By Brian Kellow

The Redeeming Power of *Andrea Chénier*

For a time at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the verismo movement looked as if it would have a long run. With its lean, tense stories of the struggles and tragedies of everyday people, verismo looked like a bracing, contemporary antidote to the nobles and heroes of French and Italian grand opera and the weighty musical and philosophical concepts of Wagner.

It's a good thing that Umberto Giordano, one of the leading verismo composers of the day, isn't around to see what is left of his reputation, which rests (as many of the verists' reputations do) on a single work, *Andrea Chénier*. The opera was a smashing success when it premiered at La Scala on March 28, 1896. For decades afterward, *Chénier* has been the subject of critical arrows, but it has never been dismissed as swiftly as it is today. Writing of a disappointing 2014 Metropolitan Opera revival, *The New York Times*' Zachary Woolfe complained about "the flatness of the characters, the slackness between the memorable melodies. This is a score that exists to be set aflame by singers." A year later, in a positive review of the Royal Opera's David McVicar production—now being staged here in San Francisco—*The Daily Telegraph*'s Rupert Christiansen attacked the work as "a score of the third class—music of shreds and patches, bombastic and crude, fueled by hot air."

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Act III's trial scene from the 2015 premiere of David McVicar's production of Andrea Chénier *at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.*

I don't think any of us would make any outrageous claims about the dramatic structure or depth of *Chénier*. But as a gutsy, florid musical entertainment, it has generally given excellent value. Christiansen's "bombastic" is a word that has often been used by other critics, and in fact the opera does open in *ff* (very loud) and end in *fff* (even more loud), offering a lot of big moments that aren't well integrated dramatically and seem to exist purely as a chance for vocal showing-off. But have we reached a point when big-scale vocalism is a bad thing? Or does *Chénier*'s bad rap stem from the fact that so few artists today are capable of creating the proper vocal fireworks?

GLOSSARY OF FRENCH REVOLUTION TERMS AND HISTORICAL FIGURES

(in order of appearance in the opera)

***Tacco rosso* (red heel)**: The gentlemen of the French aristocracy favored red-heeled shoes.

Jacques Necker: A Swiss banker made Minister of Finance by Louis XVI, he was entrusted with solving France's crippling economic problems. His failure to do so was a major spur to the Revolution.

The Third Estate: Established in 1789 to sit in Parliament alongside the aristocracy and church, the Third Estate represented "the People" of France, though it was almost entirely composed of the bourgeois and professional classes. Their transformation of themselves into the National Assembly triggered the Revolution.

Sans-culottes: Literally "without knee-breeches," they were the radical, left-wing working classes who made up the ground troops of the Revolution in its early years.

Incroyables* and *merveilleuses: In reality a revivalist aristocratic movement that flourished from 1795–99, they were remarkable for the extremity of their dress. The *merveilleuses* based their gowns on Greek and Roman models with revealing results that cast doubts on their sexual morals. Librettist Luigi Illica transfers them back to the Reign of Terror, maybe to add historical color to the opera.

Jean-Paul Marat: A scientist and writer, he was a powerful Jacobin and an instigator of the Terror. He was murdered, lying in his bath, by a Girondist sympathizer, Charlotte Corday, in 1793, and was subsequently celebrated as a martyr of the Revolution.

Charles-Henri Sanson: He and his son Henri were the public executioners of Paris. The tumbrel that took the prisoners (including Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette) to the place of execution was known as "Sanson's chariot."

Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre: The leader of the Jacobin party, he signed André Chénier's death warrant with a single sentence: "Even Plato banned poets from his Republic." Just three days after Chénier's execution, Robespierre was himself seized and guillotined. It is Robespierre's younger brother, **Augustin,** whom Chénier mockingly calls in Act II "the little Robespierre."

Antoine Fouquier-Tinville: The fearsome prosecutor of the Committee of Public Safety, he was responsible for putting on trial and disposing of enemies of the State as quickly and efficiently as possible. He was executed himself in 1795.

François Chabot: A revolutionary who began his career as a monk, he was a notoriously bad swordsman, hence Chénier's mocking use of his name to taunt Gérard in Act II.

Charles François Dumouriez: Initially a national hero and general of the Revolutionary army, he fell from favor with the rise of the Jacobins and was denounced by the National Assembly. He defected to the Austrians and was declared a traitor.


San Francisco Opera Archives/Lawrence B. Morton

Giordano's reputation suffered fairly quickly in comparison with the king of verists, Giacomo Puccini. But is *Andrea Chénier* really deserving of such backdoor treatment? Giordano may not have been able to touch Puccini in depth and detail of orchestration, but Chénier leaves *Manon Lescaut* in the dust when it comes to melodic power and variety; it also gives us a deeper glimpse into the human heart than T*urandot* and is far less ludicrous dramaturgically than *Suor Angelica*.

But perhaps *Andrea Chénier*'s principal redeeming feature is its gut-level honesty and lack of pretense—we don't have the feeling that we're being lied to, as we may in several of Puccini's works.

Giordano and Puccini had a librettist in common: Luigi Illica, who had initially written the text for Alberto Franchetti but decided to pass it on to his good friend Giordano. Illica's scripts for *Madama Butterfly*, *La Bohème,* and *Tosca* are models of economy: Puccini was noted for spending endless time overseeing the development of the libretto, believing it to be the indispensable basis of all great opera. His works move swiftly—almost too swiftly at times—from point to point, and we may feel that we have little time to respond freely to the characters and action, since the composer has done so much of the work for us already.

But it's easy to agree with Puccini biographer Mosco Carner that Illica may have lacked Giuseppe Giacosa's "poetic vision" but surpassed him in "the profuse invention of telling theatrical incidents and the elaboration of a varied and flexible plot."

