

Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*

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Bob Jones University Opera Association production of *Andrea Chénier*.

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University Opera Association's 1981 production of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*

Andrea Chénier: An Introduction a young composer transforms loss into victory....

Outside his own country, the reputation of Italian composer Umberto Giordano (1867-1948) rests largely on the opera "Andrea Chénier." Some five years before he began work on it, Giordano gained the attention of a music publisher by winning sixth place in an 1889 opera competition in Rome. Of the 73 composers who entered the contest, Giordano was the youngest. The judges admired the score of "Marina" but regarded its libretto as weak and very untheatrical. The first prize went to Pietro Mascagni for "Cavalleria Rusticana," one of the most popular operas in the standard repertory today.

Almost a year later Giordano received a telegram from the same publisher, who eventually offered him a commission for a new opera. But the result, "Mala Vita" (1892), also failed to launch a successful long-term career for Giordano. Five years later he re-worked the piece and secured Caruso's services as tenor, yet "Mala Vita" still failed to win

the support of audiences and critics. Giordano's third work, "Regina Diaz," fared even worse at its March 1894 premiere in Naples.

Later that same year Giordano began work on his fourth opera, supported meagerly by the publisher in whose contest he had won sixth place. This time the patron warned, "This is your last chance!" It fell the composer's happy lot, however, to be partnered with Luigi Illica, a highly successful dramatist, critic and professional librettist who created the basic plot and pictorial elements for three great operas by Puccini: "La Bohème," "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly." Giordano actually inherited Illica's scenario for "Andrea Chénier," an opera in the realistic style on the French Revolution, from another composer, Alberto Franchetti, who wanted to do the young composer a favor.

During their long months of work together, Giordano and Illica quarreled often and sometimes violently. Giordano underwent several other professional crises during the creative period. In spite of many difficulties, however, he persisted in his efforts, recognizing the work's potential for the positive reception he had so long awaited as a composer. In the end he succeeded in exercising his gift for composing beautiful melody in a manner that complements Illica's highly theatrical libretto.

continued on next page

Andrea Chénier: An Introduction

continued from front page

“Andrea Chénier” enjoyed a triumphant premiere at Milan’s La Scala opera house on March 28, 1896, and within a few days had achieved the status of a new masterpiece whose fame spread quickly across Europe. The publisher who had given Giordano his “last chance” wrote about the opera, “The music in ‘Chénier’ has this quality above all: it is clear and immediately comprehensible; it is appealing music that proceeds, flows, soars without obstacles and without straining for effect.... The score is from beginning to end a continuous lyric.”

Because the role of Chénier encompasses four arias and two big duets, the opera soon became a favorite for tenors. Among the most celebrated for their performances as Chénier are Beniamino Gigli, Franco Corelli, Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo and Jose Carreras.

“Andrea Chénier” indeed reveals the genius of both its composer and librettist.

It is essentially a private drama enacted against the public and historic backdrop of one of history’s most theatrical political conflicts, the



Composer, Umberto Giordano

French Revolution. It also introduces such universally appealing themes as patriotism, religious faith, social injustice and the corrupting influence of power.

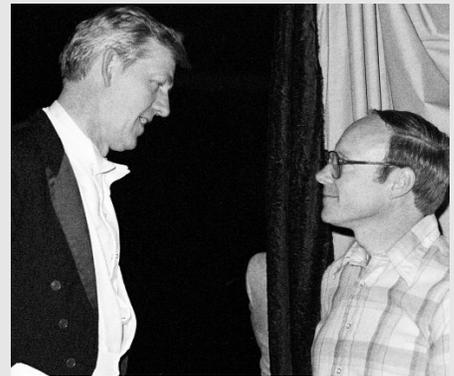
As the opera unfolds, the political conflict recedes into the background, and romance takes center stage. The uncomplicated plot features a love triangle involving a beautiful young aristocratic woman; the poet who loves her; and her jealous former servant, a revolutionary leader who accuses the poet of treason. The music and drama work hand in hand to reveal vividly the course of passionate love in a time of terror.

