
ISABELLA D'ASPEÑO OR GUSTAV'S DISGUISES: AN UNKNOWN PROTOTYPE OF UN BALLO IN MASCHERA?

► AVRA XEPAPADAKOU

University of Nicosia
xepapadakou.a@unic.ac.cy

Abstract

The present article focuses on an opera forgotten today, but popular in its time: *Isabella d'Aspeno*, a work by the Ionian composer Paolo Carrer and the unknown Italian librettist hidden behind the initials R. G. S. The opera *Isabella d'Aspeno* was performed in April 1855 at the Milanese theatre Carcano and was considered one of the *grands succès* of the season, a fact confirmed by the numerous repetitions of the production during that year and the next. The special interest of this work lies in its obvious thematic similarity to the libretto of the celebrated Italian opera *Un Ballo in Maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi and Antonio Somma. Taking into consideration that Carrer's *Isabella* is chronologically anterior to Verdi's *Ballo* (1859), it would be reasonable to wonder whether the work of the young composer from Zante served as one of the models for one of the major operatic creations of the king of Italian opera. Since *Isabella d'Aspeno* was such a major operatic hit at the time when Verdi and his librettist, Somma, were working on the dramatic plot of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the possibility that they were aware of it cannot be ruled out. We will attempt to investigate this issue by offering a comparison of the two librettos as well as those of the other known models of *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Keywords: opera, Ionian islands, modern Greece, performing arts, nineteenth century studies.

Introduction

The present article focuses on an opera forgotten today, but popular in its time: *Isabella d'Aspeno* a work by the Ionian composer Paolo Carrer and the unknown Italian librettist hidden behind the initials R. G. S. The opera *Isabella d'Aspeno* was performed in April 1855 at the Milanese theatre Carcano and was considered one of the *grands succès* of the season, a fact confirmed by the numerous repetitions of the production during that year and the next. The special interest of this work lies in its obvious thematic similarity to the libretto of the celebrated Italian opera *Un Ballo in Maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi and Antonio Somma.

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Italian opera. Since *Isabella d'Aspeno* was such a major operatic hit at the time when Verdi and his librettist Somma were working on the dramatic plot of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the possibility that they were aware of it cannot be ruled out. We will attempt to investigate this issue by offering a comparison of the two librettos, as well as those of the other known models of *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Paolo Carrer

Before embarking on this endeavour, a few preliminary details on the man behind *Isabella d'Aspeno* are in order. Pavlos Karreris or Paolo Carrer (1829-1896) from Zante was perhaps the most successful Greek opera composer of the 19th century.¹ He was one of the leaders of the Ionian art music school, and the first to create “national” operas and national songs on Greek themes, Greek librettos and verses as well as melodies inspired by the folk and the urban popular musical tradition of modern Greece.²

Carrer was a descendant of a noble family of Zante. He studied music in his birthplace with the Italian teachers Giuseppe Cricca, Francesco Marangoni, and possibly in Corfu with the distinguished Ionian composer Nikolaos Mantzaros. A natural musical talent, but also in harmony with the cultural *milieu* of the Ionian Islands of the time, which was dominated by Italian opera and western European culture, he composed his first small-scale musical pieces in the late 1840s.

One should point out here that the Ionian Islands are the only area of southeastern Europe and in particular of the Greek-speaking world that escaped ottoman rule.³ Their direct contact with the West created a unique cultural landscape, in which local traditions and western models co-existed. Emigrants from Venetian Crete and Italian musicians initiated the natives to western harmony and laid the foundations of Ionian music institutions and habits.

The city of Corfu was the first to develop urban structures and from early on acquired a cultural life centering around opera performances at the San Giacomo theatre since 1733. Corfu was considered an Italian music centre, a part of the Italian opera *piazza*. During the nineteenth century, the cities of Zante and Argostoli in Cephallonia followed in the footsteps of Corfu and built their own opera houses, thus securing autonomous cultural activity. Italian opera troupes visited the three islands throughout the nineteenth century and became favourites with all social classes. At the same time, local musical, operatic and dramatic production flourished in the Ionian Islands, making them the backbone of Greek theatre and Greek art music (Xepapadakou, 2022, pp. 17-19).

The experiential relationship of the Ionian Islands with Italian music is a unique historical and social phenomenon in the Greek-speaking area. Since the mid-18th century, the offspring of the upper classes studied music in Italian Conservatoires (Xepapadakou, 2017, p. 8). It is this habit of music studies that is associated with the first creative period of Paolo Carrer. In 1850, during the peak of the *Risorgimento*, the Italian unification struggle, the young Pavlos Carrer, who was in the twenty-first year of his life, moved from Zante to Milan – the operatic capital of Europe (then under Austrian occupation) – in order to pursue advanced music studies.

1. For a detailed biography see Xepapadakou (2013) and Xepapadakou (2014).

2. Carrer composed five “national” operas: *Marco Bozzari* (1858-1860); *Kyra Frossini* [Lady Frossini] (1868); *Despo* (1875); *Lambros* (beginning of composition in 1879 – unfinished work); *Marathon-Salamis* (1886); and the *couleur-locale* operetta, *Contes Spourgitis* [Count Sparrow] (beginning of composition in 1888 – unfinished work). For the national element in Carrer’s operas see: Xepapadakou (2010).

3. The Ionian Islands (Heptanese) became successively the possession of Venice (1836-1797), France (1797-1799 & 1807-1815), Russia (1800-1807) and Great Britain (1815-1864) and were never under Ottoman occupation. Therefore, Italian cultural influence was very strong, and it was customary for the members of the local aristocracy to study in Italian cities or to pursue a career of affairs there. Also, Ionian noblemen and bourgeois were fluent in the Italian language, which was the official language of the state until its union with Greece (1864). For further historical details see Potts (2010).

