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CONCHITA: THE BRINK OF AN ABYSS

The early critics of Riccardo Zandonai's *Conchita* – of the world premiere in Milan in 1911, and of the first London performances in 1912 – were writing on the brink of an abyss. To begin thus is, in one sense, to do little more than reiterate one of the clichés of twentieth-century history: that the world was 'never the same' after 1914; that many of the practices associated with the nineteenth century – not least its cultural energy and optimism – were swept away by the horrors and dislocations of the First World War. If intimations of this imminent catastrophe were felt by this particular band of Milanese and London critics, then they managed to hide it from their readership. But the abyss was also looming in a narrower, albeit not-entirely unrelated, sense – the one that concerns operatic history. On this less dangerously contested stage, our critics were indeed aware of their perilous historical position. Here is how one of the Englishmen, writing in «The Observer», sums it up:

The situation with regard to opera is in every respect embarrassing. The critical advisers of the public are apt to treat carpingly every modern addition to the list... The public hesitates – especially the English public – and places faith and financial assistance in the works they know and have known for the last fifty years. It is “out” for sheer enjoyment of the tunes it knows and the singers it knows, or for education in those things (Wagner, for instance) that it thinks it ought to know. The latter alternative is a matter of absolute persistence on the part of the critic, the manager and the interpretative artists. When the guiding spirits are united and have nearly had enough of insisting, the public will begin to insist on its own account, and the opera arrives in the ranks of the successful. It is an astonishing reflection, when one comes to consider the number of operas in the last fifty years (they are to be reckoned in thousands), that the actual permanent repertory of the opera house anywhere is limited to an odd dozen or so of fairly attractive operas¹.

This lament might plausibly have been repeated by any of the critics of the time, and in either city. They had a firm idea of their own importance – centrality, even – in the operatic firmament; and they nevertheless saw that firmament as heading for disaster. They thought that the solidifying of the operatic repertory, and in particular the relative absence of new works, was reaching a parlous condition – a state of crisis. Written between the lines of all the reviews is an anxious question: will *this* new work mark a turning point, herald a return to the time when new operas poured forth with easy abundance? Might it, in other words, be a potential addition to ‘the repertory’?²

Fast-forward a century, to the early years of the twenty-first century, and the most remarkable aspect of these reviews is that their underlying lament could be repeated almost verbatim today – albeit with due adjustment of tone (journalistic *de haut en bas* is less tolerated in our demotic times) and due curtailment of prolixity (journalistic space, at least outside the internet, is now at a much greater premium). The existence of the ‘repertory’ was (then as now) a fixed point of the operatic landscape, and (then as now) a matter of acute critical embarrassment. Indeed, many would argue that operatic history in the hundred years between the *Conchita* premiere and today is more responsibly told not as a succession of new works but as a series of waves in the reclamation of old ones. Early examples of this reclamation could be traced back far into the nineteenth century, indeed to the dawn of the operatic ‘repertory’ itself: in London’s Mozart revivals of the 1820s and 1830s, for example; or in Paris’s Gluck revivals of the 1850s and 1860s³. Still more

¹ Anon, «The Observer», 7 September 1912. This and all other journalistic responses to the Milan and London premieres are taken from the collection of such reviews housed in the Biblioteca Civica in Rovereto.

² As the critic of «Rivista artistica dei teatri e del varietà» of Rome put it (10 November 1911), «Avrò dunque scoperto una nuova *Carmen*? Un altro *Guglielmo Tell*?»

³ Tracking in detail the emergence and consolidation of this repertory, a process whose speed varied markedly from country to country, is a task largely still awaiting operatic scholars. There is, though, agreement about certain watershed periods. In the case of Italian opera, the political upheavals of the nineteenth century were of particular importance. As John Rosselli put it with his usual economy and grace, «Italian opera had been closely bound up with the world of the old sovereigns. It was shaken when the 1848 revolutions shook their rule; when, in 1859–60, they departed for good, Italian opera began to die». See JOHN ROSSELLI, *Music and Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, London, 1991, p. 71. For Mozart revivals in London, see RACHEL COWGILL, «Wise Men from the East»: *Mozart’s Operas and Their Advocates in Early Nineteenth-century London*, in *Music and British Culture, 1785–1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich*, ed. CHRISTINA BASHFORD

