

# live and empoisoned

by [John Yohalem](#) (parterre.com) | 8:49 am | May 13, 2016



In how many operas does the heroine drink poison and then go lengthily mad? Only *Tsar's Bride* comes to mind. But also: In this opera, the baritone is fought over by two adoring women. *That* happens to tenors all the time—and, in Mozart, to basses—but a baritone? Add characters named Morna and Wortimer, and if you're not in a Harry Potter adventure and singers are warbling coloratura, you know it must be an obscure belcanto masterpiece. But whose? Donizetti wrote seventy and, admit it, you only know twenty of them. Mercadante wrote almost as many and you know even fewer. Verdi? Ridiculous. Rossini? Absurd. The Ricci brothers?

No, face it, we are dealing with *Malvina di Scozia* by Giovanni Pacini. It was Pacini's sad fate to compose eighty operas in the shadow of better-known men. He couldn't dry up. It was an addiction. He pissed melody. And opera houses kept coming to him for new ones. Once, around the time of Bellini's *I Puritani*, Pacini got so discouraged he took the pledge, no more opera, and kept it for nearly five years. But one fatal sip of melody, and there it was: a new one, *Saffo*, staggering upon the stage, and two busy decades followed. When he died, in 1867, at the age of 72, he had just premiered two new ones and was at work on a third.

Pacini was born in 1795, in Catania (like Bellini) to a roving theatrical family (like Rossini) that encouraged his youthful talent. He was eighteen when he wrote his first opera, but he didn't achieve success until Rossini departed for Paris in 1824. All the young composers in Italy scrambled to occupy the empty throne, and Pacini was the

first out of the gate, with *Alessandro nell' Indie* and *L'ultimo giorno di Pompeii*. "I wrote them in the style of Rossini," he would say later, "because that's what audiences wanted to hear." In time his style matured, adjusting to the Romantic Movement, to Bel Canto triumphant. To this much later era we owe Pacini's masterpieces, *La fidanzata corsa*, *Allan Cameron*, *Saffo* and *Medea*. And there was a new one, sometimes two, nearly every year. *Stella di Napoli*. *Il saltimbanco*. *La gioventù d' Enrico V*. *Lorenzino de' Medici*.

Why is Pacini nearly forgotten, while Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti survive? The music is as pretty (Rossini said, "He's the best tunesmith of us all ... if he weren't so lazy") and the plots barely more ridiculous. (Try comprehending motivation in *Carlo di Borgogna*. Just try. But the score is irresistible.) He was known as the king of the cabaletta, and I defy anyone not to bounce to the *stretta* that ends Act II of *Maria, regina d'Inghilterra*.

But he seems not to have cared about the librettos very much. They were words; he set them to music. It was the end of the scene, so the tension should rise: Harmony took care of that. He did not obsessively read foreign plays (as Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi did), homing in on the thrilling dramatic moment, nagging the librettist to tighten the situation. And he did not go to Paris (as Rossini, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Mercadante and Verdi all did) to learn what changes had been made in musical drama, what could be done with verse and climax and concerted event. Worst, he never created a single perfect work, capable of holding the stage after the entire fashion for belcanto had vanished, that *Barbiere*, *Lucia*, *Norma* to get him through the tulgy wood of the reign of Wagner and Verismo. His wonderful *strette* vanished. His name was confused with Puccini or Piccinni. A sad end.

Or was it the end?

What has brought him back to the edge of public awareness is that the belcanto style of singing is once again studied and performed, and its performers and audiences are bored with the familiar works. At festivals like Martina Franca, Bad Wildbad and Wexford, Pacini is once again a name to reckon with. Seven or eight of Pacini's operas are available on disc (mostly thanks to Opera Rara, which has even issued a *Pacini Rediscovered* CD), though I'm not aware of anything on video. Pacini is on deck, full of fight, ready for his comeback. Can he pull it off and put it on?

New York's Vertical Player Repertory (VPR), usually based in Brooklyn but for this occasion, May 11 and 13, occupying Christ and St. Stephen's Church on the Upper West Side, is giving *Malvina di Scozia* its first break in a century and a half. The opera premiered in Naples in 1851 and ran up a respectable twenty-four performances in less than two months. A revival misfired in Rio de Janeiro; another

took place in Malta. And then it was gone. Pacini went right on composing other things for other folk. He might not even have noticed that Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *Traviata* had just transformed opera.

*Malvina* was ill-starred from the beginning; it is surprising it is as hardy as it is. The libretto was old, having premiered in 1835 as Persiani's *Ines de Castro*. The censors in nervous Naples (there had been a revolt there, and everywhere else, in 1848), banned reference to any current European monarchy, so the Portuguese story had to be rearranged for tenth-century Scotland. (Bagpipes are requested for the court triumph scene.) The company's leading tenor had absconded for reasons no longer recalled, so the opera had to be composed for a baritone hero. Pacini wrote the "other woman" role for a brilliant star contralto, and few later singers felt comfortable with it.