In the 1850s, the heart of Italian opera beats in the city of Milan to the rhythms of *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore* (1853), and *La Traviata* (1853). In the shadow of Verdi there move composers such as Giovanni Pacini, Luigi and Federico Ricci, Errico Petrella and Filippo Marchetti, all almost forgotten today (Grout and Williams, 1914/1988, p. 419). The competition faced by every composer who aspired to be recognized in the operatic arena was fierce, especially if he was not of Italian origin. It is no coincidence that Milan in the 1850s did not produce any foreign composers out of the many who struggled for a place in the sun (Kimbell, 1991, pp. 536-537).

Furthermore, the rejuvenation of Italian opera with new blood was hindered even more by the spread of the French *grand opéra* on the theatrical stages. Its historical and political themes made it a good conduit of anti-tyrannical messages, at the same time acting as a shield against censorship. Thus, the stakeholders of the Italian operatic market invested in Meyerbeer, an action which was welcomed by the pioneers of the *Risorgimento* and was rewarded by the preference of the public (Staffieri, 2009). Finally, fierce competition was not limited to composers vying for second place, but extended to the theatre houses of Milan, to *impresarios*, art agents, and rival music publishers, who shaped cultural life by engaging in merciless war (Rosselli, 1984, p. 160).

This intricate setting would frame Carrer for about eight years as he adapted to the Milan operatic universe. Upon his arrival in the city, he took private courses with the music teacher Raimondo Boucheron, *per perfezionarsi*, that is, to perfect his musical education (Schmidle, 1929). He also appears to have taken classes with two prominent maestri, Pietro Tassistro and Giuseppe Winter (Xepapadakou, 2013, p. 33). In the same year, he presented a concert at the Carcano theatre with his first instrumental works.⁴ He also composed the music score for Tomaso Casati's *ballo eroico* entitled *Bianca di Belmonte*.⁵ Mentored by Francesco Lucca, the powerful Italian music publisher, Carrer made his debut as an opera composer in August 1852 at the Carcano, with *Dante e Bice*, an opera in three parts to a libretto by Serafino Torelli.⁶

In the next year, Carrer cooperated with the choreographer Andrea Palladino for the production of a comic ballet entitled *Cadet, il barbiere*, which was staged at La Canobbiana theatre with mediocre success.⁷ However, the same year would bring a great success to the young composer: the three-act opera *Isabella d'Aspeno*, which opened at the San Giacomo theatre of Corfu, followed by a triumphant series of performances at the Milanese Carcano (April 1854 and March 1856).

Carrer's success in the Milanese stages was crowned by the production of the grand opéra *La Rediviva* ('risen from the dead' or 'the resurrected'), *Tragedia Lirica in un Prologo e Tre Atti* to a libretto by Giuseppe Sapio.⁸ The work was received with enthusiasm when it premiered at the Carcano (January 1856), a success that continued at the Teatro Comunale of Como (January 1857) and at the San Giacomo of Corfu (December 1857). Throughout his sojourn in Italy, Carrer also composed salon music, especially opera adaptations for piano and flute, dances and *solfège* exercises.

4. Carrer's debut at the Carcano Theatre took place on September 9, 1850, when two of his works, a *Canto Greco* and *Sinfonia* were performed, along with excerpts from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* and Auber's *La muette de Portici*, in an evening concert. See Anon. (1850, September 4). *L'Italia Musicale*, 249.

5. *Bianca di Belmonte*, Azione coreografica divisa in cinque atti Di Tomaso Casati. Milano con tipi di P. Ripamonti Caprano 1850, 15 pages. For the staging of the work: Anon. (1851, January 1 and 8). *L'Italia musicale*.

6. *Dante e Bice*, Melodramma storico-fantastico in tre atti, premiere at the 'Teatro Carcano' on 24.08.1852. See Anon. (1852, August 25). *L'Italia Musicale*; Anon. (1852, August 26). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*; C. (1852, August 29). Teatro Carcano. *La Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*.

7. *Cadet, il Barbiere*, Balletto comico in tre atti, premiere at the 'Teatro alla Canobbiana' on 04.06.1853. See Anon. (1853, May 1 & 1853, May 21). *L'Italia musicale*, Anon. (1853, June 6). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*.

8. *La Rediviva. Tragedia Lirica in un Prologo e Tre Atti* premiere at Teatro Carcano on January 19th, 1856.

Isabella d'Aspeno

Isabella d'Aspeno is the second opera of Paolo Carrer and the first to achieve notable commercial success in Italy. The work, to a libretto by an unknown author signing with the initials R. G. S., occupies an important position in the Italian operatic creation of *mezzo ottocento*, as it seems to have been one of the many prototypes of Verdi's famous opera, *Un Ballo in Maschera*. It has been assumed that the initials of "modesto signor R. G. S." (Gutierrez, 1914/1984) might hide the name of Giuseppe Sapio, the librettist of the third Italian opera by Carrer, *La Rediviva*. This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that Sapio's name is given as *autore* (author) of the libretto in the catalogues of the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense⁹ and the Biblioteca del Conservatorio di musica Giuseppe Verdi¹⁰, both in Milan. However, Carrer himself mentions instead the name "Guidi" – without a first name – in his correspondence with the poet and librettist, Ioannis Tsakasianos (Kokla-Papadatou, 2008, pp. 330-332). The issue, therefore, remains obscure, at least as obscure as the reason behind the decision of the "modesto signor R. G. S." (Gutierrez, 1914/1984, p. 120) to sign his work with these enigmatic initials.

In 1853, Carrer signed a contract with the Municipal theatre of Corfu San Giacomo to perform *Isabella d'Aspeno* in the coming year.¹¹ The opening of the new opera was planned for the carnival season, which traditionally corresponded with the height of theatrical activity.¹² However, the production was full of snags, to judge from several contemporary accounts that the members of the Italian opera company decided to go on strike in 1854 protesting against delays in their payment.¹³ According to reports in the Italian press, *Isabella d'Aspeno* opened on February 7, 1854, starring the Italian primadonna Teresa Truffi-Benedetti.¹⁴

The production was repeated at least three more times with great success and high applause; the staging, so say the reports, was considered *fortunatissimo*.

