into the past, and some revolutionary songs, such as the Carmagnole or the Marseillaise or Ça Ira. The story presents a disenchanted view of that moment in history: the protagonists are not only disillusioned by the atrocities which the revolution brought with it, but they actually die as a result of this dictatorship. The ideals of "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" were not put into practice. What remains therefore? Chénier has no doubt: love - a love that will lead our heroes to take the tragic decision to die together.



DID CHÉNIER "FATHER" TOSCA?

There are more than a few similarities between this "French" story and the one told four years later by Giacomo Puccini (and by the same librettist Luigi Illica, co-writing with Giuseppe Giacosa): the same climate, a combination of love, political ideals and sacrifice. The characters also bear resemblances to each other, Floria Tosca resembles Maddalena de Coigny and there is also a partial resemblance between Gérard and Baron Scarpia... The three main characters in Andrea Chénier basically correspond to the nineteenth century traditional operatic "vocal stereotypes": the two lovers, tenor and soprano, and a baritone who disturbs the idyll. However, Gérard (unlike Scarpia) is not an altogether evil character, and reflects a society which no longer separated good and evil in such absolute terms. We do after all manage to feel some compassion for poor Gérard, for his suffering humanity and his tragic mistakes.

WHO WAS LUIGI ILLICA?

He was born on 9th May 1857 in Castell'Arquato in the province of Piacenza and was among the leading librettists of the post-Verdian period. As well as working for Unmberto Giordano, he also worked for Giacomo Puccini, Alfredo Catalani and other composers. He was a journalist, a good versemaker and a member of the Milanese "Scapigliatura" movement and already as a boy had displayed a rebellious temperament. At the age of twenty he went to sea and spent the next four years in the navy. During this period he took part in the battle of Plevna against the Turks. In 1879 he settled in Milan where he became a reporter for the "Corriere della Sera". He later transferred to Bologna where he co-founded the radical publication "Il Don Chisciotte" inspired by Carducci. He returned to Milan in 1882 and began to publish his own writings and plays. From 1889 Illica added the writing of opera libretti to his activity as a playwright. This new occupation led to a very intense period of work and his growing success was crowned in 1891 when he joined the Casa Ricordi publishing house. Over the next two decades Illica wrote for the finest composers of the age producing some thirty libretti which included Siberia (1903) for Giordano, Iris (1898) and Isabeau (1911) for Mascagni, Bohème (1896), Tosca (1900), Madama Butterfly (1904) in collaboration with Giacosa and Manon Lescaut (1891-1892) for Giacomo Puccini. In 1915, at the age of 58, he enrolled in the army as a volunteer and left for the front. The following year a bad fall from a horse forced him to retire to his house in the country near Castell'Arquato where he died on 16th December 1919.

VERISMO IN LITERATURE

Before being used with reference to music, the term Verismo (realism or naturalism) was used to describe a trend in Italian literature which had started in the middle of the second half of the nineteenth century originated by a group of writers, mostly novelists and playwrights, who constituted a veritable



"school" of writers founded on very precise principles. Verismo came about as a result of the direct influence of the climate of Positivism, that absolute trust in science, in the empirical approach and the infallible instruments of research, which developed and thrived from 1830 until the end of the nineteenth century. Verismo was not an ingenious and isolated notion invented by Italian writers but was clearly inspired by a literary movement which had become widespread in France from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The French protagonists of literary naturalism included Émile Zola, who was the same age as Verga, Gustave Flaubert, the author of Madame Bovary - and Guy de Maupassant.

The naturalist writer – they said - tries to discover the laws that govern human society "moving from the lowest towards the highest social forms, as a scientist does in the laboratory when he tries to discover the laws of physics which underlie a phenomenon."

VERISMO IN MUSIC

According to some musical historians, the origins of musical Verismo can be traced to Bizet's Carmen, others find its roots in Verdi's La Traviata. The "Verismo" label puzzled a genius like Verdi who made the following reflection: "Ah, ah realist if you like... Shakespeare was a realist but he did not know it. He was a realist by inspiration: we are realists according to plan, by calculation..".

The musicologist, Mosco Carner, pointed out, as a main distinguishing feature of Verismo, "the excess, the unbridled inflation of dramatic and emotional effects. One atmosphere follows another in rapid succession and once an atmosphere has been created it is already destroyed. The characters have an above average energetic charge and they are drawn into a turmoil of passions driven by sex".