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Andrea Chénier: Behind the Scenes with the Composer

- The struggling young Giordano had a commission for a new opera but lacked a suitable libretto. Learning this, the successful, wealthy composer Alberto Franchetti turned over his rights to a scenario on the life of the French poet/martyr, André Chénier, created for him by the popular playwright Luigi Illica. Together, Giordano and Illica shaped the scenario into a highly successful opera. At the same time Illica was working on the libretto for Puccini’s “La Bohème.”
- While composing “Andrea Chénier,” Giordano lived on a meager allowance in the dark, dingy storage room of an establishment that made gravestones.
- Giordano and Illica had a number of serious quarrels during the creation process. One story has it that Illica was infatuated with a certain mezzo soprano and wanted Giordano to create a role for her in the opera. When the composer refused, the librettist brandished a pistol. As a result, Giordano created the role of the old blind woman, Madelon, who appears in Act III.
- After “Andrea Chénier” was completed, Giordano’s publisher refused to see it through to production, judging it a worthless opera. The young composer happened to be in Florence at a ceremony honoring the maiden voyage of the city’s new electric tram line. The illustrious composer Pietro Mascagni spotted Giordano in the crowd and stepped out of the tram car to speak to him. As the crowd cheered wildly, the tram pulled out of the station, traveled a few hundred yards and then crashed into a wall, killing and injuring many of its passengers. Mascagni, crediting Giordano with having saved his life, devoted himself to saving the young composer’s career. With Mascagni’s help “Andrea Chénier” premiered at La Scala on March 28, 1896.
- In addition to establishing Giordano’s musical career, the opera “Chénier” helped the composer secure his bride. Giordano fell in love with Olga Spatz-Würms while working on “Chénier.” Her father, the wealthy owner of Milan’s Grand Hotel, was hesitant to give his daughter to a poor young musician. He thus took a copy of the “Chénier” score to Giuseppe Verdi, a resident of the hotel, for an opinion. A few hours later, having played through the score, Verdi advised Spatz-Würms to consent to the marriage.



Dwight Gustafson, conductor and set designer, speaks with costume designer Harrell Whittington at the premiere in 1981.

The Historical André Chénier (1762–1794) with Aimée de Coigny (d. 1820)

Giordano's Italian opera "Andrea Chénier" is a period piece, or a work set in a specific historical context. It centers around the tragedy of the French poet André Chénier. In this sense its theme can be summed up in a line from the libretto:

"Revolution devours her own sons." But it does not give an accurate account of the historical figures on whom its characters are modeled. Even though the opera appeared a century after the real Chénier's death, Giordano still had to avoid taking sides in the political issues raised by the French Revolution because of the political unrest in Italy in his own day.



André Chénier, the real poet

The real Andre Chénier was the son of an officer at the

French embassy in Constantinople and his Greek wife. He had a rich, refined upbringing, anchored in a thorough education in Greek language and culture. As a young man he settled in Paris, where his love of literature was heightened by interaction with the artists and intellectuals he met at his mother's soirees.

After serving with a military regiment, Chénier became a political journalist and a member of the moderate wing of the revolutionary party, Club des Feuillants. His early writings favored the Revolution, based on the injustice and tyranny of France's socio-economic system (the *ancien régime*). Later, however, he realized that the ideals of the Revolution could not be achieved within a framework of law and order. Even those who initially had unselfish motives for overthrowing the old system had become corrupted by their newly-acquired power. The Revolution itself had ironically become another form of cruel oppression. Thus Chénier ultimately sided with the moderate Girondists against Marat, Robespierre and other bloodthirsty leaders of the radical Jacobins.

Despite the idealism underpinning the new government, Chénier discovered that the phrase "freedom of expression" refers to the freedom to agree with the person or party in power. When the Jacobins became more powerful than the Girondists, Chénier became a marked man.