obvious indications of our modern condition appeared in 1920s Germany, where there was a so-called ‘Verdi Renaissance’ in which several of his forgotten works were revived. This was in part a reaction against Wagner, traditionally Verdi’s antithesis; but more basically it reflected the fact, ever more glaring, that people still wanted to go to the opera (in fact, radio and recordings were expanding the market), but that their dislike of contemporary works was becoming ever more pronounced⁴. This set the global pattern for the rest of the twentieth century. The repertory renewed itself, if at all, by digging into its past: first with revivals of Verdi; then, spreading from Germany to elsewhere in Europe, with Verdi’s earlier contemporaries; then with even earlier composers such as Handel; eventually (our position today) with almost any work from that great lending library in the operatic past, the only stipulation being that it has lain untouched for a decent period. To put this in a wider perspective, the story parallels that of the ‘early music’ movement generally: it was born of and is sustained by cultural pessimism – by the fact that, musically, we now enjoy novelty more when it comes from the past than when it comes from the present.

Within this broad context, then, the kinship between past and present critics of *Conchita*, between – if you will – ‘them’ and ‘us’, should hardly come as a surprise. Although our historical situation vis-à-vis the ‘repertory’ is very different, we ultimately ask of the opera a similar set of questions. Precisely because Zandonai’s opera failed to establish a place in the repertory (a failure it shared with virtually all Italian operas of the period apart from those of Puccini), we approach it, just as did its first critics, as a potential future classic: like them, we weigh it against the ‘canon’: against the fixed standards of an established corpus of works with their well-absorbed array of styles and manners⁵. This, incidentally, differentiates an inquiry into *Conchita* reception from the more usual reception-history operatic investigations, which for obvious reasons tend

and LEANNE LANGLEY, Oxford, 2000, pp. 39-64; for Gluck in Paris, see FLORA WILLSON, *Classic Staging: Pauline Viardot and the 1859 Orphée Revival*, «Cambridge Opera Journal», 22/3 (2010), pp. 301-326.

⁴ For a detailed consideration of the so-called ‘opera crisis’ of 1920s Germany, see GUNDULA KREUZER, «Zurück zu Verdi»: *The ‘Verdi Renaissance’ and Musical Culture in the Weimar Republic*, «Studi verdiani», 13 (1998), pp. 117-54, esp. 144-54.

⁵ Of course the work is not literally ‘new’ to us today: there are recordings and vocal scores, etc. However, we might also recall that, with a work of *Conchita*’s kind (i.e. with an important publisher – Ricordi – carrying its standard), the opera was hardly new on the occasion of its world premiere; as always, the theatrical journals carried extensive pre-publicity.

to concentrate on well-known works – that is, on those that have prospered in the repertory. Such studies typically derive their punch lines from the fact that the shock of the new often unmade critics from the past, a circumstance that can seem comforting to the reception-historian, who basks in the secure knowledge that the work under scrutiny will eventually triumph over such adversity⁶. We – the Zandonistas – don't have that reassurance: a circumstance that may make our adventure into this particular undiscovered country a little more unpredictable.

I hope that these ruminations will act as a suitable preamble to my task in hand, which is to look in some detail at the first critical reception of *Conchita* in Milan and London⁷. At the least, such general considerations – about the stasis of the operatic repertory, just emerging then and a century old now – may serve as justification for a powerful if slightly disconcerting impression one might take away from reading the critiques. The past these writings inhabit is in so many ways distant and alien: I have already mentioned the very different relationship then obtaining between critics and their public, and could innumerate any number of other, much more formidable barriers between 'us' and 'them': technological, aesthetic, what you will. But one can emerge from a study of this ample corpus of reception documents with, at least so far as reactions to the music are concerned, an impression of uncanny agreement.

The summing-up here of this corpus of musical opinion – opinion expressed often at great length in many diverse publications – must of necessity be brief. We can pass over potential differences between Milan and London, differences born of differing critical traditions and cultural backgrounds; we must also – alas – ignore what information can be gleaned about the individual performances and staging. In spite of these differences, what is most striking, and this in spite of the fact that ultimate critical verdicts about *Conchita*'s potential long-term viability range widely, is the relative unanimity of opinion about Zandonai's musical strengths and weaknesses. In most cases, these matters were intercalated with an assessment of musical forebears, themselves an interesting indication of the state of the ever-congealing 'repertory'. Inevitably given *Conchita*'s subject matter, indeed its blatant gestures of intertextuality, *Carmen* is mentioned frequently: but Bizet's opera, which

