

THE MYTH OF CAIN

by
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Il Mito di Caino, by Franco Margola, marked the conclusion of what was unquestionably one of the happiest periods of the composer's artistic career. In the 1930s, after earning a diploma in composition, Margola found himself quickly launched onto the national scene, thanks, on the one hand, to his own fertile creativity and, on the other, to Alfredo Casella, who was unfailingly and extravagantly generous towards promising young musicians. In those years, Margola had received numerous prestigious acknowledgments, and had placed brilliantly in the most important competitions for composition.

As a composer, this musician from Brescia had dedicated himself primarily to the instrumental repertoire, and in particular to chamber music, but he had also naturally delved into the genres of vocal music ever since his years as a student. These were mostly brief experimental works; as the need to shrug off the legacy of late romanticism had led more serious musicians to take up positions of radical extremism, though the results were rarely convincing.

Margola demonstrated his abilities to join the cause of modernity, but he nonetheless maintained a more respectful position towards tradition. His thoughts may be summed up in the following statement, which was found among his papers: "Modern musical drama lacks melody. It lacks those singable romanzas which were the delight of our grandfathers and our fathers, and this is one of the reasons why no one feels drawn toward modern musical drama. Everyone complains, and singers most of all, that they must struggle enormously to memorize one of these operas, and that they are never given the chance to show off their voices. It is a widespread opinion among various followers of contemporary opera that modern composers lack that divine gift which belonged to the musicians of the nineteenth century. This divine gift whose absence is mourned has in no way disappeared from the earth, and we say this immediately to reassure those who mourn its disappearance while failing to take the time to look around and search for it. Since we are very kindhearted, we will then point our finger at the hiding place in which the divine gift has concealed itself. That is to say, at ourselves."

With such beginnings, it was inevitable that, after having completed his technical and spiritual training, and encouraged by numerous honors received, the young composer would let himself be tempted by ambition to try his hand at composing an opera. Indeed, successful results in this genre as well would have unquestionably crowned him as a truly complete musician.

Practically nothing is known of the genesis of *Il Mito di Caino*, which was in fact his first theatrical experiment. We do not know what part Margola played in the choice of subject matter, who provided him with the libretto, and if he had previously considered other topics. In any case, he began to work on the composition in 1938, the year in which his compatriot Edoardo Ziletti entrusted to the publishing house "La Prora" of Milan his own *Caino*, a "lyric Poem in one act", which served as the basis of the opera's libretto.

Freely inspired by the well-known story from Genesis, *Il Mito di Caino* presents a subject which was by no means new; on the contrary, it joined the ranks of operas inspired by Biblical tales which had long been a part of the history of Western music. Nonetheless, in the years in which Margola was active, the choice of a similar theme did not at all imply adherence to hackneyed and conventional solutions. In fact, when the opera was staged for the first time, the audience was struck above all by the novelty of the genre.

The choice of subject matter was thus dictated by specific artistic motivations which underlined a clear sense of purpose on the part of the composer. It was Margola's intention to propose something which differed from the traditional genre of lyric opera as an expression of a musical language which broke away from the decisively outdated stylistic elements of late Romanticism but, at the same time, did not reject an immediacy of communication which was accessible to all. The treatment of a Biblical theme, in other words, fully justified the use of a solemn and archaic sense of melody which presented a valid alternative to the over-used and abused sentimentality of the nineteenth century. In this sense, Margola followed in his own way the model of the older composer Pizzetti, and it is no coincidence that it was to him that Margola dedicated his *Quartetto d'archi n. 5 in re*, winner of the "San Remo" Prize of 1938.

And yet the very approach to the subject matter was definitely not in line with tradition: as the title itself makes clear, the opera by Ziletti and Margola centers on the drama of Cain and his "curse": a curse intrinsic to the character himself, an existential condition dramatically experienced by the conscience of a man in his desperate search for a *raison d'être*, a reason for all things. The drama of Cain lies in his spiritual unrest, in his incurable inability to accept human limits. Rather than a guilty assassin, the Cain in Ziletti's text becomes an almost innocent victim, a victim not only of a temptress but above all of a legitimate desire for knowledge and self-knowledge which brings him nothing but pain, misunderstanding and hostility.

Cain's guilt lies, however, not merely in his dissatisfaction, in his jealousy of his brother, or in the

conclusive unleashing of homicidal fury. It lies above all in his inability to find comfort in a God which, in the words of Ararat, “we must love when he caresses us and when he beats us”. Cain responds to the young woman: “I too love him. but a bit in my own way”, but the truth is that his soul does not seem to enjoy “the gift of faith” (to put it in modern theological terms). Like a sort of precursor to Leopardi, Cain is constantly assailed by an unsatisfied yearning and by questions destined to remain unanswered.

In Edoardo Ziletti’s *Caino*, there is no room for God the creator, judge and Lord of the universe, and even less room for those characters which in some way indicate God’s presence — the Angel of Justice, the Angel of Mercy, or Lucifer himself — who often appear in the oratorios of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This Cain, in his modern existential anguish, converses with no one for he is entirely wrapped up in soul-searching within himself.

