

Un ballo in maschera - Verdi and the Censors

In the Austrian dominated, autocratically governed and ecclesiastically narrow-minded Italy of Verdi's early years, censorship took some curious turns. *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845) for instance, attracted the disapproval of the religious authorities in Rome and southern Italy, with the result that Verdi had to replace the libretto with one entitled *Orietta di Lesbos*. (That an opera about Orietta the Lesbian was considered more suitable than one about the Maid of Orleans is not without irony.) A decade earlier, Verdi's German contemporary, Richard Wagner, had faced similar censorship over his *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love), and was obliged to refashion it as *The Novice of Palermo*.

Attila (1846) with its barely concealed nationalism, aroused wild enthusiasm amongst Italian audiences and, after performances, Verdi was accompanied to his lodgings by cheering crowds, brass bands and torchlight processions. He got away with murder, so to speak, with *Attila*, but he was not so lucky with another work premiered in Venice five years later, originally called *La maledizione* but renamed *Rigoletto*.

The subject of this latter work contained just about every ingredient likely to upset a censor: a frivolous and dissolute ruler, a loose girl who sleeps with him, and a grotesque hunchback. The authorities expressed their mortification that Verdi and his librettist had chosen a subject of such 'repulsive immorality and obscene triviality'. Changes were proposed in order to make the work acceptable. Verdi rejected them. He insisted that the Duke be a libertine because without this the story lost its point. Even the sack in which Gilda's body is delivered to her father, had been rejected. Verdi was flabbergasted: 'I don't understand why the sack has been omitted! What does the sack matter to the police? Are they afraid of the effect on the stage?' The censors objected to the character Rigoletto (who at that point was called Triboletto) being ugly and a hunchback. Verdi's retort to this was 'I find it very beautiful to portray this character externally misshapen and ridiculous, but inwardly impassioned and full of love. I chose the subject precisely for these qualities and these original features. If they are removed, I cannot write the music.' In the end, both sides made compromises.

With *Un ballo in maschera*, intended for Naples, Verdi's troubles were even greater than with *Rigoletto*. The story of the killing on stage of a ruling monarch was bound to worry the authorities in those revolutionary times. The composer and his librettist Somma contemplated using fictitious characters and setting the action in an earlier (and more barbaric) period. Somma suggested the 12th century but Verdi rejected this as being too remote and out of keeping with the work's style and customs. After considering a synopsis of the libretto - then called *Una vendetta in domino* - the censors first insisted that the king must become a duke and that he be resident anywhere in the north except Sweden or Norway. So, the action was transferred to 17th century Pomerania - one of Gustav III's titles was Duke of Pomerania. However, in January 1858, just before rehearsals were to begin, an Italian nationalist Felice Orsini tried to assassinate the French Emperor Napoleon III by throwing three bombs under his carriage en route to the Paris Opéra. Eight people, but not the Emperor, died, and Orsini went to the guillotine. A year earlier, Ferdinando II Bourbon, King of the Two Sicilies (nicknamed 'Re Bomba' because of his vicious methods in quelling riots), had been attacked with a bayonet by one of his own soldiers. The Duke of Parma had also recently been killed, and his successor could only rule with the aid of an Austrian garrison. The censors were on high alert.

Verdi wrote to Somma:

'I'm drowning in a sea of troubles. It's almost certain the censors will forbid our libretto.... They made the following suggestions, but only as a special favour:

1. Change the hero into an ordinary gentleman, with no suggestion of sovereignty.
2. Change the wife into a sister.
3. Alter the scene with the fortune-teller, and put it back to a time when people believed in such things.
4. No ball.
5. The murder to be offstage.
6. Omit the scene of the drawing of the name.
7. And, and, and...!!

As you can imagine, these changes are out of the question, so no more opera. So the subscribers won't pay the last two instalments, so the government will withdraw the subsidy, so the directors will sue everyone, and already threaten me with damages of 50,000 ducats. What hell!

Eventually, the Neapolitan authorities allowed Verdi to take his opera elsewhere. He turned to Rome where, as it happened, a stage play about King Gustav III had recently been performed. The censors in Rome were generally more concerned about matters of religion than matters of politics – or so he thought. He sent a version of the synopsis set in Stockholm to the Roman opera impresario Vincenzo Jacovacci. Jacovacci accepted it, subject to the approval of the Papal censor who, as it turned out, was concerned with both morals *and* politics. The duke had to be demoted to a count, and the action had to be moved entirely out of Europe.

It was Antonio Somma who, grudgingly, selected colonial Boston from amongst the alternatives offered for the new location. However, he had become so disillusioned with the whole project that he refused to be associated with it any longer. On the published score he masked his identity with the anagram 'Tommaso Anoni'. Finally, it was as *Un ballo in maschera* (the Italian version of the subtitle to Scribe's 1833 libretto *Gustave III, ou Le bal masqué*) that the opera opened at the Teatro Apollo in Rome on 17 February, 1859.

The Bostonian locale, imposed so incongruously on Verdi and Somma's beautiful work, has been an embarrassment ever since. As the musicologist Philip Gossett notes, 'Colonial Boston was never associated with masked balls, and conspirators named Sam and Tom (the equivalents of Counts Ribbing and Horn) evoke comedy. Oscar, a character Verdi adored, could exist only in a European court that had breathed the atmosphere of the French under Louis XIV. And a can-can *a la* Offenbach ('*Dunque, signori, aspettovi*') ('So, friends, I'll await you') to celebrate a visit in disguise to the den of Ulrica hardly expresses the spirit of a culture known for the Salem witch trials.'

'A pity!' wrote Verdi, 'to have to give up the magnificence of a court like that of Gustavus III - and besides, it will be no easy task to find a duke as imposing as this Gustavus!! Poor poets and poor *maestri*!'

A century and a half later, when the issues that aroused the censors are long forgotten, opera audiences are more likely to find themselves in the Sweden of Gustav III than the Boston of Governor Riccardo, Count (*sic*) of Warwick. Verdi and Somma would be pleased that their masterpiece is back where it truly belongs.