Carner believes that Giordano might have done well to emulate Puccini's slavish devotion to developing the libretto; he credits Giordano with making a half-joking comment about the key to success: "Find a good song, and then build an opera around it!"

But Giordano and Illica did far more than that in *Chénier*. The first act of the opera sets up a ripe musical and dramatic situation in its delineation of the Countess di Coigny's grand salon, and the seething revolutionary tensions that boil beneath it, as personified by the ambitious, embittered servant Gérard, who hates the "gilded house" of his employers and predicts that their hour of doom is near. Properly staged, this act can get the opera off to a marvelous start: we are bound to cringe at the fawning of the guests over the fatuous Countess. Giordano's treatment of the madrigal that Fléville has selected to entertain the Countess' guests is also deft: it hauntingly foreshadows the collapse of the aristocrats' world and sounds almost like a lament. The quiet resentment of Chénier as he listens to the Abbé recite the news of the court is also tremendously effective, as is his opening aria, "Un di all'azzurro spazio," which begins as a rhapsodic romance and erupts into an angry statement of revolutionary fervor. This sets up Gérard's smuggling in of the hungry peasants, the Countess's horrified reaction, and Gérard's angry resignation. *Chénier*'s status as a true verismo work has sometimes been questioned, given its French Revolution setting and the fact

Left: San Francisco Opera's 1938 production of Andrea Chénier *boasted Beniamino Gigli in the title role. The tenor also appeared as Chénier in the Company's 1923 and 1924 performances. Captured in this photograph is Act I's Coigny Château.*

Right: In San Francisco Opera's 1975 production of Andrea Chénier, *Plácido Domingo performed the title role. Domingo has said that Chénier is "less interesting dramatically," than the character Gérard. "Chénier is an idealist whose head is always in the clouds." In 1975, baritone Cornell MacNeil played opposite Domingo as the servant-turned-revolutionary Gérard.*

Greg Peterson/San Francisco Opera Archive

Does Chénier's *bad rap stem from the fact that so few artists today are capable of creating the proper vocal fireworks?*

that it deals with a poet and a fallen aristocrat. But the opera's true nature is revealed in this first act: Gérard's anger over his situation and the pathetic groveling of his elderly and infirm father is unquestionably the stuff of verismo.

For the remainder of the opera, this verismo strain comes and goes as the plot mechanics take over and the principal (and several secondary) characters all get their moments in the sun vocally. These mechanics are often quite effective: the second act, with Maddalena's companion Bersi operating undercover, and the Revolutionary forces closing in on Chénier, are neatly played out. But in the third act, Gérard steps forward as the opera's verist heart and soul. He's a fascinating character, and one of the fullest creations in the verismo repertoire: a faint-hearted Revolutionary whose position of power is threatened by his unrequited passion for Maddalena and his high regard for the character of Chénier. His great aria "Nemico della patria" shows us his recognition that he is still a servant, "now as always, with different masters"; it then blooms into a painful admission of how he has missed out on the beauty of life. The scene in which he tries to force Maddalena to surrender to him sexually is very close in some ways to the second act of *Tosca*, with Scarpia trying to force Tosca to submit to him. But Gérard emerges as a far chewier character than Scarpia: after telling Maddalena that even against her will, she will be his, he relents when he realizes the depth of her love for Chénier. And while Maddalena's famous aria "La mamma morta" does seem to come out of nowhere, dropped abruptly into the scene, it's quite possible that Giordano and Illica intended it to be seen as a guilt-tripping of Gérard: when he sees how much she has suffered, he vows to try to save Chénier's life; when he fails to do that, he ultimately (in a lift from *A Tale of Two Cities*) enables Maddalena to take the place of the doomed Idia Legray and die with Chénier at the guillotine.

In a sense, Gerard can be seen as a male counterpart to Amneris in *Aida*, creating the circumstances of the final love-death of his beloved and his rival. It's a glorious role for the baritone, and many tenors singing the title role have wished they were playing Gérard, notably Plácido Domingo who complained that Chénier was "an idealist whose head is always in the clouds." "Certainly he is the 'better' character of the two," Domingo wrote in his autobiography, *My First Forty Years*, "but he is less interesting dramatically." Chénier and Maddalena, at the very least, get the spectacular duet "Vicino a te" to themselves. Unlike Puccini, who often chose not to write a fresh, excerptable number for his finales, Giordano goes out in a blaze, providing the soprano and tenor with a glorious shared high B, as exciting a finale as any in Italian opera.

It has fallen to high-voltage singers to keep *Andrea Chénier* alive. In our own time, Aprile Millo distinguished herself as Maddalena at the Met, opposite Luciano Pavarotti, and Jonas Kaufmann has triumphed as Chénier at the Royal Opera. The most flavorful performance of the opera I have heard in the theater came in 1996 at Seattle Opera, in a production starring Ben Heppner and Diana Soviero, conducted by Steven Mercurio, in which everyone entered wholeheartedly and unapologetically into the opera's spirit.

Perhaps this is a key part of the contemporary difficulty with accepting *Andrea Chénier*. The opera deals in huge emotions and bold compositional and dramatic strokes; it requires a certain degree of surrender, and it also requires personalities to sing it who can compel us to believe in its gloriously overripe melodrama. Today, the opera world's center of gravity seems to have moved toward those works that are most easily cast: the operas of Mozart, Handel, and many of the bel-canto works. But we should not think of ease of presentation and audience comfort as the only standard of what gets produced. *Andrea Chénier*'s musical rewards are immense—and it would be a shame if we lost sight of that.

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