We cannot but speak of fanaticism, enthusiasm, repeated encores, innumerable calls to the stage, swarms of handkerchiefs, flowers, fondants, garlands, sonnets, serenades, and, as if that were not sufficient, a turnover of 2,700 pounds for the composer, plus two golden rings.¹⁵

The musicians of the Philharmonic Company of Corfu, together with the cheering crowd, accompanied Carrer to his house playing triumphant music. He lost no time to compose a new cavatina for the *beneficiata* of the prima donna.¹⁶

The positive reception of the performances in Corfu ensured an auspicious future for *Isabella* in Milan. On the 9th of April of the following year (1855), the opera premiered at the Carcano (Gutierrez, 1914/1984, p. 120). This was Carrer's first taste of success on the Italian operatic stage. The performance conquered the Milanese public and was repeated several times, more and more triumphantly.¹⁷ The composer and the actors received deafening applause and were recalled on stage again and again.¹⁸ "There is no doubt; the spectacle is very well liked", claim the reports, which called the performance "this year's triumph at the Carcano".¹⁹

According to the reviews, the highlights of the opera were the overture – with the magnificent solo of the first violin; the scene at

9. Racc. Dramm. 6162/21.

10. Libretti L.6.

11. Anon. (1853, October 22 & 1854, January 28). *L'Italia musicale*.

12. The carnival period was the high season of theatre activity. Its duration was from Saint Stephen's Day (26 December) until Forgiveness Sunday. See Xepapadakou (2022, p. 22).

13. Anon. (1853, January 21). *L'Italia Musicale*.

14. Cast: Arnolfo: Ranieri Bettazzi(t), Rainoldo: Luigi Ruiz (bs), Rudigero: Massimiliano Severi (br), Isabella: Truffi-Benedetti (s), Ebba: Adelaide Ferlotti (ms). See Anon. (1854, February 19). *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*.

15. Anon. (1854, February 19). *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, Anon. (1854, February 25 & March 04). *L'Italia Musicale*.

16. Anon. (1854, March 08). *L'Italia Musicale*.

17. Impresarios: Casati & Simoni, Scenography: Carlo Sala, Orchestra conductor: Nicola Bassi. Cast: Arnolfo: Giacinto Ghislanzoni (t), Rainoldo: Bartolomeo Gandini (bs), Rudigero: Antonio Ghislanzoni (br), Isabella: Adelaide Dall'Argine (s), Ebba: Lucia Viale (ca), Ugo: Alessandro Trabattoni (br). See Anon. (1855, April 18). *Il Trovatore*.

18. Anon. (1854, April 18). *L'Italia Musicale*.

19. Anon. (1855, April 16). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*.

20. Anon. (1855, April 16). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*.

21. Antonio Ghislanzoni was a remarkable personality of the heyday of Italian opera. He first appeared as a baritone, but then took up writing librettos and musical criticism in the newspapers *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* and *Rivista Minima*. His most celebrated librettos are those of the opera *Aida* (1871-1872) by Giuseppe Verdi and of the *I promessi sposi*, that was set to music by Errico Petrella and performed in 1869. He was responsible for the revision of the libretto of the opera *La forza del destino* by Giuseppe Verdi, that premiered at the Scala of Milan on 27 February 1869 and also of *Don Carlos*, that was presented in 1872. He was also the author of *Gli artisti di Teatro* (Milan, 1865) and *Storia di Milano dal 1836 al 1848* (Milan, 1882), both illustrating the atmosphere of the artistic circles of mid nineteenth-century Milan. See also Black (1997, p. 402). In *Storia di Milano* Ghislanzoni comments upon the fashion trends of the 1850s, according to which the trend of a full beard and mustache were launched by the hot-blooded Milanese students, to the horror of the decent bourgeois and family men (Weaver, 1980, p. 108).

22. Musical review of Giuseppe Rovani in the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, as mentioned in Gutierrez (1914/1984, p. 120).

23. Anon. (1855, April 24). *La Musica* and Anon. (1855, April 15). *La Gazzetta Musicale*.

24. Anon. (1855, April 16). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*.

25. Seremeti, A. N. (1890). To melodrama en Elladi [Opera in Greece], *Parnassos*, 13, 94 & Herodotus Atticus (1886, August 17), Hellines moussourgi [Greek Composers], *To Asty*, 8.

26. Cast: Arnolfo: Giorgio Stigelli (t), Rainoldo: Giovanni-Battista Antonucci (bs), Rudigero: Luigi Spellini (br), Isabella: Silvia Della Valle (s), Ebba: Lucia Viale (ca), Ugo: [Alessandro Trabattoni (br)]. Cf. Anon (1856, March 8). *L'Italia Musicale*.

the dwelling of the witch; Rainoldo's cavatina masterfully performed by the bass Bartolomeo Gandini; the main aria of the tenor Arnolfo; the romanza of Isabella; and the duet between the tenor and the baritone, sung with great virtuosity by the Ghislanzoni brothers.²⁰ It is worth noting that the role of Rudigero was interpreted by the baritone, and later librettist and critic, Antonio Ghislanzoni, a notorious *enfant terrible* of mid nineteenth-century Milan.²¹

All the Italian music critics recognized Carrer's talent, but a few censured him for "excessive memory", as they judged that several passages of *Isabella* reflected echoes from earlier operas.²² The young composer was praised for his vivid and spontaneous handling of the orchestra, and his ease in creating popular tunes which stick to the mind of the audience, and even for his flashy inventiveness.²³ However, the more severe ones advised him not to rely on "easy" musical solutions and popular success, but to attempt a more in-depth approach to music, so as to set himself apart from the mass.²⁴

In any case, the reviews in the Italian music press of the time should not always be taken at face value, since some publications acted as instruments of well-known music houses. The rivalry between the music newspapers *L'Italia Musicale* and *La Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* is proverbial: the former belonged to the music publishing house, Lucca, which was launching the young composer Paul Carrer at the time; and the latter, to the rival Ricordi. The contradictory comments that the first work of Carrer received must therefore be viewed through this prism. Lucca's newspaper obviously backed a work whose success the Ricordi newspaper sought to diminish. The *Gazzetta dei Teatri* can be considered the most moderate of all, as its comments lie somewhere in the middle (Xepapadakou, 2013, 47-48).

