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Traces

by Mary Jane Phillips Matz

In the issue of Opera News dated 27 January 1979, two phrases in an article about Giuseppina Strepponi refer to her as ‘once the mistress of one of the Bonapartes’ and to her son Camillo as having died ‘while training to become a doctor’. Behind those two throwaway lines lie nearly sixteen years of research in several dozen archives.

The first reference is to Princess Elisa Bonaparte’s son-in-law, Count Filippo Camerata dei Passionei, whose support of opera in Senigallia and Ancona gave the impresario Alessandro Lanari a pillar of power in two cities where he regularly worked. In Peppina’s letters in the Carteggi Vari in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, Camerata is called ‘Il Con- C’ and ‘the person you know about in Ancona’. Lanari was Camerata’s close friend; he stayed in the Camerata palazzo and counted on his host to muster local forces in Senigallia and Ancona when necessary. As for Peppina Strepponi, she (encouraged by Lanari) hoped that Camerata would bail her out of financial and emotional bankruptcy by supporting her in 1841. He did not.

The second reference, to Peppina’s son, calls attention to our now considerable understanding of this mother-child relationship. Camillo Luigi Antonio Strepponi was born in Turin, in the Parish of Santa Maria Maggiore, and was baptized on 4 November 1841, in the Parish of Santa Maria Maggiore, and was baptized ‘forty days’ after a performance of II giuramento. A third pregnancy ended early in 1840, as we know from one of her own letters describing her “forty days” of recovery spent in Cremona. It is probable that she stayed either with Cirelli or with the composer Ruggero Manna, Elisa Bonaparte’s protégé, whom she had known since 1828 or 1829, if not indeed earlier.

Peppina’s last child was born in Trieste on 4 November 1841, in the Parish of Santa Maria Maggiore, and was baptized ‘Adelina Maria Rosa Teresa’. The godmother was the mime-soprano Teresa Guerrieri Paradisi, who had sung with Peppina in Bologna, Turin, and Senigallia. The godfather was Antonio DeSella, of the governing board of the Teatro Grande in Trieste.

It is certain that two of these four children survived (from Peppina’s reference to herself as ‘madre di due figli’). In August 1849, Camillo became the protégé of Elisa

Needing someone in Milan to give him the support and counsel which he regularly was fed by his partisans in Busseto, Verdi became friendly with Donna Giuseppina Appiani and Donna Emilia Zeltner Morosini; but these women did not actually work in the theatre, while Strepponi did. Thus she became essential to Verdi, and so vocal in her advocacy of him that by early March 1842, when Nabucco got onstage, Donizetti was driven by jealousy or anger to refer to the composer as ‘her Verdi’.

Very well, then: Verdi was ‘her Verdi’. But who was she? The question remains unanswered. We can honestly say that Peppina Strepponi, guided by her instinct for self-preservation and by the need to keep her problems a secret from as many of her colleagues as possible, succeeded in covering her traces so thoroughly that even expert researchers with access to thousands of documents still have not been able to patch together an adequate biography of her.

When Camillo was born, Peppina was 22, and had been singing three years with scarcely a day between engagements. Yet between the spring of 1837 and November 1841, she got pregnant four times, because her full schedule of performances, the use of wet-nurses, and the continuing, day-to-day intimacy with one or more men cut her off from natural, built-in birth-control mechanisms. Her second child was born dead in Florence on 9 February 1839, immediately after a performance of II giuramento. A third pregnancy ended early in 1840, as we know from one of her own letters describing her “forty days” of recovery spent in Cremona. It is probable that she stayed either with Cirelli or with the composer Ruggero Manna, Elisa Bonaparte’s protégé, whom she had known since 1828 or 1829, if not indeed earlier.

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Bonaparte’s court sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini, who was then the head of the Accademia in Florence. Later Camillo studied medicine in Siena. The clue which led to the discovery of his death certificate is in the Museo Teatrale alla Scala in a letter from Peppina to her friend Mauro Corticelli, in which she begs him to find influential friends to help a young Sienese medical student named Palagi. Wondering whether Peppina Strepponi was concerned about a youth from a city where, so far as we know, she never set foot, I began once more to search Tuscan records. Dr. Manno-Tolu, assistant to the chief archivist of the Archivio di Stato in Florence, found Camillo Strepponi’s death certificate a few weeks ago. He died in the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena on 26 June 1863. At that time, he was a legal resident of Florence, a medical student, and a bachelor. His father’s name is ‘Camillo’ and his mother is ‘Giuseppa N.’ (Last Name Not Known), which means that Peppina and Verdi were remarkably successful in hiding Camillo’s existence. We know from one of Peppina’s letters at Sant’Agata that she did not even observe formal mourning for him.

When we come to the thorny problem of identifying the father or fathers of these children, born in 1838, 1839, and 1841, we are on dangerous ground indeed. As early as 1962, I wrote that I thought Gatti wrong in believing that Merelli was the father of even one of these children, and that Walker was wrong in claiming that the tenor Napoleone Moriani was the father of the two he knew about and the third he deduced.

From the death certificate of Camillo, it seems that Camillo Cirelli is his father. Cirelli stood by Peppina through nearly a decade of turmoil. He eventually became Theatrical Commissioner in Milan, but by the time he reached that pinnacle, Peppina had allied herself to someone even more powerful—Verdi. But for at least seven years, Cirelli was the most loyal friend Peppina had.

One would like to believe that this generous man was indeed the father of Peppina’s children, but there is ample evidence to show that she was involved with other men as well. The father of Camillo, for example, might well have been Vestri himself. The actor left Turin when she did, in 1838, ‘for reasons not connected with his profession’.

Letters from two people who knew her well refer to her ‘crazy love affairs’; and her own letters refer to several men who may have been involved intimately with her.

