

Zealot, Patriot, Spy? : Verdi's *Marquis de Posa*

by Thomas Hampson

"There is nothing historical in this drama, so why not?"

With these words rang a defense – at the same time a posture – Verdi adopted for the creation of *Don Carlos*. While the quote, written to his publisher G. Ricordi, pertains to the specific scene of the apparition of Charlemagne at the end of Act V, it is, nevertheless, hugely relevant when entertaining any reflections on Verdi's *Don Carlos*.

Already historically compromised by the great German poet-dramatist Friedrich Schiller, who, in fact, relied heavily on the occasionally embellished-interpreted history of Vischard de Saint Real, the story of *Don Carlos* presents a complex backdrop of political-religious (i.e. public) conflict by which the very personal dilemmas of love, jealousy, family, and faith are brought into sharp relief.

Verdi's genius in the articulation of the more-often-than-not catastrophic result of a personal passion pitted against various social, religious, or political contexts is well manifest in such works as *Luisa Miller*, *I due Foscari*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Rigoletto*, and, of course, *La Traviata*.

However, with *Don Carlos*, the essentially metaphoric use of historical context as exposé of these conflicts accomplishes something remarkable in the theatre, and that is the recreation of the ambiguity of successive moments found in reality. There is no scene in the opera that ends in the same political or even personal context in which it starts. There is no formula for the tying together of scenes or even of acts – i.e. climactic aria, rousing ensemble, or even more subtlety through the continuation of linguistic symbols or musical motives. There is only mutation, migration, even metamorphosis. One is caught in the ebb and flow of events in King Philip II's life as mercurially manipulated by the machinations of his vastly incomprehensible son, set against the backdrop of absolutist religious fervor desperate to suffocate the threat of non-conformity.

Certainly, the Marquis de Posa is the most metaphorical figure in the opera, not the least because the very essence of his existence and behavior would have been impossible in Philip II's court. (Nevermind that he didn't historically exist as such in any case!) However, Posa's mission is historically founded: that of securing the freedom or at least relaxed oppression of Flanders. But even more to the point of Schiller and certainly Verdi is Posa's unwavering determination to realize for himself and "his kind" self-determination. This is probably one of the most essential conflicts of European political-religious history, found over and over again in great literature from the Grail legends to the personal dilemmas of a Werther or the nightmares of a Franz Kafka.

Verdi's concern at one point that Posa would be perceived only as a martyred hero not only demonstrates the composer's wise, somewhat cynical understanding of the theatre public's hunger for cliché, but also illuminates his "use" of Posa in this musical-dramatic work. Posa never wavers. He is a constant and consistent force throughout the opera. I see him musically rather like a painter who uses a continuous beam of light through which the drama of shadows can make its point. His unwavering mission, which, in fact, borders on the zealous, finds him in the role of confidant to the very source of the massacre he protests (Philip), just as it prepares him to become a murderer (Eboli) in the name of protection of his only ally and therefore hope, Carlos. He compromises one apparent allegiance to fortify the appearance of another (Auto-da-fé) in order to attain the greater goal of "his beliefs" and he is even treasonous in the simple act of serving as messenger-boy for his love-sick friend.

Each event, however, is greater than Posa's participation in it. If anything, Posa's metaphoric existence as the emerging cry for self-determination and greater democratic ideals, though it is very sympathetic, is suffocated in a larger social, personal, political, and religious conundrum that requires a dramatic martyrdom to achieve any permanence to his character's existence.

The challenge artistically, then, in performing a role like Posa is, in fact, to avoid the heroic. If one sings exactly as the master wrote, constant in his use of *pianissimi*, trills, phrase markings, and rests, there emerges a character who is more intent on finding his way in each new circumstance rather than an operatic figure bent on delivering his message. Posa is very intentionally given a separate musical tone to each for his "partners" – Elisabeth, Carlos, and most importantly Philip – regardless of what it is he has to say. His lyricism is not impotence, but a rather pliant, even manipulating dialogue. His outbursts are always born of passion that surprises even himself and thus requires immediate further dialogue. It is curious that the role of Posa is the only character not to be altered in form, tessitura, presence, and, therefore, intent. Throughout all of Verdi's various revisions and approved translations from the original French libretto, Posa remains intact.

Complex personalities in tumultuous times breed contradictions, but as fascinating as these ambiguities and contexts are, *Don Carlos* remains a great dramatic plea for the supremacy of the personal experience. Human behavior and its often obscure manifestations dictate that the world will always have its "Posas," but the fragile, flickering of the light of reason harbored in the passions and love born from the individual experience is our greatest warning – therefore our worthier contemplation.

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