⁶ ARMAN SCHWARTZ, *Rough Music: Tosca and Verismo Reconsidered*, «19th-Century Music», 31/3 (2009), pp. 228-244. Schwartz, however, is fully aware of the potentially distorting issues here, and indeed uses the first critics' incomprehension to reassess in revealing ways *Tosca*'s historical position.

some decades before had been a radical example of operatic realism, had by then fully achieved its classic status, and was for the most part merely a forbidding, impossible-to-replicate model. One might imagine that the twin peaks of Verdi and Wagner were unassailably shrouded in the mists of time and monumentality. As it happens, though, Verdi (in spite of his ever-increasing monumentality as *vate del Risorgimento*) was then probably at the lowest ebb of his operatic reputation, and was hardly mentioned even in Italy: one imagines he was deemed largely irrelevant to modern developments. Almost the only reference to him comes in a review in «Il Secolo», in which the love duet in Act 2 was thought to reveal «le dolcezze della sua musa, toccanti in questo punto quanto l'invocato bacio di Otello a Desdemona soave»; but the reviewer in this case was none other than Gaetano Cesari (the leading Verdian scholar of his generation, and co-editor of the first collected edition of Verdi's correspondence), a fact that perhaps explains the otherwise rather surprising juxtaposition⁸. Wagner of course could never be irrelevant; but the high point of Wagnerism had passed in both countries, and the polemics had accordingly cooled. The Milan correspondent of the «Corriere della sera» brought back remembrances of times past by structuring his review around a lengthy (and, in the circumstance of Zandonai's limited use of thematic recall, vaguely preposterous) battery of Leitmotifs, a *tema del legame, dell'amore, della maledizione, del bacio, del dolore, dell'abbraccio* and so on; but this was a manifestly antiquated ploy, not followed by others⁹. Strangely enough, Puccini (who would today be most modern listeners' point of reference) is not much mentioned. His position in the repertory in 1911, with the long silence after *Madama Butterfly* followed by such a difficult opera as *La fanciulla del West*, was less secure than we might imagine; one Italian reviewer described «la musa di Puccini» as «stanca da un pezzo»¹⁰. The overwhelming points of reference were more recent self-consciously realistic operas, in particu-

⁷ Some consideration of this reception has already taken place in DIEGO CESCOTTI, *Conchita a teatro: rivelazione od occasione perduta?*, in ID. (ed.), *Di donne, burattini, armi ed amori, L'enigma-Conchita indagato da letteratura, teatro, musica, cinema ed arti figurative*, Lavis, Alcion, 2009, pp. 101-127; in particular pp. 117-122.

⁸ GAETANO CESARI, «Il Secolo», 15 October 1911; for the Verdi correspondence, see GAETANO CESARI and ALESSANDRO LUZIO, *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, Milan, 1913.

⁹ 'c.l.', «Corriere della sera» (15 October 1911).

¹⁰ 'e.a.', «L'Avanti!», 15 October 1911. See also «The Observer», 7 July 1912: «Puccini has accomplished something of the same thing [i.e. harmonic experimentation], only less aspiringly».

lar Charpentier's *Louise* and – with varying degrees of shock-horror – Strauss's *Salome*.

As far as Zandonai's musical merits were concerned, the critics again offer a conspectus of contemporary taste. A good indication of the ever-increasing prestige of instrumental music is the fact that there was virtually unanimous praise for his orchestral writing: in particular for the instrumental intermezzi, about which the adjective 'symphonic' was often employed with unambiguously positive connotations (Verdi, who not long before had obsessively railed against this aspect of modern Italian operatic music, would have been turning in his grave)¹¹. Another musical aspect often praised was the rhythmic: one in which Zandonai demonstrated his avant-garde credentials with some enthusiasm. Many referred to the daring irregular rhythms that characterise the protagonist, in particular during 'characteristic', *couleur-locale* episodes: as «The Times» put it: «Conchita has two effective songs – one... has a rhythm in 5-8 like that of a polonaise without its last quaver, which is very piquant»¹². Cesari, ever the musicologist and ever among the conservatives, declared that «la poliritmia è l'elemento maschile – secondo l'antico significato greco», a point of ostentatious erudition that he then used as a stick with which to beat Zandonai's attachment of the device to his heroine.

