
THE ORIGINAL VISION: *L'Andromeda* (Teatro San Cassiano, 1637)¹

The libretto

"The curtain disappears. The scene was entirely sea. In the distance was a view of water and rocks so contrived that its naturalness (although feigned) moved the spectators to doubt whether they were in a theatre or on a real seashore. The scene was quite dark except for the light given by a few stars, which disappeared one after another, giving place to Aurora who came to make the prologue. She was dressed entirely in cloth of silver with a shining star on her brow, and appeared inside a very beautiful cloud which sometimes grew large and sometimes small, and oh lovely surprise, circled across the sky on the stage. Meantime, the scene grew light as day for the prologue, sung divinely by Signora Maddalena Manelli from Rome, after which one heard a very sweet symphony from the most polished instrumentalists, assisted by the author of the opera with his miraculous theorbo. Then Juno came out on a golden car drawn by her peacocks, blazing in a coat of cloth of gold with a superb variety of jewels on her head or in her crown. To the wondering delight of the spectators, the car turned from right to left as it pleased her. Mercury appeared before her. This personage was and was not in a machine. He was, since flying, it is impossible not to admit it; he was not, since one saw no other machine but that of a flying body. He appeared adorned in his customary garments with a blue mantle that waved loosely from his shoulders. Juno was excellently played by Signora Francesca Angeletti of Assisi and Mercury exquisitely by Signor Don Annibale Graselli, from Città di Castello. In a moment one saw the scene change from a seascape to a wood so natural that it carried our eyes to the life to real snowy heights, real flowering countryside, a regal spreading wood and unfeigned melting of water. Andromeda appeared with a following of twelve damsels dressed as nymphs. Andromeda's dress was of the colour of fire of inestimable value, that of the nymphs was white, flesh colour and gold. Andromeda was wonderfully represented by her who did the prologue. The scene turned in a moment from the wood to the seascape. Neptune appeared and Mercury came out to meet him in a wonderful machine. Neptune was on a great silver shell drawn by four sea horses and a sky blue mantel covered him. A large beard came down to his breast and a long shock of hair wreathed with seaweed hung down to his shoulders. His crown was made as a pyramid tossed with pearls. This part was played excellently by Signor Francesco Manelli of Tivoli, composer of the music of the opera. Proteus came from the bosom of the sea dressed in silver scales with a great shock of hair and blue beard. Signor Giò Battista Bisucci from Bologna served as this very gentle personage. Here to end the act they sung firstly a madrigal for many voices, behind the scene, concerted with different instruments; and then three very beautiful youths, dressed as Loves, came out to make a most graceful dance as an Intermezzo. The speed of the movements of these children sometimes made people doubt if they might not have wings on their shoulders or indeed on their feet.

¹ Benedetto Ferrari (librettist) and Francesco Manelli (composer).

“To the tune of a sweet melody of instruments Astrea appeared in the sky and Venus in the sea; one in a silver cloud and the other in her shell drawn by swans. Astrea was dressed in the colour of the sky, a flaming sword in her right hand; Venus in sea colour with a gold cloak clinging to her shoulders. Astrea was gracefully played by Signor Girolamo Medici, a Roman, and Venus most sweetly by Signor Anselmo Marconi, a Roman. The scene changed to a woodland, and Andromeda came out with her train. Six of her ladies, for joy at killing a boar, did a light and wonderful ballet with such varied and different weaving of paces that truly one was able to call it a leaping labyrinth. It was the invention of the celebrated Venetian dancer Signor Giò Battista Balbi. Suddenly, from beneath the stage arose the magician Astarco as a ghost. This personage was clad entirely in a long deep gold coat with hair and a long beard white as snow. As a sorcerer’s sceptre, he held a wand in his right hand. This character was worthily represented by him who played Neptune. The sky opened and in a burst of light, one saw sitting on a stately throne Jove and Juno. Jove was covered by a starry cloak and on his hair was set a crown of rays and a thunderbolt in his right hand. He who performed Proteus played this part divinely. Here, to finish the act, another madrigal for many voices was sung within firstly concerted with different instruments, and then twelve wood nymphs made, as an intermezzo, a very eccentric and tasteful ballet of movements and gestures. There were no eyes that did not weep the passing of this dance. The above-mentioned dancer Signor Giò Battista Balbi was the inventor.

“The scene changed to the seashore. In tune, to a most sweet harmony of different instruments, a very beautiful machine appeared from one side of the scene with Astrea and Venus upon it. It turned to the right and left as these goddesses most pleased. Opposite them Mercury came out and, the sky opening, sat in the middle. This little scene had a most wonderful effect for the quantity of machines and for the successive arrangements of silent characters and movement (on the stage). In a flash, the sea scene became a superb palace. It was a good sight to see a well laid out and constructed building suddenly born from rough stone and coarse sand. This represented the royal palace of Andromeda from which came Ascalà, a knight. His clothes exceeded in value and beauty those of all the rest. He was dressed in the Turkish style. This unhappy character, with a thousand charms of heaven, was played by him who took Mercury. Regretfully, the palace disappeared and we saw the scene entirely of sea with Andromeda bound to a rock. The sea monster came out. This animal was made with such beautiful cunning that, although not real, he put people in terror. Except for the act of tearing to pieces and devouring, he did everything as if alive and breathing. Perseus arrived on Pegasus, and with three blows of a lance and five with a rapier he overthrew the monster and killed it. This character was dressed in white with a great crest on his helmet. His flying steed had a plume with the same device on its head. This character was played angelically by him who took Ascalà. The sky opened and one saw Jove and Juno in glory and other divinities. This great machine descended to the ground to the accompaniment of a concerto of voices and instruments truly from heaven. The two horses, joined to each other, it conducted to the sky.

“Here the majestic and ever worthy occasion had an end.”²

² Translation (with slight modification) by John Warrack in Simon Worsthorne, *Venetian Opera in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954).