



by Richard Dyer

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI was three weeks away from his 20th birthday when his opera *Tancredi* had its premiere in Venice in 1813. He already had 9 operas behind him, most of them successful, at least on a local basis.

With *Tancredi* and its immediate successor *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, four months later, Rossini became an international figure and incontestably the most important Italian opera composer of the period, a master both of heroic opera and of comedy.

Tancredi was translated into a dozen languages and soon it had been performed all over Europe, North and South America. But it got off to a slow start. The leading mezzo and the leading soprano were ill on opening night, so both the premiere and the second performance were broken off midway through the second act because the prima donnas could not continue. But almost immediately *Tancredi*'s entrance cabaletta, *Di tanti palpiti*, swept through the whole of Italy the way *La donna e mobile* from Verdi's *Rigoletto* did 38 years later. Even the Venetian gondoliers were singing it, and the Pope decreed that altar boys must stop whistling it. This simple melody, moving up, down and across five notes of the F-major scale became the first of Rossini's Greatest Hits.

Rossini's reputation in comic opera has remained secure for nearly two centuries now, thanks to *The Barber of Seville*, but until a generation ago, virtually no contemporary opera-lover would have associated him with heroic or tragic works. *Tancredi* and its most notable successors in the heroic vein, nearly a dozen of them, had vanished from the stage within Rossini's lifetime. Nevertheless, our own era has seen the successful revival of such major works as *Elizabeth, Queen of England*; *Otello*; *Moses in Egypt*; *Zelmira*; *Semiramide*; *The Lady of the Lake*; and *The Siege of Corinth*, in addition to *Tancredi*.

Gaetano Rossi's libretto for *Tancredi* is based on *Tancredi* (1760), a stately, silted tragedy in rhymed verse by France's most prolific writer, Voltaire, today best known for his short novel *Candide*. *Tancredi* is lifeless today, but the *Comedie Francaise* performed it off and on for 125 years, and *Amenaide* offered a choice role to some of the greatest French actresses.

Reference books often report that the opera is also based on *Jerusalem Delivered*, Torquato's wildly popular 16th century epic about the First Crusade. But it isn't. One of the heroes of the epic is named *Tancredi*, and his exploits would have been as familiar to

Rossini's audience as Indiana Jones' are today. But there is nothing in the poem beyond Tancredi's name and the time-frame of the story that anticipates Voltaire's tragedy or Rossini's opera. Possibly the epic, the play and the opera, all three, owe something to legends surrounding an historical participant in the first Crusade, Tancredi of Galilee.

Voltaire's play has some holes in its plot which widen into chasms in the opera; the premise of the intercepted letter defies plausibility, and a few quiet words in the middle of one of the duets between Tancredi and Amenaide would have cleared everything up and prevented the tragedy. There is another whole opera latent in the "prequel" of *Tancredi*, in which Tancredi, Amenaide and the Saracen Solamir lay the groundwork for the opera when they all meet at the Byzantine court in Istanbul; we learn this story from Voltaire, not from the opera. The libretto also irons the character of Amenaide flat; in France and in England, Voltaire's heroine became a prototype for the feisty woman struggling against a male-dominated world; in the opera, she is only a pathetic victim.

Opaque as the plot is, the text does systematically deliver strong emotions and vivid conflicts, symmetrically laid out in arias, duets, and ensembles. This was a period in which the public preferred happy endings, so Rossi provided one, the way writers in England were arranging for Juliet to wake up before Romeo kills himself, and for Hamlet to survive.

At the first revival of the opera, however, in Ferrara, a few months after the premiere, a local dignitary named Luigi Lechi persuaded Rossini to restore Voltaire's tragic ending. Lechi wrote the new text himself, Rossini reordered the original score and composed

some poignant new music. This version failed to find favor, however, and the manuscript of the tragic ending lay silent in the archives of the Lechi family for 163 years until it was discovered in 1976. The eminent musicologist Philip Gossett, subsequently prepared a critical edition not just of the tragic ending but of the whole opera and all its variants, paving the way towards *Tancredi's* triumphant return to the repertory. The original happy ending is still occasionally heard – it was chosen for the Naxos recording with Ewa Podleś in the title role – but the tragic ending is the one that holds the stage.