Next stop after the success in Milan was the performance at the small Italian town of Castiglione delle Stiviere in spring 1856 (Carrer, 1887). At the same time, the direction of the Carcano theatre decided to repeat the performances of *Isabella d'Aspeno* next spring, along with a commissioned new opera by Carrer, *La Rediviva*.²⁵ With a new and better cast, *Isabella* was staged for a second time at the Milanese theatre in March 1856.²⁶ But its success was overshadowed by the veritable triumph of the grand opéra, *La Rediviva*, with its sensational plot.

A Closer Look at the Libretto

The synopsis of *Isabella d'Aspeno* is as follows:

Synopsis²⁷

***Isabella d'Aspeno* [Isabella of Aspen]**

Tragic Opera in Four Parts and Three Acts

Music: Paolo Carrer

Libretto: R. G. S.

Year of Composition: 1853

Premiere: Corfu, San Giacomo, Municipal Theatre, February 7, 1854

Characters

Arnolfo, the count of Ebersdorf (tenor)

Rainoldo, his cousin (bass)

Rudigero, baron of Aspen (baritone)

Isabella, his wife (soprano)

Ugo, Arnolfo's squire (baritone)

Ebba, sorceress (contralto)

Time: Fourteenth-fifteenth century²⁸

Location: Rhine area, fiefs of Ebersdorf and Aspen, ruins of Griefen castle.

First Act, First Part: The Homecoming

Cottages by the banks of the river Rhine. The castles of Ebersdorf and Aspen are in sight. Peasants in boats go about their everyday work. Soldiers and officers are sitting and drinking, celebrating the unexpected return of count Arnolfo of Ebersdorf from the crusades. [Coro d'introduzione: "Versa tocca"]. The single dissonance in the general atmosphere of joy is the macabre song of a strange witch about two corpses which the break of dawn will bring [Canzone: "Bello al pari d'una rosa"]. Rainoldo, Arnolfo's cousin, is acting as regent during the latter's absence and is now furious by his return and planning to overthrow him. His devoted followers proclaim their readiness to assassinate Arnolfo at the first opportunity [Recitativo e cavatina: "Ah, se a ridar la vittima"].

In his private apartments at the castle of Ebersdorf, count Arnolfo alone plays a sad tune in his harp and sings for the lady of his thoughts [Recitativo e cavatina: "Arpa mia tu come allora"]. Ugo, his loyal groom informs him that the people are hailing him for the victory he has brought to his domain. However, he, melancholy and distracted, is thinking of his unknown beloved. It seems that the lady is the wife of his friend Rudigero, baron of Aspen. After a while, Rudigero visits Arnolfo to tell him that a political conspiracy is being forged against him [Recitativo e duetto: "Or nel sen di vostra casa"]. In their conversation they mention a sorceress that Arnolfo wishes to meet.

First Act, Second Part: The Prophecy

In the ruins of Griefen castle there lives a sorceress, Ebba. Her abode is full of old grimoires, astrological instruments, magical herbs and

27. Based on the librettos: a) *Isabella d'Aspeno*. Melodramma tragico in quattro parti diviso in tre atti. Da rappresentarsi Nel Teatro Comunale di Corfu' il Carnovale 1853-54. Posto in Musica dal Maestro Paolo Carrer, Socio Onorario della Filarmonica Corcirese. Parte prima e seconda – Il ritorno, La predizione. Parte terza – La sorpresa. Parte quarta – La vendetta. Corfu: dalla Tipografia del Governo; and b) *Isabella d'Aspeno*. Melodramma tragico in quattro parti, diviso in tre atti. Poesia di R. G. S. Posto in Musica dal Maestro Paolo Carrer. Da Rappresentarsi nel Teatro Carcano la primavera 1855, Milano: Tipografia di Alessandro Lombardi.

28. Fourteenth century, according to the Italian libretto, fifteenth century, according the Corfiot libretto.

potions and other magical paraphernalia. A large cauldron dominates the scene. As it gets dark, Ebba calls upon Satan [Aria: "Signor dei regni"] when a knock on the door interrupts her: a servant of Isabella, the countess of Aspen, hands Ebba a note. At the same moment Arnolfo, disguised as a peasant, sneaks into the witch's room and hides behind a door to overhear. After a while Isabella comes in terror. She confides to Ebba that an illicit love is torturing her, from which she cannot free herself despite her struggles [Scena e aria: "M'arde il cor per un mortale"]. Ebba assures her that she can liberate her from the bonds of her passion with a strong magic philter. To obtain it, she needs to visit a terrifying place infested with phantoms and spirits. Isabella, although frightened, is determined to look for it.

Behind the door Arnolfo watches the whole scene. Suddenly the voice of a man, attempting to enter the sorceress's house is heard. Isabella, alarmed, recognizes her husband's voice. Rudigero breaks down the door and bursts in, also in disguise. Rainoldo and other aristocrats follow him, all disguised as peasants. Arnolfo joins the company incognito. Rudigero demands to know why his wife is visiting the sorceress. Isabella responds that she needed a medicine for heartache. Then Arnolfo reveals himself and asks the witch to foresee the future by reading his palm. Ebba tells him that he is brave, but refuses to foretell his future. As he insists, she reveals that very soon he is doomed to be assassinated by a friendly hand. This prophecy causes great distress to all present. The five main heroes express *a parte* their inner thoughts in a quintet: Arnolfo is concerned about Isabella, Isabella prays that her beloved be saved from the traitor's crime, Rudigero declares his devotion to the count, Rainoldo is shaking in fear of discovery, and Ebba guesses but does not reveal the identity of the assassin.

