

BIANCA E FALLIERO

Rediscovering a gem

Thirty-nine performances in its opening run: an astonishing number by modern measure, but even by the standards of 1820, an impressive result indeed. In fact, to this day Bianca e Falliero holds claim to the longest single-season run of performances of any Rossini opera seria at La Scala. Yet contemporary newspaper critics were not overly enthusiastic about the new opera, and some were decidedly cold. The case of Bianca's initial critical reception underscores how, then as now, critical opinion and actual audience response at times have very little in common. How to explain such a result? The study of reception history often raises puzzling questions, and some situations can seem unfathomable to the modern observer, but the reception of Bianca e Falliero seems an extreme case. In an attempt to understand the paradox, cultural context is one key. The premiere of Bianca e Falliero occurred in the midst of one of the more incandescent moments of the querelle between "Classicists" and "Romanticists" that had initiated in Milan in 1816. The debate involved above all literature, poetry, and plays; many of the reviews focus on the libretto Felice Romani (a diehard Classicist), and the polemical atmosphere of the times, regardless the stance taken, is clearly reflected in their comments (some of which we report below). In another moment, or perhaps in another city, the focus of some reviewers on everything they perceived as "old fashioned" style in the opera might not have been so extreme. Regardless those reviews, the audience response was positive. But as so often happened in the 19th century, lukewarm first-run reviews could suffice to hinder the immediate circulation of a new work, inhibiting other impresarios from taking a risk on a new title. Fully three years would pass before the opera was staged again (at Cremona), and Rossini himself would not be involved in any subsequent staging.

Further, the effect of censorship throughout the various Italian states in those years, though sometimes mysterious in its workings, cannot be overestimated. Although Romani had taken care to defuse a priori the more politically incendiary aspects of the original literary model for Austrian-dominated Milan (as we shall see later in this essay), its basic underlying tenet of oppressive government figures and foreign conspiracies doubtless remained an uncomfortable theme whose presence would certainly not help the opera to travel intact. Even seemingly minor details may have caused problems. An intriguing study from several years ago on opera libretto censorship,¹ comparing the 1819 premiere libretto of Bianca e Falliero with that of the 1831 La Scala revival, pointed out an interesting change to Act I, scene 6. In the original version, Bianca collects flowers from her handmaidens to make a garland, choosing, as it happens, the red, white, and green of the tricolored flags that, from the end of the eighteenth century, had come to symbolize the aspirations of Italian independence:

Della rosa il bel vermiglio
L'amor mio gli pingerà.
Il candor di questo giglio
La mia fé gli mostrerà.
Qua l'emblema di costanza...
Là il color della speranza...
Qua un pensiero... un altro qua...

The 1831 edition renders the verses innocuous:

Idolo mio, deh vieni,
Vieni a colei che t'ama.
Te chiede sol, te brama
Il mio soffrente cor.
Un guardo tuo sereni
Il cor che oppresso giace:
Vieni a donarmi pace
Sull'ale dell'amor...

As the author of the study suggests, the combination of colors mentioned in the libretto may have been casual. Yet, given that Bianca actually assembles the garland on stage (the original stage direction instructs her to "take the flowers from the handmaidens and weave them into a garland"), Romani's indication would not have remained a vague literary metaphor but rather a striking visual "gesture"; thus an intervention by the Austrian police, as the author deduces, seems more than plausible. An examination of librettos from several other productions of Bianca show that these verses had been changed elsewhere as well (for instance, and predictably, in Trieste in 1829), probably simply adapted to the same music, while here the change of meter in the 1831 libretto (from ottonari to settenari) indicates that the entire piece was replaced.

It is tantalizing to hypothesize that one possible facet contributing to the limited dissemination and ultimate disappearance of Bianca e Falliero from the stage may have been the shadow of politics that were uncomfortable for Italian theatres through the 1820s and '30s (and certainly the 1840s, had its stage career ever reached that far).

