

Giordanos' *Fedora*

By Carol Crocca

Umberto Giordano (1867-1948) is best remembered for *Andrea Chenier* (1896), a work of veristic naturalism in the context of the French Revolution, a work still in the repertoire and famous for its beautiful melodies in arias for the principals and the final duet. Giordano had been caught up in the *verismo* movement in Italian opera after the phenomenal success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, based on a novel by Giovanni Verga. That opera concerns an adulterous affair, ending in the murder of the wife's lover by her husband. After two early operas which were not admired, *Chenier* was Giordano's first success.

Verismo, or "realism" in English, began in the 1890's as a literary movement in Italy, exemplified by the novels and plays of Verga. As described in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, (Ed. Randel, Harvard University Press, 2003, Cambridge, Mass., p.944),

The settings are contemporary, the characters are often rural and generally impoverished, the passions run high and lead to violence. There is a tendency in these works to wed the sordid with the sensational.

The term was later used to describe works without some of these characteristics, such as Puccini's *Tosca*, *La boheme*, and *Madama Butterfly*, Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*, and Mascagni's *Iris*, which have different settings but more naturalistic treatment of their subjects. Bizet's *Carmen* is often cited as an early example. The French writer Emile Zola is that country's leading exponent of the genre.

(An interesting side-light about *verismo* is that it affected both the style of singing and the voices of some of the popular singers of the day. Lyric bel canto instruments were not suited to the dramatic demands of the *verismo* works, and some singers found their voices coarsened later in their careers after adding them to their repertoire.)

Fedora followed *Andrea Chénier* in 1898. It was based on a play by Victorien Sardou, a French dramatist who wrote other plays on which operas, such as *Tosca*, were based. *Fedora* was also popular and financially rewarding for its composer. Like *Cavalleria*, it concerns a revenge murder, motivated by an adulterous affair, but the identity of the murderer is initially in doubt, and the motive is not revealed until the second act.

Because this opera is not a well-known one, I include a brief synopsis.

In Act I, St. Petersburg, the Count Vladimiro is brought to his house mortally wounded. His fiancée, Princess Fedora, has been waiting for him and she vows to avenge his death. Count Boris Ipanov is suspected. In Act II, she goes to Paris, and at a soiree, she encounters Boris and finds herself drawn to him. True to her oath, however, she denounces him to the police. Boris admits the killing, but explains that the Count was having an affair with his wife (who, conveniently for the plot, has died). Fedora is mollified and throws herself into his arms.

In Act III, we find them living together in Switzerland, but bad news arrives that Boris's brother has died in prison. He suspects that Fedora has had his family harassed and accuses her. Fedora takes poison and begs his forgiveness, which he gives her before she dies.

There are a number of admired arias in the work, the most well-known being Boris's "*Amor ti vieta*" in Act II. Although seldom produced here, these have helped the opera maintain its hold on Italian stages. Giordano wrote several operas after *Fedora*, but he never equaled his former level of achievement.