Second Act, Third Part: The Surprise

In a wild and dark forest, Isabella appears, covered in a long black cloak. She is exhausted, but still determined to discover the magic herb. In the background a temple, resonating with chants, can be discerned [Gran scena e cavatina: "Tu che sai quanto io penai"]. Arnolfo is following Isabella from a short distance. Eventually he stops her and declares his love. She repels him, saying that she is married to his closest friend. When he threatens to kill himself, she confesses that she too is in love with him [Recitativo e duetto: "T'amo d'amore immense, eterno"]. Suddenly they realize that they have been followed. It is Rudigero, who has been pursuing Arnolfo to warn him that a murder trap is being set for him. Rudigero offers his friend his cloak and encourages him to follow a secret path, in order to avoid the conspirators. He fails to recognize his wife, covered by her cloak [Recitativo e terzetto: "Egli è là... (dicean sommessò)"]. Arnolfo escapes, and after a while the conspirators encircle the couple threatening to harm the unknown woman. Rudigero draws his sword to defend her. Then Isabella reveals herself and everybody exclaims: *La contessa!*

Third Act, Fourth Part: The Revenge

Rudigero returns to Aspen castle supporting Isabella. She collapses exhausted in an armchair. Rudigero is livid with rage about his friend's betrayal. Isabella tries to appease him, assuring him that she is innocent and that nothing inappropriate has happened between

29. The three-act opera *Un ballo in Maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi (music) and Antonio Somma (libretto), based on Eugène Scribe's libretto *Gustave III ou Le Bal Masqué*, opened on 17 February 1859, at the Teatro Apollo of Rome Parker (1997, p. 295).

30. The opera opened on February 27, 1833 in Paris, at the theatre hall of the Académie Royale de Music (Scribe, 1841, p. 3).

31. The name was simplified by Scribe (1841). The author draws his material from the French translation of a book by John Brown (1820), *Les Cours du Nord, ou Mémoires originaux sur les souverains de la Suède et du Danemark depuis 1766*, Bertrand. In his libretto, he frequently refers to this text in footnotes. A detailed contrastive analysis of the two works can be found in Schneider (2003).

32. On the subject of the conscious heterosexualization of Gustav III in the operas that dramatize his life (or rather his spectacular death), see Texter (2002) and Jellinek (1994).

33. The three-act opera by Vincenzo Gabussi *Clemenza di Valois* opened at the theatre La Fenice in Venice on 20 February 1841. See *Clemenza di Valois*. Melodramma in tre Atti. Parole di Gaetano Rossi, Musica del Maestro Cavaliere Vincenzo Gabussi. Da Rappresentarsi Nel Gran Teatro la Fenice il Carnevale e Quadregesima 1840-41, Venezia: Giuseppe Molinari.

Arnolfo and her. Rudigero does not believe her and forces her to confess her love, a confession which drives him mad with anger and makes him attempt to kill her. Isabella averts her death by telling him that she is pregnant [Recitativo e duetto: "Il tuo delitto, o perfida"].

After a while Rudigero calls Rainoldo and pledges himself to his cause, so that they may take revenge on Arnolfo together [Duetto: "La mano stringimi"]. At that very moment the loyal squire of Arnolfo, Ugo, appears with two official invitations for Rudigero and Rainoldo to a masked ball at the count's castle.

In a grand hall in Arnolfo's castle costumed couples dance and drink merrily [Coro e ballabile: "Dei piacer questè la reggia"]. Rudigero and Rainoldo are wearing armour and helmets hiding their faces. Arnolfo is also in armour with his face concealed. Isabella appears *in maschera* and approaches Arnolfo to warn him that during tonight's event the conspirators are planning his assassination, but he pays no attention [Romanza e duettino: "Una sol volta ancor"]. Then Rudigero and Rainoldo bar his way with their swords. In the ensuing combat Arnolfo is fatally wounded. All the guests gather to see what has happened [Quartetto: "Non ti diceva, o perfido"]. The count dies and Isabella implores Rudigero to kill her. He answers that her punishment will be to be left alive.

Analysis

At first glance, the plot of *Isabella d'Aspeno* seems unexpectedly familiar. A closer reading leads to the realization that with a mental leap from the medieval castles of the Rhine to seventeenth-century Boston, one cannot fail to meet that famous opera, the *Ballo in Maschera* by Giuseppe Verdi and Antonio Somma,²⁹ as the two works share the same central theme. However, *Isabella's* libretto is not the only model of *Un ballo in Maschera*, as, long before Carrer and R.G.S, several others had elaborated on the same subject-matter.

One hardly needs to be reminded of the French libretto by Eugène Scribe, *Gustave III ou Le Bal Masqué* (Scribe, 1841, pp. 3-28) which formed the basis of the homonymous *grand opéra* by Auber.³⁰ The libretto dramatizes a true historical event that shocked Europe in 1792, the assassination of the king of Sweden by his political rivals during a masked ball given in Stockholm's Royal Opera. History depicts Gustav the Third as a charismatic, complicated and controversial character, a lover of the arts and an ardent supporter of Enlightenment ideas. But when this enlightened ruler expressed his opposition to the methods of the Jacobins during the French Revolution, he was considered dangerous by a group of disgruntled noblemen and military officers, who conspired against him and finally murdered him during a masked ball, through the hand of Jacob Johan Anckarström (Svanstrom, 2007, pp. 252-293).