Romani's happy end was insufficient to assuage the prickly parts of Arnault's original play: even mitigating the ending, it would seem inevitable that a plot revolving around Spanish conspiracies would ultimately cause problems with Neapolitan censors; that hints of patriotic Italian speech (albeit in embryo) would raise the hackles of Austrian watchdogs; that despotic government officials of any kind mistreating a returning war hero would be indigestible throughout the Italian peninsula. In sum, it seems somewhat puzzling that Romani would have chosen Arnault's play to render as melodrama in the first place, but then again censorial decisions of the 19th century are often as difficult for us to understand today as are the seemingly haphazard censorial decisions of our own time regarding movies and television. And while the issues in the plot were not of a kind to have the opera actually banned, they had the insidious effect of leading to modifications and alterations in the score, in an ongoing process of distortion.

Modern historiography may have added its own contribution to Bianca's continued oblivion through most of the 20th century. Until recently a common prejudice toward works fallen out of the repertory was that "if they are no longer performed, there must be a reason" – usually assumed to be that the works themselves are second rate. Though this is occasionally true, the revival efforts in recent decades, especially as regards Rossini's opere serie, have amply disproved any attempt to generalize. Quite a few unsuspected gems have been restored to the repertory, and Bianca is certainly among these. Yet historical and biographical essays of even just a few decades ago reiterated the tired notion that Bianca e Falliero is filled with pieces taken from other operas, a canard probably derived from the attitude of some of the early reviews and from Stendhal's offhand judgment in his *Vie de Rossini*, when he dismissed all but a few pieces of the opera with the phrase "Quant à la partition de Rossini, tout était reminiscence". This opinion was repeated uncritically up through recent times, even though it would have sufficed to read through the score to reveal the fallacy of the claim. In fact, apart the re-elaboration of the closing number from *La donna del lago* and a few sections of the overture, the "self-borrowings" in Bianca are limited to a few brief quotes. Doubtless this legend also grew, with hindsight, from the fact that much music from Bianca were soon recycled elsewhere and quickly became familiar, such that a subsequent hearing of Bianca e Falliero itself, even in abridged form, would have generated a strong but misplaced sense of déjà entendu. Quite a few numbers and sections from Bianca reappeared in later operas, or were inserted in revivals of his previous works. Rossini recycled the "Viva Fallier" chorus in *Moïse*, part of the *Aria Contareno* reappeared in *Maometto II*, and the opening section of the overture later became famous as the beginning of the *Le siège de Corinthe* overture. He also reused the second-Act Quartet in a Viennese production of *Elisabetta* in 1822 and inserted both the Quartet and the first-Act Bianca-Falliero Duet in an 1824 Parisian production of *La donna del lago*. The Quartet was used in *Elisabetta* again in a Milanese revival at the *Teatro Re* in 1825 and was also heard in operas by other composers, for instance in a revival of Pacini's *Barone di Dolsheim* in London and an 1830 Verona production of Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo*.

These, then, are some of the reasons which contributed to the curious sesquicentennial oblivion of what has now proven to be a true gem of an opera. But let us now trace its original history.