The opera begins with a lively, not-quite suitable overture Rossini had originally composed for a comic opera, *La pietra del paragone* (*The Touchstone*); there is only a little bit of other music in *Tancredi* that Rossini borrowed from himself, although he later sometimes raided *Tancredi* for other operas.

There are three principal characters, each torn between love and duty: Tancredi, a male role sung by a mezzo-soprano or contralto; Amenaide, a soprano; and her father, Argirio, a tenor instead of the baritone or bass usually assigned to fatherly parts. Each is an exceptionally demanding and exceptionally rewarding role, calling for long-breathed legato lines, vivid declamation, and a dual command of coloratura – Rossini's florid vocal line demands both the skill of a great virtuoso vocalist and the expressive powers of a great actor.

The coloratura isn't just there for show; it delineates character – we can hear how it imprisons Argirio like the bars of his rule-ridden life; on the other hand, coloratura is what sets Amenaide's spirit free.

The music balances an irresistible forward momentum with melody that takes its time to

unfold its expressive meaning. There are several examples of the famous “Rossini crescendo” for example, yet the opera develops through spacious arias and duets, most often in several contrasting sections, surprisingly often with the chorus chiming in. The principal characters are seldom entirely alone in their thoughts and the private drama cannot escape the social fabric surrounding it.

We are seldom away from these three principals, although Rossini did write charming arias for two subsidiary figures, Isaura and Roggiero – these arias are not necessary to the plot and their purpose is to give the principals a breather between big scenes and big sings; in the 19th century such arias were known as “sorbet arias,” because the audience could relax too and take a break with a little Italian ice.

Rossini’s handling of the orchestra is no less vivid and original than his eloquent shaping of the *bel canto* line. It is the orchestra that vividly depicts Tancredi’s rapidly beating heart in *Di tanti palpiti*. It is the orchestra that first takes us beyond words into Amenaide’s feelings when she stands accused of treason. The woodwinds, in particular, are participants in the drama. The oboe depicts Amenaide’s prison plight and the English horn colors her exquisitely mournful aria. The introduction to Tancredi’s entrance is a captivating barcarolle, depicting his arrival by sea; in the craggy orchestral writing for his big scene near the end, we can hear what the libretto describes – “A mountain range, with steep ravines, torrential waterfalls . . . Mount Etna is in the distance. The sun is setting and glinting on the sea beyond” – all of this viewed from the perspective of Tancredi’s troubled mind.

Stendahl, the great French novelist, was also Rossini’s first biographer; writing in 1824,

when Rossini was only 32 and with five operas still to compose before his premature retirement, Stendahl maintained that *Tancredi* was the Rossini’s greatest work – Stendahl went to hear Giuditta Pasta (later the first Norma in Bellini’s opera) sing the title role 30 times. Now that it is possible to hear most of Rossini’s 40 operas, and experience them in the theater, few would agree with Stendahl’s assessment. *Tancredi* is nevertheless an opera full of musical marvels, and since the 1970s it has finally won a secure place in the repertory of highly-skilled singers and adventurous opera companies.

The modern history of *Tancredi* began with a revival starring Giulietta Simionato in Florence in 1952. In the 1970s, it became a signature role of Marilyn Horne who sang it often in America and Europe. Since Horne, Ewa Podleś has carried the hero’s banner proudly; other notable Tancredis have included Vesselina Kasarova, Lucia Valentini-Terrani, Anne-Sofie von Otter, Bernarda Fink, Gloria Scalchi and Daniela Barcellona. These mezzos have defended the honor of a number of comparably distinguished sopranos in the role of Amenaide – Margherita Rinaldi, Nelly Miricioiu, Katia Ricciarelli, Patrizia Ciofi, Eva Mei, Annik Massis, and three Americans, Lella Cuberli, Gianna Rolandi and Maureen O’Flynn.

When the 75 year-old Rossini was shown the manuscript of the tragic finale of *Tancredi*, his youthful triumph, he wrote, “I declare, and not without blushing, that this is my manuscript of 1813. It was written in Venice; those were the days!!! Today, it is another story . . .”