For censorship reasons, Scribe tried to mitigate the dangerous political undertones of the work, and so attributed the crime to erotic rivalry. Ignoring the rumoured indifference of the King to the female sex, Scribe introduced a love story of his own invention, between Gustave and the wife of his murderer, Mme Amélie Ankastrom.³¹ At the same time, however, he also added a young esquire, Oscar, who adores his master and follows him faithfully everywhere. This is a part written for a female voice, through which, as many scholars claim, the author perhaps hints at Gustav's sexual preferences.³²

34. Saverio Mercadante's three-act opera *Il Reggente*, based on a libretto by Salvatore Cammarano, premiered in Turin, at the Teatro Regio on 2 February 1843. See *Il Reggente*. Tragedia lirica in 3 atti di S. Cammarano. Posta in musica dal Maestro S. Mercadante e rappresentata per la prima volta in Torino nel Carnevale del 1843. Napoli Stabilimento Musicale Partenopeo Successore di B. Girard e C.

35. For the performance in Venice, see the report in Anon. (1841, March 1). *Il Felsineo*, *Giornale*to sentimentale. The opera was performed in the spring of 1842 at the Milanese Teatro alla Scala without much success (Romani, 1862, p. 100; Ambiveri, 1998, p. 73).

36. It must be mentioned that between Mercadante and Verdi and Carrer two more stage works on the same topic were produced. One is the 'Azione Coreografica in Cinque Atti' *Gustavo III, Re di Svezia* by Augusto Huss, performed on 3 March 1846 at the Teatro alla Scala (See Romani, 1862, p. 107; Toscanini, 1962, pp. 94-97). The second, the opera *Una notte di festa* by Angelo Villanis, based on a libretto by Temistocle Solera, opened on 16 February 1859 at the theatre La Fenice of Venice, one day before the premiere of the verdian *Un Ballo in Maschera*. The similarities between this work and the other four works are rather vague (See Rosen & Pigozzi, 2002, p. 28).

37. Anon. (1851, April, 23). *L'Italia Musicale*.

38. See also the numerous *carteggi*. It must also be noted that the opera is successively called *Una Vendetta in Domino*, *Adelia degli Adimari* and finally *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

39. *Il Reggente*. Tragedia lirica di Saverio Mercadante. Da rappresentarsi al teatro di San Giacomo in Corfù. Milano coi tipi di Francesco Lucca 1849. The libretto is kept in Corfu Reading Society, Pierris Collection, no 363.

Before Paolo Carrer, two renowned musicians of the previous generation had worked on the same story. Obviously drawing on Scribe and Auber, composer Vincenzo Gabussi in collaboration with librettist Gaetano Rossi and composer Saverio Mercadante in collaboration with librettist Salvatore Cammarano, created and staged, around 1840, the operas *Clemenza di Valois*³³ and *Il Reggente*.³⁴ Gabussi's opera met with only moderate success in 1841, and was soon forgotten.³⁵ On the contrary, Mercadante's piece became established in the operatic repertoire until the 1870s (Verschaffel, 2000, p. 231). In order to avoid the censorship that the representation of a recent regicide on stage would certainly cause, both works transposed the action to the far past: *Clemenza* takes place in medieval France and *Reggente* in sixteenth-century Scotland.

Mercadante's opera, which must have served as Carrer's model, deserves a closer inspection. In this play, King Gustav is transformed into the vice-regent Murray, and the conspirators become supporters of Mary, Queen of Scots. Scribe's plot is retained, with Amelia's part somewhat enhanced, while the soprano part of Oscar remains almost unchanged (Jellinek, 1994, p. 304).

Next in line are Carrer and R.G.S., followed by Verdi and Somma,³⁶ about whom it can be surmised that they watched the performance of *Il Reggente* staged at the Teatro Re in Milan, in April 1851.³⁷ Both artistic teams attempt to rework the, by then not so new, dramatic material at their disposal. Carrer and R.G.S. are the first to do so, finishing their adaptation in 1853, while Verdi and Somma begin working on the libretto in 1857, as can be established on the basis of their correspondence (Ricciardi, 2003, pp. 16-18).³⁸

It would be reasonable to suppose that Carrer borrowed Mercadante's plot at the direction of his patron, the well-known Milanese musical publisher Francesco Lucca, who owned the rights of both composers (Rosselli, 1984, p. 174). However, Carrer's acquaintance with *Reggente* may have begun even earlier, as this opera was performed in 1849 in Corfu, at the San Giacomo theatre.³⁹ It is more than likely that Carrer was among the audience.

The following table offers a comparative overview of the four operas and their main features, bringing especially to the fore several similarities and few differences among them.

Table 1
A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR OPERAS AND THEIR MAIN FEATURES