In 1819 the *Teatro alla Scala* of Milan commissioned Rossini to inaugurate the winter season with a new opera seria. Bianca e Falliero o sia Il Consiglio dei Tre ("Bianca and Falliero, Or: The Triumvirate Council"), a melodramma in two acts, would be the composer's thirtieth opera, and the fourth written in 1819. Expectations for the new work were high: the last Rossini premiere in Milan, *La gazza ladra*, had taken place over two and a half years earlier.² By the time rehearsals were underway, news had reached Milan of the overwhelming success of *La donna del lago* in Naples, after a disappointing opening night on 24 October. For this new commission Rossini planned to follow a traditional design. For cities with whose audience he was less familiar, he did not attempt the structural novelties he had some of his opere serie in Naples where, since 1815, he had been the absolute master of every phase of production and felt he could experiment (somewhat) with operatic forms. Even so, the very recent experience that previous *March of the disastrous reception* at Naples of his innovative *Ermione*, which was pulled from the stage after a single performance, may well have advised particular caution. This would be especially the case with *La Scala*, where previously his opere serie had not fared well. Thus, this opera for the Milanese public would be a showcase of vocal virtuosity set within a perfectly conventional formal design, a further refinement of the floridly embellished vocal style which was the prime characteristic of his compositional language, and which would reach a dizzying summit in *Semiramide* four years later. For the Bianca libretto Rossini was on sure footing: Felice Romani, with whom Rossini had already collaborated (*Aureliano in Palmira*, 1813; *Il Turco in Italia*, 1814) was the most accomplished librettist of the day. He chose a tragedy set in 17th-century Venice written by Antoine-Vincent Arnault, whose classically flavored dramas enjoyed wide notoriety in those years. Set against a backdrop of political turmoil, the play concentrates on the private turbulence in the lives of its four main characters – father, daughter, lover, and suitor. Romani was no doubt attracted by the opportunities the tragedy afforded to depict four very distinct personalities, and he drew them with sensitivity and depth. The plot unfolds along lines of sure theatrical effectiveness.

Arnault's original, *Blanche et Montcassin*, called for a striking shock ending. Montcassin (Falliero) is hooded and remains silent throughout the trial. After the testimony of Blanche (Bianca), Capello (Capellio) tries to suspend the proceedings. But it is too late: Contarini (Contareno) triumphantly whisks off Montcassin's hood to show that he has been strangled. Blanche falls dead across her lover's corpse, and Capello bursts into a downstage speech against the crimes of Contarini and Venetian bloodthirsty trials in general. Romani opted for a happy ending which, though not implausible, is certainly less gripping. Various factors contributed to Romani's decision to alter the ending – the conventions of classical opera regarding representation of death, the for one thing. Further, as mentioned above, the hand of the censorship office (or Romani's judicious preemptive self-censorship) is clear when the librettist speaks of

being “obliged to provide a happy end” to the play (it would have been highly improbable that the censor would have allowed an opera portraying a government official who was despotic to the point of assassinating an innocent defendant). But Romani may have been overly solicitous in apologizing, in his preface to the libretto, for his concession to the “laws of theatrical convention”: such adjustments were common at the time, and none of the contemporary critics seemed to mind this aspect of his adaptation.

The Milanese theatre assembled an excellent cast (some of them old hands at Rossini roles, and local favorites), and Rossini took full advantage of their capabilities. Carolina Bassi, a contralto known as “La Napoletanina”, was 38 and at the height of her powers when she created the role of Falliero. A Rossini specialist, her repertoire included *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, and later *Maometto II* and *Semiramide*. Violante Camporesi (Bianca), a Roman soprano, had sung privately for Napoleon and was to become a favorite at the King’s Theatre, London. She and Bassi garnered the lion’s share of accolades at the first performance. Claudio Bonoldi (Contareno) had already created a number of Rossini roles: *Giocondo* in *La pietra del paragone*, *Ladislao* in *Sigismondo*, and *Gernando* and *Ubaldo* in *Armida*. The opera marked the debut of Giuseppe Fioravanti (Capellio), a member of a dynasty of composers and singers. He would go on to a brilliant career, singing operas by Pacini, Petrella, Raimondi, and Donizetti, as well as those of his father Valentino, and would later create the role of Aliprando in Rossini’s *Matilde di Shabran*. The *La Scala* orchestra was one of the finest in Italy, and featured a number of famous instrumentalists among its principal players. The scenographer for the first staging was the famous Alessandro Sanquirico, whose sets and scene paintings won admiration both in the opening season and at the 1831 *La Scala* revival. A fine cast, an excellent orchestra, a master set designer, and an opera written by the best Italian librettist and composer of the time: all the ingredients for an outstanding production.