This inner emptiness constitutes the real curse of Cain, who like Leopardi sees “fatigue or tedium” as the only solutions. The damnation of the first murderer thus lies in his intellectual solitude, his psychological isolation. Unable to accept human limits, Cain cannot bear any form of imposition or prohibition, lamenting that “*In ogni cosa bella / v’è una proibizione*” (In all things there is a prohibition). In the final analysis, the true sin of Cain lies in his search for an absolute which is inaccessible to man. Adam’s reproach is very clear in this sense: “*Non comprendi che invano, / vuoi spingerti oltre l’umano? / Giustizia te lo vieta*” (Do you not understand that you cannot push yourself beyond human limits? Justice forbids it). Again, however, the voice of God is the important missing element, silent as always. In *Il Mito di Caino*, the dialogue between man and God which characterizes the entire story in the Old Testament is totally lacking. One could conclude by saying that the characteristic element of this work, as opposed to the various oratorios of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is not so much its exterior form or the extent to which it is staged, but rather the spirit of total secularity with which the tale is narrated, a spirit which, among other things, is reflected externally, as we have already pointed out, in the total absence of personages who are in some way conceived as divine emanations. We can, however, assume that it was this very aspect of psychological introspection which captured the attention of Franco Margola. Coining back to Ziletti’s libretto, however, we should recall that the composer made numerous modifications to the original lyric poem for the overriding purpose of removing certain “heavy-handed” aspects of the text. Margola’s aim was to create a great fresco which would imbue the tragic tale with mythical and universal connotations, without losing itself in useless details. By achieving this objective, he confirmed his gifts of synthesis, pithiness and logic which had already been demonstrated in his previous instrumental works. Indeed, *Il Mito di Caino*, an opera of stylistic coherence and balance, unravels in a single long breath, neither slopping for repose nor swerving off course. And it is the very absence of a real narrative development which also renders monolithic the presentation of the characters. Particularly significant among these are the opposing figures of Cain, tormented by inner demons, and Adam, the severe and judicious patriarch who through time and experience has instead learned to transform his young and rebellious impulses into human wisdom, paying for these impulses with the banishment from earthly paradise. The solemn and archaic tone with which the composer illustrates the biblical story perfectly suits the austere attitude of Adam, whose prayer, *Padre, Signore, iddio, il primo padre ascolta*, felicitously brings into balance the obvious tensions created by the presence of Cain. Bui the candid invocation of Abel, *Io ti adoro Signore per la dolce vita che m’hai dato*, is also effective in this sense, and restores dignity to a character who is basically pale and insignificant. As for the female personages, Eve plays an entirely secondary role, while Ararat, on the other hand, is the only ambiguous figure, wavering between candid virginal innocence and worldly-wise feminine sensuality. Her uncertainty over what to do after the crime and curse against Cain in the finale of the opera is symptomatic: the music here is characterized by a solemn and grandiose funeral dirge, underlining the universal and profoundly tragic aspect of this first drama which, in the poetic text, risked being reduced to a banal family quarrel.

From the point of view of the musical language, Margola does not veer excessively from tradition. He juxtaposes refined orchestral writing against a vocal style which is full-bodied and fundamentally syllabic - almost a *recitar cantando* - flowing here and there into ariosos which are invariably solemn and intentionally archaic in tone. The opera’s austere character is also underlined by the absence of real vocal ensemble numbers, with the exception of the central quartet, the prayer *Ti rechiamo, Signore, secondo la tua legge* (composed perhaps for reasons of brevity, since Ziletti’s original text foresaw separate entrances for the four characters).

Composed between 1938 and 1939, *Il Mito di Caino* was first presented on 29 September 1940 at the Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo as part of the series entitled *Teatro delle Novità*, an initiative conceived in 1937 by the artistic director of that time, Bindo Missiroli, and now in its fourth edition. This series presented experimental operas by young Italian composers in world premieres, as well as older but never-performed works. It had become one of the most interesting venues of its kind in Italy in those years, and its prestige saved it from the general crisis which had begun with the onset of the war.

Il mito di Caino was performed twice: Sunday 29 September and Tuesday 1 October 1940, together with *La*

principessa prigioniera by Vincenzo Davico and the ballet *Il Furioso nell'Isola di S. Domingo* by Gianandrea Gavazzeni, respectively. It had been programmed for the previous series of 1939, but was postponed because of the difficult historical situation. Gavazzeni was also the concert master and orchestral conductor of the performance, while the stage director was Domenico Messina. The sets were the work of Contardo Barbieri and the soloists were Luigi Rossi Morelli (Caino), Giacinto Prandelli (Abele), Antonio Cassinelli (Adamo), Rhea Toniolo (Eva) and Carla Gavazzi from Bergamo (Ararat), to whom Margola later dedicated his *Cammina, cammina* (dC 61).

The success enjoyed by *Il Mito di Caino* encouraged Franco Margola to compose a second opera of larger proportions, also on a libretto by Edoardo Ziletti. This time the subject matter was mythological, confirming the musician's vocation for classical themes: *Titone. Il poema delle rose* (published in Brescia in March 1942), a tragedy in three acts. Here too, however, the role of Titan curiously ends up marked by the same tension - the same *Streben* - which had characterized Cain ("*Io l'eterno sospir che non v'appaga. / Il desiderio folle / Che vorrebbe toccar tutte le mete. / L'ansia che non si placa, / E beve ad ogni fonte e sempre ha sete*"). For this opera, however, Margola could have made the old woman's lament his own, when at the beginning of the third act she bewails the loss of her son, abducted by the sea: "*O distesa senza confini, / Perfida, infeconda, / Anche questo m'hai preso!*" (O vastness without limit, perfidious, barren, this too you have taken from me!). The opera *Titone* is interrupted - unconsciously and portentously - at this very point, for it too ended up a victim of the war at the bottom of the sea, together with the ship which was transporting the composer's bags to Sardinia. Margola, perhaps in the throes of a perfectly justified dejection, never again took up the work, nor even considered doing so. *Il Mito di Caino* thus represents his only complete experiment in the field of opera.

(translation: Candace Smith)