CREATORS	SCRIBE/AUBER	ROSSI/GABUSSI	CAMMARANO/ MERCADANTE	R.G.S./CARRER	SOMMA/VERDI
TITLE	<i>Gustave III ou le bal masqué</i>	<i>Clemenza di Valois</i>	<i>Il Reggente</i>	<i>Isabella d'Aspeno</i>	<i>Un ballo in maschera</i>
PREMIERE	1833	1841	1843	1854	1859
DRAMATIS PERSONAE	Gustave III (t)	Renato Conte di Arles (t)	Conte Murray (t)	Arnolfo (t)	Riccardo (t)
	Warting or Ribbing (t)	Enrico (t)	Lord Howe (t)	—	Samuel (bs)
	Dehorn (bs)	—	Kilkardy (bs)	Rainoldo (bs)	Tom (bs)
	Ankastrom (bs)	Giulio di Valois (bs)	Duca di Hamilton (br)	Rudigero (br)	Renato (br)
	Amélie (s)	Clemenza di Valois (s)	Amelia (s)	Isabella (s)	Amelia (s)
	Oscar (s)	—	Oscar (ms)	Ugo (br)	Oscar (s)
	Arvedson (ms)	Neala (ms)	Meg (s)	Ebba (ca)	Ulrica (ca)
	Christian (t)	Ferrante (bs)	Scottish soldier (t)	—	Silvano (bs)
TITLE	<i>Gustave III ou le bal masqué</i>	<i>Clemenza di Valois</i>	<i>Il Reggente</i>	<i>Isabella d'Aspeno</i>	<i>Un ballo in maschera</i>
LOCATION	Stockholm, Sweden	Arles, France	Scotland	Ebersdorf and Aspen, Germany	Boston, New England
TIME	March 15 & 16, 1792	Thirteenth century	1570	Fourteenth-fifteenth century	The end of seventeenth century
STRUCTURE	Five Acts	Three Acts	Three Acts	Three Acts, Four Parts	Three Acts
First Act	The Royal Palace in Stockholm	i: Countryside in the outskirts of Arles ii: Court of Justice iii: The abode of the sorceress	<i>The sorcery</i> i: Room in the count's castle ii: The abode of the sorceress	Part One: <i>The Return</i> i: Farms by the Rhine ii: Room in Ebersdorf's Castle Part Two: <i>The Prophecy</i> Ruins, the abode of the sorceress	i: Room in the count's mansion ii: The abode of the sorceress
Second Act	The abode of the sorceress	Countryside in the outskirts of Arles	<i>The veiled lady</i> i: Room in Hamilton's house ii: Countryside in the outskirts of Edinburgh	Part Three: <i>The Surprise</i> Wilderness	Countryside in the outskirts of Boston

Third Act	Countryside in the outskirts of Stockholm (the place of execution)	i: Room at the Valois castle ii: Grand Ball-room	<i>The Masked Ball</i> i: Room in Hamilton's house ii: Secret room in Hamilton's house iii: Grand Ball-room	Part Four: <i>The Revenge</i> i: Room in Aspen Castle ii: Grand Ball-room	i: Room in Renato's house ii: Room in the count's mansion iii: Grand Ball-room
Fourth Act	Room in Ankastrom's house				
Fifth Act	Ballroom at Stockholm's Opera House				

All four Italian operas follow Scribe's and Auber's dramatic conceptualization to the letter, and reproduce faithfully the plot of the French *Gustave III*. It is obvious that this work was the main thematic canvass on which the next librettists added their own personal touches (Flora, 1962, pp. 44-72). Focussing on Carrer's *Isabella d'Aspeno*, one easily notes that the composer retained the three main dramatic characters, that is, the leading soprano and the two male rival lovers, a tenor and a baritone, who were also adopted by Mercadante and later by Verdi. But, in contrast to the French original and to these two composers, Carrer followed in the steps of Gabussi and gave the heroine a more central role, a fact reflected in the title of the opera (*Clemenza/Isabella*). But in all five plays the heroine is slow to appear on scene: the composers have a *grande entrée* reserved for her, when the action is transferred to the witch's dark dwelling.

Additionally, Carrer and R. G. S. make two more modifications: for reasons of dramatic economy, the roles of the two conspirators are merged into one, the bass Rainoldo; and they introduce quite early on the character of the sorceress Ebba, who, in the guise of a Shakespearean – or rather Verdian⁴⁰ – witch, predicts the ominous future.⁴¹ This dramatic choice strengthens the cohesion of the plot and enhances verisimilitude, as the disturbing presence of the witch during the initial celebration scenes prefigures the impending episode at her ruined refuge. The scene with Ebba and the chorus at the start of the opera is absent from the first libretto of *Isabella*, as performed in Corfu in 1854; it was added to the second libretto, for the performance at the Teatro Carcano (1855 and 1856) in Milan, where the role of the witch was interpreted by the debutante (*comprimaria*) contralto Lucia Viale. It may be surmised that the addition of the scene was motivated by production necessities.

Another point of differentiation concerns once again the role of the sinister sorceress, as well as that of her counterweight, the airy and frivolous esquire. Carrer makes two modifications: firstly, he changes the tradition which requires this part to be played by a fe-

40. See *Macbeth* by Verdi, who was one of the first to introduce Shakespearean drama to Italian opera (Kimbell, 1991, 491-492).

41. First Act, Part One, Second Scene.

42. The voice of Ugo can only be surmised through the fact that Alessandro Trabattoni, the performer of the part in Milan, had distinguished himself in baritone parts, such as the Count of Toulouse in the Italian version of Verdi's opera *Jérusalem* presented as *Gerusalemme* at the theatre Alla Scala on 26 December 1850 (See Romani, 1862, p. 111).

43. The huge success of *Isabella d'Aspeno* is mentioned in the music reviews of Carrer's next opera, *La Rediviva*. There it is frequently mentioned that *Isabella* was last year's great success. See Anon. (1856, January 23). *Gazzetta dei Teatri*.

44. Ulrica is the only part that Verdi ever wrote for a real contralto and not for a mezzo-soprano. (See Jander, Steane & Forbes, 1997, pp. 933-935).

45. See the previously mentioned relevant bibliography, as well as the correspondence between Verdi and Somma, as published by Ricciardi (2003) and Abbiati (1962, pp. 1-27).

46. Anon. (1892, January 31). *Theatēs*.

47. Although Carrer borrows the characters from Sir Walter Scott's drama *The House of Aspen: A Tragedy*, the plot is completely different. See Xepapadaku (2018, pp. 1030-1032).

48. See Ugo, V. (1836). *Hernani*. E. Renduel: First Act: 'The King', Second Act: 'The Bandit', Third Act: 'The Old Man', Fourth Act: 'The Grave', Fifth Act: 'The marriage'.