Rossini received a plot synopsis in Naples in late summer of 1819, and quickly approved it, giving Romani the go-ahead. The libretto focused on the intimate situations and emotions of the tight group of characters involved in the differing marriage plans of Bianca and her father. The background of an attempted overthrow of the Venetian government, the consequent reinstatement of the law which prohibited contacts with foreign ambassadors, and the eventual trial on circumstantial evidence function as a sequence of secondary complications to motivate the action toward its climax. Rossini seems to have begun setting the opera while still in Naples, and a few of the numbers may have already been composed by the time he reached Milan on 31 October, though Stendhal’s claim that the entire first act was written while Rossini was still in Naples seems an exaggeration. (He may, however, have fully sketched out the first act, and this may have given rise to the author’s assertion). Conceived as a series of Arias, Duets, and ensemble pieces leading to the culminating second-act *Quartet* (a pattern masterfully summarized in the monumental first *Finale*), the opera gave him ample opportunity to concentrate on richly embellished vocal expression. In assigning the vocal roles he followed one of his favorite patterns, making the young Falliero an *en travesti* contralto to preserve the S-A-T-B ensemble structure. Rossini had already used a contralto *en travesti* in his immediately previous Naples opera, *La donna del lago*, and would use one again at Naples soon after in *Maometto II*. In many respects Bianca is a contralto showcase; many years later Rossini, in a well-known letter to Luigi Ferrucci, underscored his predilection for the timbre: “The contralto is the voice to which all other voices and instruments must be subordinated in a composition”. The chorus, variously representing handmaidens, senators, attendants, etc., is considerably involved in the stage action, singing in eight of the eleven numbers of the opera. It interacts with the protagonists at crucial points in the drama, and its role is for the most part one of involvement rather than of detached commentary.

The score to *Bianca e Falliero* is meticulously written, with a great deal of attention paid to nuances of phrasing and articulation. To animate the conservative formal structures, Rossini concentrated on subtle and refined timbric and harmonic effects. The overall framework is constructed as two large wedges (three solo pieces, a duet, and a large ensemble piece comprising a number of sections mirroring the wedge design, passing from duet, to trio, to quartet, and finally full ensemble with chorus in the first act; two duets, a *gran scena* with chorus, and a quartet in the second act) framed by opening and closing ensemble pieces (the introductory chorus in Act One; the *Coro* and *Aria Bianca* in Act Two). These pieces are in turn subdivided by the choral interventions into smaller, overlapping wedges which give further cohesion to the whole structure. Rossini gave homogeneity and balance to the vocal lines by constructing the majority of themes out of brief, clearly defined units. Many of these rhythmic and melodic cells, modified and developed, reappear in successive musical numbers, a subtle device which lends a sense of continuity to the overall design.

Rossini decided to close the opera with an adaptation of the final *Rondò Elena* which Isabella Colbran had sung to the delight of the Neapolitan audience in *La donna del lago*. In the new *Aria Bianca*, the basic vocal line and harmonic skeleton remain unchanged, while the accompanimental formulae are heavily retouched. As Rossini’s less familiar operas are studied in detail, increasing light is shed on his practice of recuperating previously composed material, even in part, in the compositions. What was in some cases an expedient to gain time as deadlines approached, in other cases often reveals itself, upon closer examination, to be a deliberate process of development and refinement. The particular instance of self borrowing in *Bianca e Falliero* seems to reflect a specific compositional decision, and its placement is dramatically felicitous, since a *belcanto* outburst of joy is the only sensible ending to the drama. The magnificent *Quartet* serves as the effective second *Finale* to the opera, collecting and releasing the tension built up over the course of the drama. Bianca’s *Aria* thus serves as a prolonged and elegant *dénouement*, a collective sigh of relief.