As might already be guessed, these 'progressive' elements of Zandonai's musical language, while receiving much praise, were – perhaps inevitably – sometimes turned against the composer. Both orchestral brilliance and rhythmic ingenuity led, it was generally thought, to an absence of melodic distinction: as one London critic put it, «He treats the voice as one of his orchestral instruments... Consequently, the opera is more in the nature of a symphony with vocal *obbligati*»¹³. In both Italy and England there were, in other words, still critical remnants of old 'national music' debates and attitudes: ones that go back at least to the eighteenth century. According to these ancient formulations, Italians were the proper guardians of melodic writing, and should leave harmony and other musical complexities to the French and the Germans, who were the avatars of the musical future. Zandonai's progressive tendencies were, in other words, often considered to be bought at the expense of his Italian soul¹⁴.

¹¹ For a less positive reference, see G. CESARI, «Il Secolo», 15 October 1911. Always among the conservative wing, he described «un brioso *scherzo* strumentale secondo le buone regole dell'opera moderna».

¹² Anon, «The Times», 4 July 1913.

¹³ Anon, «The Morning Post», 4 July 1912.

¹⁴ The resonances with dominant strains in Puccini criticism will be obvious here.

We could go on to further musical issues that emerge from this reception – the business of musical characterisation is often mentioned, for example – but perhaps the point has been sufficiently stressed. As mentioned near the start, this delving into critics' musical judgements, judgements made almost exactly one hundred years ago, produces a rather unusual result: rather than the defamiliarising effect elicited by many remnants of the music-critical past, the reception of *Conchita* brings with it what one might call the shock of the old. Such was the fixity of the 'repertory' between 1911 and a century later that their points of reference are little different from ours, their perceptions of *Conchita*'s strengths and weaknesses oddly consonant with our own.

Many here will by now have realised that all this discussion of musical technique has had the effect of obscuring a rather large elephant in the room. All the critics spent a long time discussing an aspect of the opera so far unmentioned; indeed, all of them recognised this aspect as something that would have great – probably crucial – bearing on the opera's longevity (or lack of it). I am referring, of course, to the plot, and in particular to the notoriety of the source from which it derives.

It will be as well to begin by outlining that plot as neutrally as possible. It is based on *La Femme et le pantin* (first published 1890, with an English translation appearing in 1908), a novel by the French poet and pornographer Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925), a friend of André Gide and Oscar Wilde who is chiefly known nowadays for his 1894 collection of hymns to lesbian love, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (three of which were set to music by another friend, Claude Debussy)¹⁵. The novel is told mostly in the form of a flashback, but Zandonai's librettists, Maurice Vaucaire and Carlo Zangarini, simplified the action and reduced it to four acts, each of which follows a rather similar trajectory. The action takes place in Seville. In Act 1, Mateo (according to the contemporary *disposizione scenica*, «Uomo sui quarant'anni. Aspetto simpatico e signorile. Scapolo maturo ed esperto») visits a cigarette factory and meets Conchita (described, again in the *disposizione scenica*, as «Sedici anni. Figura svelta e capricciosa; viso espressivo, occhi mobilissimi, furbi, penetranti»)¹⁶.

For a detailed consideration of the latter, see ALEXANDRA WILSON, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity*, Cambridge 2007.

¹⁵ The background to Louÿs's novel, and its afterlife, are discussed in great detail in FEDERICA FORTUNATO, *Burattinaia o moralizzatrice? Conchita tra stereotipi e presagi della modernità*, in D. CESCOTTI, *Di donne, burattini...*, pp. 18-76.

¹⁶ *Disposizione scenica per l'opera Conchita...*, Milan, Ricordi, 1913 (henceforth DS),

Mateo follows Conchita home, there ensues a love duet; but he gives her mother some money, an act that turns Conchita against him. In Act 2, some time later, Mateo finds Conchita dancing erotically for a group of lascivious Englishmen and becomes wildly jealous. She calms him down (another love duet) and promises to have sex with him in his house the next day. He gives her the key. Act 3, only hours later, finds Mateo at the gate of his house. But Conchita will not let him in and taunts him further by openly making love to a younger man who is with her in the house. In Act 4, soon after, Mateo is nursing his psychological wounds. Conchita appears, but this time matters take a different turn. Mateo beats her brutally, an act that transforms her. She now swears that she loves him completely, and the curtain falls to exclamations of mutual adoration.

This *lieto fine* doesn't, by the way, occur in Louÿs's novel, which concludes with a much more cynical and equivocal denouement: Mateo's beating does indeed do the trick, but not permanently. This alteration to the libretto was in line with a more general change in focus. Indeed, in their Preface to the printed text, the librettists demonstrated themselves anxious to establish distance from their source in a much more fundamental way:

Conchita, nella presente edizione, non è, né vuol essere, un fedele adattamento del celebre romanzo *La Femme et le pantin* di Pierre Louÿs. Gli autori hanno deliberatamente attenuato il tipo originale della protagonista, sia per ragioni di teatro, sia per considerazioni psicologiche ed estetiche del tutto personali... Quello che nel romanzo è insensibilità morale, diventa, nell'opera nostra, orgoglio di purità sotto apparenza di vizio¹⁷.