The quarter of a century preceding the first world war, was dominated musically by the output of a generation of musicians born between 1860 and 1870: Ruggero Leoncavallo, Giacomo Puccini, Pietro Mascagni, Francesco Cilea and Umberto Giordano. They were very different characters who were united – at least for a certain period of their creative work – by their pursuit of Verismo, a term which nonetheless struggles to embrace musical personalities who were so different from one another. So great was this difference that the term "Giovane Scuola" was coined in an attempt to define a "way of feeling" which could be attributed to the group of composers. As to their style... it was emphatic and full of passion. The traditional Italian vocal skills were adapted to meet expressive and dramatic objectives. Often they fell prey to easy effect and a declamatory style. Psychological and passionate conflicts remained at the crux of the plots (not unlike the romantic dramas) but they would be presented with a hitherto unknown violent intensity.

CHÉNIER, THE TENORS' FAVOURITE

The role of the male lead in Umberto Giordano's masterpiece has always been especially favoured by



tenors due to the extraordinary appeal of its lyrical-dramatic melodies for a singer who wants to display his skills. In fact there is a long list of famous artists who have considered this part their personal forte who include Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, Beniamino Gigli, Mario Del Monaco, Franco Corelli, José Carreras and Andrea Bocelli.

IMMORTAL PIECES

One should not be surprised if spontaneous applause frequently interrupts the action during performances of Andrea Chénier. The opera contains a number of well known pieces which are very moving and especially well loved by audiences. For example, Son sessant'anni o vecchio (Romanza sung by Gérard), Un dì all'azzurro spazio (Improvviso sung by Chénier), Nemico della patria? (monologue by Gérard), La mamma morta (Racconto sung by Maddalena, which is a piece also used as part of the soundtrack for the "Philadelphia"), Come un bel dì di maggio (Romanza sung by Chénier).

CHÉNIER'S REAL POETIC VOICE

"As the last ray of light, as the last summer breeze

Colour the close of a beautiful day, at the foot of the gallows once more my lyre I seize.

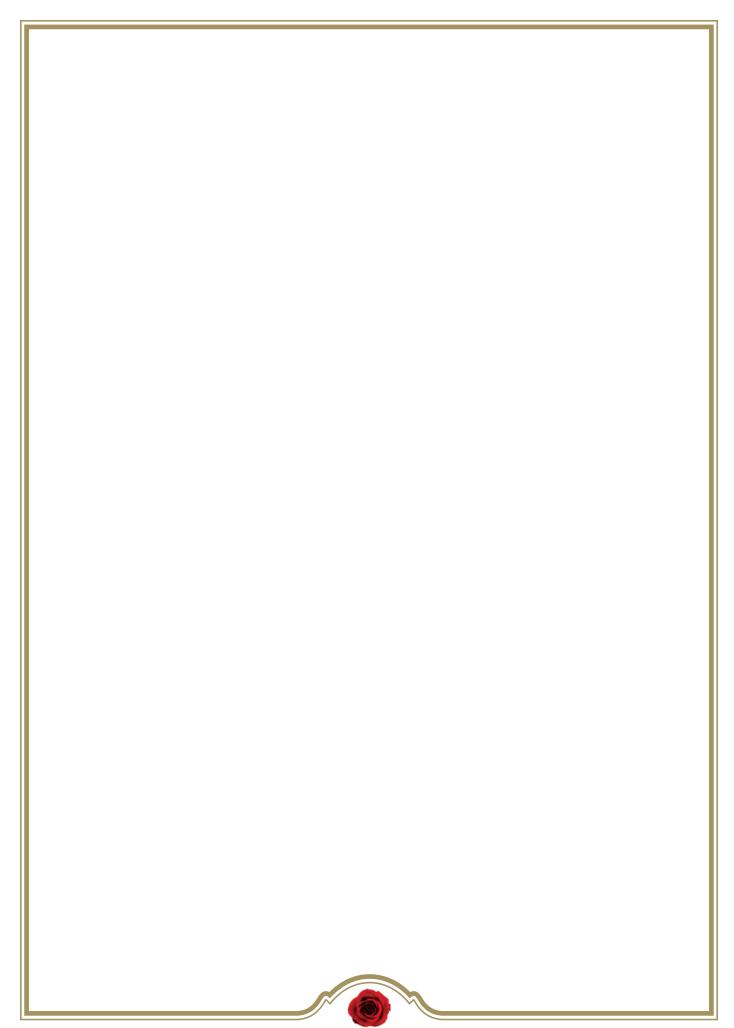
Perhaps I'll soon be on my way. Perhaps before the finger of time makes its full turn,

Resting upon the smooth enamel of those sixty steps that limit its sojourn,

So watchful and sonorous, the sleep of the tomb will press upon my brows (...)"

These are the first lines of André Chénier's poem "Comme un dernier rayon" written in prison awaiting the guillotine.





ANDREA BOCELLI LE OPERE