The opera premiered on 26 December 1819. The interpretations by Bassi, Camporesi, and Bonoldi made a striking impression, and many of the pieces (such as Bianca’s first-act *Cavatina* and the first-act *Bianca/Falliero Duet*) earned

thunderous applause. The great second-act *Quartet* (which would come to be regarded during the 19th century as one of Rossini's finest efforts) produced, in the words of Rossini's biographer Azevedo, "une longue explosion d'admiration". Yet, the initial critical reaction to the opera as a whole was somewhat cold. The Milanese critic for the *Gazzetta di Milano* was decidedly unkind, launching a frontal attack on Rossini's embellished vocal style which he considered entirely unadapted to portraying the "forti passioni" animating the characters, and closing with the hope that the fine Bassi and Camporesi could be heard in music "less oppressed by heavy ornamentation, and thus infinitely more beautiful". This was not, of course, a specific criticism of *Bianca e Falliero*, but rather of Rossini's own musical language and hence of all his works. The Rossini phenomenon was such that few critics could remain indifferent: they were either for him or against him. Nonetheless, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the Milanese audience soon warmed to the opera and *Bianca e Falliero* enjoyed an unusually long run. Rossini left Milan for Naples on 29 December. Perhaps wary of the good but not overwhelming success of *Bianca* he soon put some of its music to use in other operas.

After a three-year hiatus, the opera traveled to a number of Italian cities, initially earning enthusiastic receptions. It reached Lisbon in 1824, Vienna in 1825, and Barcelona in 1830. We can only suspect, however, that the opera continued to travel on the sheer attraction of its many popular pieces, since a comparison of the various libretti reveals that *Bianca e Falliero* suffered the humiliating destiny of many Rossini opere serie in their subsequent careers: cuts, heavy alterations, insertions of pieces by other composers, wholesale amputations. This particular form of artistic abuse reached its nadir at the 1831 *La Scala* revival: the *Gazzetta di Milano* reviewer lamented "the barbarous practice of grafting extraneous pieces onto an opera, which often preserves nothing of its own beyond the title. The spectators remained cold and were at times even disgusted by this performance". The musical and dramatic structural equilibrium of *Bianca* could hardly stand the strain, and the opera had very few stagings after the 1830s.³ The more famous numbers remained fixtures of recital repertoire up through the 1860s, and Rossini wrote a series of vocal variants for an unidentified performance of the *Bianca Cavatina* and the *Bianca/Falliero Duet*.

Contemporary criticism of *Bianca e Falliero* revivals complained that many of the plot situations were "things too often seen" on an operatic stage. Opere serie of the period were in fact rife with forced marriages, foiled lovers, and tyrannical fathers, and from a purely structural viewpoint *Bianca* offered no novelties to the genre. *Bianca e Falliero* was an opera to be appreciated for its vocal and instrumental subtlety. In our program note to the modern premiere of *Bianca e Falliero* (Pesaro, Rossini Opera Festival, 1986; reprinted for the ROF revival in 1989) we closed with the augur: "Today, detached from the musical debates of the past, we can comfortably ignore considerations of whether or not the opera is sufficiently progressive or novel, and judge Rossini's music for its own quality. After more than a century and a half, *Bianca e Falliero* can finally enjoy the reception it has always deserved". The enthusiastic response and reviews the opera has since enjoyed for its staged and concert performances, and CD recordings, have shown that hope to have been fulfilled, and it is no small pleasure to see that Rossini's last opera for Milan has finally received a full, if belated, vindication.

Gabriele Dotto

Translation by Michael Aspinall

¹ Ernestina Monti, Contributo ad uno studio sui 'libretti d'opera' in Lombardia e sulla censura teatrale in Milano nell'Ottocento, in "Archivio Storico Lombardo" (Milano, Società Storica Lombarda), LXV, n.s. IV, fasc. 3-4 (luglio-dicembre 1939), pp. 306-66.

² On 31 May 1817. Other operas written for *La Scala* were *La pietra del paragone* (1812), *Aureliano in Palmira* (1813), and *Il Turco in Italia* (1814); *Bianca e Falliero* was the last opera Rossini wrote for the Milanese theatre.

³ The critical edition, based on the autograph full score housed in the Casa Ricordi archive at the Biblioteca Braidense of Milan, has restored *Bianca e Falliero* to its original 1819 form.