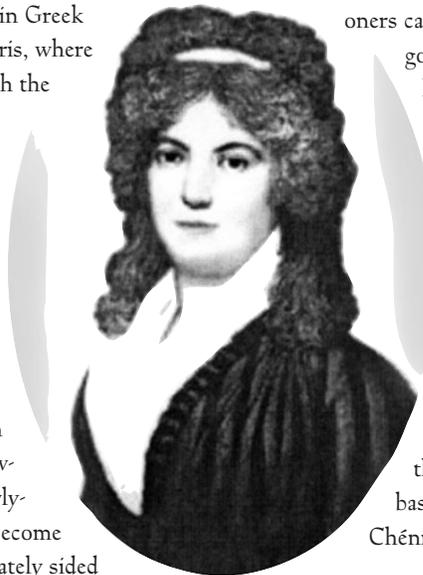
The poet fled Paris and went into seclusion. Later, however, he returned to the vicinity in an attempt to help the wife of an aristocrat charged as a traitor and conspirator. Upon discovering Chénier, Jacobin agents charged him with being critical of Robespierre and helping to prepare King Louis XVI's defense.

Chénier spent 141 days in St. Lazar prison, a former lepers' hospital, where he wrote the greatest of his poetic works. He was tried on July 24, 1794, and guillotined at the age of 31 the next day. The Revolution thus killed France's greatest poet between LaFontaine (d. 1695) and Victor Hugo (d. 1885).

It was in St. Lazare that Chénier became acquainted with a beautiful aristocratic woman of the de Coigny family, Aimée, whom the librettist Luigi Illica took as the model for the completely fictional character Maddalena in Giordano's opera. In the poem "La Jeune Captive," Chénier immortalizes his fellow inmate as a naïve "young captive" who yearns to be free from the grip of Death. In real life, however, Aimée was a notorious, debauched woman.

Although Chénier and Aimée de Coigny never had a romantic relationship, they must have encountered each other in St. Lazare, however briefly, because Aimée became the primary inspiration for Chénier's prison poems. She apparently gave the condemned man courage to exercise his gifts while he awaited his fate at the hands of cruel captors.

On July 25, 1794, Chénier's name was read on the list of prisoners called to the guillotine. Aimée's was not. Instead of going to his death with the woman who inspired his art, the real Chénier rode the tumbrel to the guillotine with his confidant and fellow poet, Jean-Antoine Roucher.



the real Aimée de Coigny

Legend has it that just before going off to his death, Chénier handed Aimée his final poem, a work she had inspired. Another anecdote takes the story a step further, suggesting that at the guillotine the young de Coigny woman handed the poem off to a friend, taking no note of its sad sentiment. It is more likely, however, that the piece was taken out of the prison in a basket of dirty laundry along with the other works Chénier penned there.

Having been clever enough to evade execution, Aimée later escaped from St. Lazare by bribing a guard. She became a trendsetter in fashionable circles of the British Regency, later resumed her tawdry life in Paris and eventually gained a position at Napoleon's court. In the 26 years that she outlived Chénier, she is not known to have ever alluded to him or his poetry, which remained obscure until after her death. Ironically, however, Aimée de Coigny owes her immortality not to her own life and achievements but to the enduring art of the poet André Chénier, the librettist Luigi Illica and the composer Umberto Giordano.

Andrea Chénier: The Story

ACT I

Ballroom at the Chateau di Coigny;
winter 1789

The servants, including the housemaster (major-domo), prepare the Countess di Coigny's gilded salon for a grand social event. The footman Carlo Gérard satirically describes the life of the aristocracy. The sight of his father, an elderly servant who carries a heavy load, grieves and then angers Gérard against a system that makes abused slaves of some and abusive masters of others. He reveals that he is a revolutionary who impatiently awaits release from bondage.