Reviewing Walker’s and Abbiati’s and Gatti’s research, together with certain of Oberdorfer’s statements, I began in the early 1960s to try to identify at least ‘the vile Mo.....’ of Peppina’s letters, who was the father of one of these children. Many shards and scraps of solid evidence pointed away from Moriani.

—But who, then?

In a libretto from Senigallia, I noted the name of a tenor listed there as ‘Luigi Morini,’ the back-up for an ailing Moriani. Working with the help of dedicated, patient colleagues in Florence, Milan, Venice, Bologna, Parma, Ancona, Rome, Lucca, and Leghorn, I have pieced together a documentation which shows that the tenor Francesco Luigi Morini, the son-in-law of Lanari’s sister, may very well have been the ‘Mo.....’ who fathered one, or four, of Peppina Strepponi’s children. Morini was born in Bologna in 1808; he came up through the ranks with Teresa Guerrieri Paradisi and with Peppina herself; he joined Lanari’s ‘stable’ of singers only three months after Peppina joined; and he moved to Florence permanently when she did. He was, in fact, present in all the cities and in all the periods when she became pregnant, in 1837, 1838, 1839, and 1841.

Last spring, my daughter Catherine Matz, working in the manuscript collection of the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, began to examine a collection of letters which, more than any documents yet found, point to Morini as the father of Peppina’s children.

After Morini’s premature and unexpected death in October 1841, Peppina never referred to ‘Mo.....’ again. (John Nadas, our AISV archivist, pointed this out to me.) The person who made her ‘head spin,’ whom she dreaded meeting in Vienna in 1842, may be Donizetti (as Gatti and others suspected), but this does not mean that he was the father of four children born between 1838 and 1841. Gatti did tell me, however, in 1956, that he and several of his colleagues believed that Donizetti had been one of Peppina’s lovers.

As for the man Moriani contemnuously calls ‘that repulsive Lame Devil’ and ‘The Guardian’ who rendered Peppina so ‘abject in the eyes of society,’ I have been long tempted to think that it was someone in the ballet and mime world of the period, since ‘Il diavolo zoppo’ and ‘Il tutore e la pupilla’ are both ballets of that era. Or we may identify him as Vestri, who did in fact leave Turin when she did, to move to Milan. Like Morini, Vestri died in 1841. It is certain that in April 1840, when Peppina returned from her ‘forty days’ in Cremona, she had a protector who checked on her mail and visited her every afternoon about four, but left her alone every night. But he could just as easily be any one of the dozens of unidentified factors in this puzzle.
Out of the chaos of this biological and emotional catastrophe, Peppina brought order, finally. If Donizetti’s remark of March 1842, about ‘her Verdi’ is to be taken seriously, then Verdi may be the anonymous gentleman, described in Peppina’s letter of 3 February 1842, who would like to marry a “Singer or Ballerina” if she would be willing to give up the theatre forever.¹ Documents

¹A long poem on Strepponi’s Saffo, written by an unidentified man or woman named D. Barnshaw, is in the Sant’Agata archive. The occasion for which it was written was Peppina’s appearance in Pacini’s Saffo at the Carlo Felice in Genoa on 18 January 1842. From Peppina’s correspondence, it is evident that she knew English very well indeed. Out of fairness to all persons involved, one has to report that this “Barnshaw” might be the gallant gentleman who would be willing to marry a “Singer or a Ballerina” if she were willing to give up her career.

All documentation of these developments, and of everything about Peppina Strepponi’s life, enriches our understanding of what Verdi got as her ‘dowry’ of experience and knowledge. But quite apart from any contribution she made to Verdi’s success, we are building a documented biography of one of the most distinguished, active and influential figures in the history of music in the last century.

Giuseppina Strepponi in Paris
with a review by Berlioz
by Marcello Conati

Verdi’s biographers have not told us much about the last period of Giuseppina Strepponi’s artistic career, which was spent, as is well known, in Paris, from the autumn of 1846 to 1848. Even Frank Walker, who so carefully reconstructed both the artistic and the emotional career of the singer before her meeting with Verdi (some of his conclusions, however, have now been thrown into question by the researches of Mary Jane Matz), produced only an announcement from La France Musicale (the magazine of the Escudier brothers, Verdi’s French publishers) of 15 November 1846, about the course of singing lessons that Strepponi proposed to give. [It is reproduced at the end of this article.] Walker preceded this by quoting some of an article in La France Musicale of 18 October which announced her arrival in the city and described her career:

La Strepponi is know in Italy not only as a great singer but still more as a woman of much wit and spirit. She has always been greatly sought after by the world of the nobility, who, after having applauded her on the stage, loved to applaud and admire her at their most brilliant gatherings.

And he mentions the announcement of two concerts, on November 3 and 5, which she was to give in the Salle Herz. Walker remarks: ‘Giuseppina seems to have settled down comfortably in Paris, secured pupils and won friends. Verdi had given her a letter of introduction to the Escudier brothers.’ And that is just about all we have been told about Strepponi’s Parisian activity as singer and teacher (barring a few items that can be dug from the Verdi correspondence), during the period when she joined her life to Verdi’s.

However, the accounts that appeared in La France Musicale about Strepponi’s public activity in Paris are far more numerous. Many of them were reprinted in the Italian theatre magazines of the period, such as La Gazzetta Musicale di Milano, published by Ricordi, L’Italia Musicale, published by Lucca, the Milan Bazar, the Bologna Teatri Arte ed Letteratura, and above all the Milan Moda and Pirata, edited respectively by G. B. Lampugnani and F. Regli, both of them men on good terms with Verdi. In La Moda for 15 November 1846, for example, we can read, in the original French, a review of one of the two concerts mentioned above, put on by La France Musicale (i.e. by the Escudier brothers):