

Riccardo Zandonai

GIULIETTA & ROMEO



Teatro Grattacielo. NY, USA.



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PREFACE

“Done piansi, che amor pianse
in segreto” –

brief considerations on Juliet and
Romeo by Riccardo Zandonai, on the
centenary of its first performance.

by Carlo Todeschi

In the immediate postwar period, Zandonai found himself surrounded by numerous magnetic fields: the Italian melodramatic tradition, German symphonism, naturalism, French colorism. The composer from Rovereto had fleeting contacts with international and decadent figures such as D'Annunzio and Puccini but preferred them the more closed companies of Nicola D'Atri (Lucera (Foggia) 1866 - 1955), art and music critic, from the time of Conchita and maximum confidant of Zandonai, and Arturo Rossato from Vicenza (Vicenza, 1882 - Milan, 1942), librettist of Romeo and Juliet and of all subsequent Zandonai's operas. That was the Italian melodramatic tradition mixed with a conservative taste recognizable in the figure of Verdi who advocated the return to

the ancient as the responsible cause of progress. The idea initially proposed by the Veronese Giuseppe Adami (1878- 1946), then retired from the project, was to follow an essential plot proposed by Italian "storytellers" such as Luigi Da Porto (1485- 1529) and Matteo Bandello (1485 - 1561), trying to avoid the expansions of the horizon and the various complications subsequently proposed by William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616). An all-Italian version therefore means a version that translates into the more traditional vocal archetypes of Italian melodrama: a tenor and a soprano opposed to a baritone, and a few more or less secondary figures around them. A characteristic poetic local color, with an Art Nouveau flavor, is spread extensively, which becomes the backbone of the whole work. We therefore have the image of an epically delightful past cloaked in an all-Italian decadent decorative style, characterized by "stornellate", dances, cavalcades and texts written in the Veronese dialect, often derived from the Veronese dialect poet Berto Barbarani (Verona 1872-Verona 1945), which provides a series of illustrative, decorative effects in a "false ancient"

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mode, one for all the song of the singer in the third act, a sort of madrigal that contrasts with the cavalcade, a noisy symphonic piece that represents Romeo's desperate race from Mantua to Verona. Veronese oleography and symphonic spirit, poetic and sentimental reconstruction without philological pretensions, after all, for those who see Verona today, even the famous "Juliet's balcony" is nothing more than a cunning historical forgery obtained by sticking a balcony of Castelvecchio on an ancient house of the historic center, referred to as Casa Capuleti, and this too has to be demonstrated. During the rehearsals of the first performance at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, Zandonai releases these statements to an interviewer with *Corriere d'Italia*: "I wrote as always with great sincerity: In this opera, even more than in *Francesca*, I wanted to write clear music, very clear. I didn't want to get lost in research of color and details that would ease my enthusiasm. The parts of Romeo and Juliet are all singing. Also, in the recitatives I wanted to follow the Italian school, bringing them back, modernizing them, to the glorious traditions of our melodrama".

The opera is therefore characterized by a popular national slant that translates the Veronese legend into a sort of popular singing that captures an undeniable success in the third act: the Cantatore's romance and Romeo's ride, two antithetical pieces of theater and poetry. An Italian scholar, Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi (1934-) son of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, author of the *Leopard*, wrote thirty years ago that according to him the Cantatore represented not only the dominant figure of the act, but perhaps of the whole opera, a kind of Italian metamorphosis of Mussorgsky's *Innocente* by Boris Godunov. Perhaps an exaggeration which, however, gives us the idea of how much the piece in question, the only "closed piece" of the work, wanted to represent, through the voice of the poor storyteller, the collective soul of a people. Seventeenth-century archaism, pseudo-medieval modalism, the poetic nature of the climate, the image of the dying girl all this breaks down in Romeo's response, an antithetical example of the theater of emphasis, of the descriptive symphonism that aspires to the effectiveness of a soundtrack.

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If the criticism of the second post-war period, in the era of the historical avant-gardes, was not tender towards this work, it must be said instead that the public's favor was never lacking and, in this sense, Zandonai had an exceptional flair. It was always an infallible flair that led Zandonai to conceive a short composition to be included in the symphonic programs of large orchestras in which he linked together the dance of torchio (danza del torchio), the short instrumental saraband that precedes the entry of Tybalt in the second act, with the cavalcade. A symphonic episode that until about fifty years ago was in the repertoire of very important European orchestras. We should therefore not be surprised that a work like this might not please Puccini who, present at the first Roman performance, went to greet Zandonai in his dressing room. A warm hug followed by a long chat about deer hunting in Val di Fiemme (Zandonai) and Gallo Cedrone on Lake Massaciùccoli (Puccini) conducted with true scientific knowledge on the subject! Not a word about the music of the composer from Trentino!

I think the time has come to overcome the historical-critical misunderstanding that has made it difficult to relocate to the current repertoire. As Federica Fortunato, scientific director of the Riccardo Zandonai International Study Center in Rovereto wrote, “the story lends itself to being a metaphor for our time: love, tenderness, friendship opposed to the logic of blood and power”. The epilogue is heartbreaking, but in reliving the emotions of Juliet and Romeo we all cultivate the image of that suffocated youth, as a noble response to the perverse conventions of the world. An alternative life in these years of pandemic and with horror in the heart of Europe.