In terms of the plot as a whole, this attempted revision of Louÿs's heroine (Conchita becomes a kind of Desdemona *nascosta*) requires a painfully convoluted burst of interpretative ingenuity. In the final moments, for example, «non sono le busse e il dolore fisico ad abbatterla, ma la violenza inaspettata di Mateo, in cui ella trova il perfetto immedesimarsi di due intensità: il dolore e l'amore»¹⁸.

We need, alas, to pause a little longer on this outburst of male violence. The interaction between the two characters is further 'analysed'

5. This document, together with the other primary sources of *Conchita*, are discussed at length in D. CESCOTTI, *Conchita in musica: uno studio comparativo delle fonti*, in ID., *Di donne, burattini...*, pp. 129-79.

¹⁷ Preface to the libretto, reprinted in *DS*, 6-7.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

(one might almost say, in the modish parlance of the day, ‘psychoanalysed’) in the *disposizione scenica*. For Mateo, the moment constitutes what we might call a traumatic rediscovery of virility:

Una improvvisa rivoluzione è avvenuta nel suo spirito.... Egli ha avuta intera la visione dell’abiezione morale in cui era piombato per opera di Conchita. E ridiventato uomo, energico, custode della propria dignità calpestata, insorge contro la donna che per tanto tempo lo ha tenuto oppresso in una vile schiavitù¹⁹.

For Conchita the experience is necessarily more convoluted, but seems (again) to have a great deal to do with Mateo and his newly-awakened «superiorità maschile»:

Da questo momento l’anima di Conchita è del tutto mutata, per l’atto di violenza compiuta da Mateo. Le scenate di gelosia, le lunghe smanie di amore, i profondi abbattimenti, le imbelli dedizioni di Mateo, tutto ciò non aveva fatto che esasperare sempre di più la strana creatura, al quale, per la sua speciale psicologia, dall’uomo che si era invaghito di lei reclamava un amore in cui fosse un’affermazione di forza e di superiorità maschile e non di debolezza quasi femminile e di umiltà degradante. Ora Mateo, improvvisamente, ai suoi occhi si è rivelato uomo forte e capace di dominarla, sia pure con la violenza brutale...²⁰.

All this is, of course, tremendously problematic from the point of view of twenty-first-century sensibilities. One can certainly find historical precedents (in Flaubert, Wilde, a host of others); and one can – perhaps with the help of postmodern theory – find alternative ways of making it a matter of some ghoulish interest. But the fact remains that Vaucaire, Zangarini and the authors of the *disposizione scenica* seem to do little more than dig themselves into an even deeper pit of misogyny in their efforts – doubtless intended to make the opera more palatable to their audience – to ‘redeem’ *Conchita*.

When we turn to the reception of *Conchita*, which earlier – when it was addressing Zandonai’s music – seemed so prone to offering pre-echoes of current attitudes, we find flamboyant discord: indeed, an unbridgeable gulf between their attitudes and those prevailing today. It becomes immediately clear that the librettists’ attempts to sanitise the story had been in vain. Perhaps one might expect as much from the London critics, who had long been fascinated by (and, possibly for this

¹⁹ DS, 77.

²⁰ DS, 80.

reason, long styled themselves the most censorious critics of) tales of Southern-European excess. «The Daily Graphic», in spite of heading its review *Operatic triumph*, made absolutely clear where the trouble originated: «The scene is set in Seville and the passion which illumines the story with such a strong and baleful light is of an intensity that could never be found in northern Europe. The girl is a poisonous and perverse monomaniac». As for the final scene: «The girl's renewed taunts rouse the last vestiges of [Mateo's] self-respect and he trashes her violently. The result, not surprising to a student of feminology, is a complete submission of Conchita and pledges of eternal love»²¹. A similar, breezy manner in the face of male physical violence is adopted by «The Morning Advertiser», with the critic – in perhaps a telling Freudian slip – embellishing the plot by adding an impressive phallic boost to Mateo's armoury:

Finally, the discarded 'amante', remembering the old adage, «a woman, a dog and a walnut-tree, the more you beat 'em the better they be», chastises his cherished Conchita mostly unmercifully. The smarting cigar-maker, with the unreasonableness of her fascinating, all-conquering, indispensable sex, promptly falls in love with the stalwart wielder of the bludgeon, and the curtain falls on kisses and embraces galore²².