Although bereft of an orchestra—the pianist, **Doug Han**, is first rate however, and manages to *imply* what no doubt were intriguing and atmospheric orchestral touches—the VPR production proved engrossing and attractive. The company has rounded up an able cast, a sizable chorus, surtitles for the eccentric action and **Hans Schellevis**, who created the performing edition, to conduct the performances. The surtitles were effective and even grammatical. All this can't have been cheap, and is worthy of the attention lavished last week on Opera Orchestra's resuscitation of Donizetti's *Parisina*. But *Parisina* does have a clearer plot.

Malvina (aka Ines de Castro) is the true love of Arturo (Pedro), the fighting prince of Scotland (Portugal). They have had several children and hope to be married. Arturo thinks a good moment for the announcement has arrived since he has just won a victory over the Irish (Castile), but when he arrives at court, singing a battle song that is also a drinking song (why waste time?), his father, King Malcom [*sic*] (Alfonso IV), reveals that the Irish have agreed to peace on condition that Arturo marry the amorous Irish princess, Morna.

Consternation ensues, enhanced by one Wortimer, an "advisor" secretly in love with Malvina, who has rejected him. He spills Arturo's secrets and, later, kidnaps and murders Malvina's children. He even poisons Malvina, just the king and Morna are getting to like the poor girl. Arturo revolts, the king dies, Malvina goes crazy, the curtain falls. What's not to like?

What *Malvina* has certainly got is melody, opportunity for florid display, and tense situations that erupt or work themselves out in concerted passages, notably a climactic septet. Everyone seemed a bit under the weather at the opening on Wednesday night, but they were soon rolling along. "It flows so smoothly, number into number, no interruptions!" enthused a friend. I rather thought that was due to a

cool audience, uncertain when to applaud. (They let loose at the end.) There was singing worthy of applause, but the conductor and pianist went right on with things. Perhaps the rental of the space is to blame.

A pretty soprano named **Angela Leson**, whose lower register was uncertain but who flowered in the high coloratura of the mad scene, sang the title role. She was rather undercut by the massive contralto of **Karolina Pilou** as the neglected Princess Morna. Pilou, singing despite a touch of flu, stopped the show with a huge double aria (over two octaves in range) and much flashy ornament, all this expressing her delight in her forthcoming nuptials before Arturo even comes in. It's all downhill from there, but like any good Amneris, she seemed quite capable of stealing the whole show with her rage and reconciliation moments, and the duet between the two ladies, exploiting the contrasts of their voices ("Mira, O Morna" –that isn't what it's called but I couldn't resist) was especially charming.

It was so clear that **Ben Bloomfield**, as Prince Arturo, was invading tenor territory that some of the audience thought he *was* a tenor simply omitting his high notes and sounding unusually plummy in the lower ones. If Pacini had been more forward-looking, he would have prepared a tenor edition of this role, for the *brindisi* (the notes call it "a drinking song about war") gave him a chance to display a gracious line which often seemed to imply high notes that a tenor would have been expected to insert. His entire performance seemed a contest between good baritone instincts and the sort of mindless passion we associate with the higher voice. To the pleasure of all, he kept his cool and was the stalwart background to movements with other singers.

Bass **Stephen Kirchgraber** sang King Malcom with a somewhat woolly tone, acceptably holding his place in the concerted movements. Tenor **Aram Tchobanian** did all that could be expected in the underwritten role of Wortimer, and here I must register a protest, a "what were they thinking?" moment—for Pacini and for his highly professional librettist Salvatore Cammarano (who had made the same error in *Luisa Miller* for Verdi two years earlier). Wortimer is not just a stock villain or, rather, he need not be. He is malicious, bloody, horrible. And what does he get to sing, by way of explaining himself and his motivations? "O mia vendetta" is about the size of it, for Malvina's perfectly natural snub. Mr. Tchobanian could do very little with this; **Carlo Bergonzi** could not have done much more.

The role is absent without leave. Evocative as that name "Wortimer" is, we don't know *who* he is or why he does what he does, which is the heart of the opera. As everyone else boils down to a nice guy troubled by reasons of state, that leaves *Malvina* as little more than an unfortunate series of events. Verdi and Donizetti wouldn't have let this happen. Indeed, the producers (who, I should mention, were

my dear friends **Thea Cook**, Pacini's greatest fan, and **Judith Barnes**, creator of VPR) told me they'd found a tenor aria on the revenge theme in one of Pacini's other operas—there must be two dozen appropriate numbers, right?—and were thinking of filling the plot hole with it and giving Mr. Tchobanian something to do, but the evening would have run into overtime. (I suspect some fun repeats were cut, too, for the same reason.) And you know Pacini would have wanted his show out there, on the boards, never mind motivation. Well, he would. But *Malvina* deserves a villain with *cojones*, and the libretto did not provide one.

If you love belcanto, this was a memorable occasion and it will be repeated on Friday. You will certainly be hearing from Ms. Pilou and Mr. Bloomfield in the future, and Ms. Leson may learn how to warm up her lower voice better. It's four blocks north of the Met. What can you lose?