49. See the comparative table.

male singer dressed in a boy's outfit. His esquire is called not Oscar but Ugo, and is played by a baritone.⁴² Secondly, he creates the terrifying role of Ebba not for a soprano or a mezzosoprano, but for a contralto; this is an idea further developed by Verdi, and constitutes a common feature of the two operas, which allows one to assume that Verdi was probably not unaware of Carrer's work, a terrific hit in Milan during 1855-1856.⁴³

The above evidence leads us to the conclusion that there are several strands of influence between the five masked ball operas. However, it is not possible to establish with certainty direct borrowings from Carrer to Verdi. Verdi seems to have assimilated features from all his predecessors, without relying exclusively on one model or prototype. Nevertheless, the rarity of parts for contralto in the Italian opera of the mid-nineteenth century lends credibility to the assumption that Verdi knew *Isabella d'Aspeno*.⁴⁴ In any case, a few years later, Carrer's opera ceases to be talked about, both in the publications of the period and in the scholarly literature concerning the genealogy of Verdi's *Ballo*.⁴⁵ Another curious point is that Carrer (1887) never mentions *Isabella's* relations to the other four operas in his *Memoirs*. The truth is of course that the section of the manuscript referring to this period of Carrer's activity is missing. An article in the newspaper *Theatēs* of Zante, in 1892, which, when discussing Verdi's opera, points out that the same plot has been used also in Auber's *Gustave III ou Le bal masqué* and in *Isabella d'Aspeno* by Pavlos Carrer, is perhaps the only relevant reference.⁴⁶ It is not impossible that the author of the piece may have belonged to Carrer's circle or may even have been the aged composer himself.

To return to Carrer's productive years, and his second operatic attempt: faithful to the spirit of romanticism, the composer endeavored to cloak the ideas of the *Risorgimento* with the mantle of gothic novels.⁴⁷ In an effort to mislead the harsh censorship of the period, which forbade even the slightest political allusion on stage, he placed the action of *Isabella d'Aspeno* under the shadows of the castles of the Rhine and the mists of the Black Forest. These were the days when Scotland and Germany were the prime champions of medievalist literature and opera. The cold and dark background added the element of gothic horror to the political intricacies of the erotic triangle of the story (Dahlhaus, 1989, p. 121).

Isabella d'Aspeno is developed on the basis of a purely romantic libretto, which borrows its subject from romantic drama, and its structure from romantic novels (Portinari, 1977, pp. 545-566). The four parts of the opera, entitled "The Return", "The Prophecy", "The Surprise", and "The Revenge" evoke the chapters of a romantic novel, and follow the practice, hallowed by Victor Hugo, of imaging dramatic actions through the use of cryptic titles.⁴⁸ Carrer adopts this well-known in Italian opera technique, not directly from Hugo, but probably from Mercadante's *Reggente*.⁴⁹

Finally, a short overview of the history of *Isabella's* music score is also necessary. The work was considered lost, until quite recently. The manuscript score was discovered in the late 1990s in Milan, and was brought to Zakynthos and thence to Athens. It still has not been transcribed, published or studied. From a simple examination one can see the care with which Carrer has surrounded his score, which he wrote with his own handwriting. It is a legible and very detailed

manuscript with several notes and information regarding the work and its stagings.

However, there does exist a short recorded section of this opera, the "Preludio".⁵⁰ It is an introduction in two parts, portending the dark and terrifying atmosphere which dominates the opera. The first part is stately and powerful, and is built on a dialogue of the whole orchestra with the string instruments. An ironic dance motif, like a hollow creak, evokes the grotesque murder scene during the masked ball and forms a bridge to the second, more lyrical part. This is dominated by the English horn, which probably echoes the sad melody of a romantic aria or duet.

The most exciting part of the opera must have been the last, where the dramatic action reaches a peak, against the backdrop of dance music. Carrer's long and successful career as a composer of salon music allows one to assume a *contrapunto* game between soloists and orchestra, during which the latter acquires greater dramatic importance. As in the case of Auber's *Gustave III*, in *Isabella d'Aspeno* the ballroom scenes are complemented by an onstage band performing a mazurka militaria. This dance music is a permanent accompaniment, which comes, goes and comes back during the dramatic scenes, causing a contradictory atmosphere between the agony of the heroes and the merry background.⁵¹ Correspondingly, Verdi builds the main scenes of *Un ballo* around the dance melody of a mazurka, performed by a banda interna.

To conclude, the previous attempt to compare Carrer's opera *Isabella d'Aspeno* with earlier and later works exhibiting a common thematic canvass, revealed several and important affinities and ramifications. Elements of literature and fiction are manifest in the structure of the majority of the lyrical works under discussion, especially in the case of allusions to chapters of Romantic novels and adherence to the practice of visualizing the dramatic actions or in the case of acts with cryptic titles, a practice common since the time of Victor Hugo. The tragedy of the doomed passions is often enhanced by an admixture with comical elements and in some instances the combination of tragedy and comic is accomplished through the grotesque (masked balls, misshapen malefactors, Shakespearian furies). Another common romantic element is the flashback to the medieval past; in this case, the spooky atmosphere of gloomy forests and gothic castles of the North constitutes the ideal Romantic setting for all the related operas.

Of particular interest is the composers' bold choice and handling of historical and political issues. The political plots, interwoven with love triangles, form the diptych of 'passion and death' that rules these works. Both the vivid acting and the music express the unadulterated sentimentality, the erotic psychopathology, the impassioned personal conflicts, the shading of adversative amorous rivals. In all the operas under consideration, fatal romantic love is prominent, even if this is not dictated by historical accuracy. In this context, one may observe a common management in the distribution of voices, in the succession of musical styles per scene and in the use of dance music as the background of a dark affair. It is a pity that we are not yet able to compare the music of *Isabella d'Aspeno* with that of the other operas sharing the same theme; with the wish that this may soon become possible, I would like to open the subject for further research and analysis.

50. The 'Preludio' of *Isabella d'Aspeno*, conducted by Byron Fidetis is included in the digital disk: Pavlos Carrer, *Despo*, CD 0792, Eteria Genikon Ekdoseon Lyra, 2002.

51. Atto Terzo, no 3b.

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