In both cases, one might notice a recourse to quasi-medical language («monomaniac», «feminology») to deal with the heroine and her vicissitudes. This tendency was almost ubiquitous among London critics, and also enthusiastically indulged by the Italians. A good example is the critic of «L'Avanti!», who assured his gentle readers that, in order to understand Louÿs's Conchita, «bisognava divinarla, penetrarla, possederla, crearla veramente»: something he thought Zandonai had singularly failed to accomplish. In the third act, she was «un'isterica colpita da improvvisa follia» and in the fourth «una psicopatica, prezioso documento di masochismo femminile, ma non meritevole certo degli onori della scena lirica»²³. This last comment turned out to be an *idée fixe* of critics in both cities, and finally hinged on the – still powerfully contested – idea of musical realism. As the critic of «L'unione» put it, «Conchi-

²¹ Anon, «The Daily Graphic», 4 July 1912. «Feminology» is presumably a reference Florence Dressler's book with that title.

²² Anon, «The Morning Advertiser», 4 July 1912. Many of the London reviewers trotted out the old adage about the walnut tree. Versions of the saying exist in many languages and can be traced back at least to Roman times (*nux, asinus, mulier verberare opus habent*).

²³ 'e.a.', «L'Avanti!», 15 October 1911.

ta è un dramma realista dei più brutali, dei più cinici, che nasce in una atmosfera asfissiante di sensualismo, non solo, ma anche di degenerazione psicopatica ripugnante»²⁴. The basic argument here was repeated more or less explicitly by many of the critics: the problem with Louÿs's 'hysterical', 'psychopathic' female protagonist was that – far from being some fantastic, pornographic, masculinist invention – she was in fact too *realistic*: too true to life for transposition to the operatic stage, where she would perforce be displayed before polite (mixed) company, and – worse – dignified by the glorious art of music.

What are we to *do* this critical response, so alienating to us today as sometimes to verge on the bizarre? Earlier parts of this paper sketched a comforting sense of shared agendas between 'us' and 'them', between the operatic consumers of today and those of a hundred years ago. Both groups, albeit separated by a century of musical history, are in the shadow of the 'repertory'; both will measure this new opera against much the same past legacy of operatic heavyweights. But when we come to the opera's plot and situations, we are confronted with startlingly different attitudes, ones that raise questions by no means easy to answer. Of course, we can if we choose dismiss the entire critical discourse about *Conchita*'s plot and characters as 'extra-musical': a common tactic – well known to ardent Wagnerians – when such troubling matters are raised. However, as will have become clear, that tactic would also mean dismissing the *disposizione scenica* and even the libretto. What is more, there would seem to be overwhelming evidence from the latter two documents that – on this particular topic – the kinds of sentiments expressed by these ancient critics were also the sentiments of the creators of the opera. Those who wish somehow to separate the opera's musical argument from everything verbal that surrounds it can do so if they wish, but the violence of such decontextualisations is never easy in an operatic context. One would, for example, have to argue that Zandonai somehow established a sense of distance from the events he set to music. Does he do that in the fourth act? Does his noisy orchestral depiction of Mateo's violence against Conchita project anything more than simply brutality? Does his closing love duet, complete with that last gesture of exoticism and hazy *couleur locale*, establish the critical distance we might wish to find in the opera's denouement? Musical analysis can enable us to perform

²⁴ A. CAMERONI, «L'Unione», 15 October 1911.

such feats of decontextualisation; but the special pleading required will have to work hard to avoid a sense of desperation.

So, to broaden the question: what should we *do* with *Conchita*? How can it be recuperated? Long-serving inhabitants of the operatic repertory have negotiated similar problems with the passing of time. Indeed, one of the reasons they have survived is precisely because they have proved themselves patient of interpretation, able to adapt to new mores and new attitudes. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* is a good case in point. The attitudes to racial difference that were circulating around its time of creation – attitudes that inevitably surface in (at the least) its literary text – have been, as it were, mediated through time, through performance, through the entire interpretative tradition that has sustained the opera over its century-long journey towards us. What is more, the opera's musical component has – music is famous for performing such magical acts – floated free of its original circumstances, and now occupies a thousand rich contexts in our collective minds. But *Conchita*, unknown *Conchita*? Can it be rescued from its past?