The countess with her daughter Maddalena and the maid Bersi prepare to receive their guests. In spite of his bitterness against the aristocracy, Gérard reveals his secret love for Maddalena. Like Gérard, Maddalena longs for freedom, not from servitude but from the inconveniences of upper-class fashionable dress.

Among the first guests arriving for the ball are the writer Pietro Fleville and his protégé, the poet Andrea Chénier. The Abbé, a wealthy cleric, comes in from Paris and reports on the latest distressing political events there. Fleville urges the elite gathering to be merry in spite of ominous rumors of an impending revolt against the aristocracy.

The guests are then entertained by an elaborate performance by singers costumed as shepherds and shepherdesses. The countess asks Chénier to recite his poetry for their amusement, but he replies that he prefers not to. Maddalena wagers with some of the women that she can persuade the poet to speak of love. Chénier finally responds to her coquetry by improvising an ode on love that becomes an indictment of the aristocracy and priesthood for pride, avarice and indifference to the suffering of the poor. He then chides Maddalena for scorning the divine gift of love. The guests become indignant at Chénier's bold poetry, and he rushes out of the salon.

The countess calls upon the musicians to begin a dance. As the guests select their partners, a loud clamor arises outside the chateau. Gérard then leads in a band of ragged peasants, who sing of their pain and hunger. Badly shaken by the intrusion, the countess orders the

ACT II

Café Hottot, Paris; June 1794,
during the Reign of Terror

Chénier, now in political disgrace, sits alone in a café crowded with men and women wearing the costumes of revolutionaries. Nearby on

an altar, in place of a saint's image, stands a bust of Jean-Paul Marat, a propagandist for the Revolution who was murdered in 1793. The bust symbolizes the extreme degree to which the revolutionaries idolize their leaders. It also foreshadows the diminishing of the church's authority in France's new power regime. Standing near the shrine are the staunch populist Mathieu and his attendant, a costumed revolutionary.

Mob scene Act II; 1990 Bob Jones University production



peasants to leave. As they are pushed outside, Gérard's father falls at the countess' feet. Gérard tears off his livery, signaling the end of his

servitude, and forces his father to leave with him. The countess recovers from a swoon, and the ball resumes.



Act I; 1990 Bob Jones University production

Nearby, the di Coigny maid Bersi, disguised as a revolutionary, converses with L'Incredibile, a foppish spy for the revolutionaries. Then Bersi, Mathieu and a waiter move among the tables while a cart full of prisoners clambers toward the guillotine, where its passengers will be beheaded. L'Incredibile becomes suspicious of both Bersi and Chénier.

Roucher brings a passport to his friend Chénier and urges him to leave Paris. Chénier argues that he must remain there to meet a mysterious woman who has been writing him letters. When the poet produces a letter signed "Hope," Roucher begs him to disregard it lest it create even more trouble for him.

A large crowd gathers nearby to catch a glimpse of the leaders of the Revolution, including Robespierre, the idol of public opinion, as they come out of a meeting. Gérard, now a hero of the people, appears in the mob. But he is more interested in finding Maddalena than in hailing the lawmakers. The spy, promising to help Gérard, leaves to talk apart with Bersi.

Roucher again urges Chénier to flee the city, but Bersi returns to tell the poet that the mysterious woman he dreams of is threatened with great danger and wishes to meet him at Marat's shrine. Roucher warns Chénier, "It's a trap!"

Later that night Mathieu reappears alone at Marat's shrine and then walks away. In the shadows Maddalena approaches the altar, disguised as a servant. Chénier also arrives as the spy watches.

Maddalena reminds Chénier of their first meeting at her mother's salon and then reveals that she is the mysterious letter-writer. Now an aristocrat endangered by the Revolution, she pleads with him to be her protector. The spy leaves to find Gérard.

As Chénier and Maddalena express their ardent love for each other, Gérard runs toward them, stealthily followed by the spy. Not recognizing Chénier, Gérard tries to tear Maddalena away from him. Roucher rushes in and spirits Maddalena away for protection. The spy flees when Roucher threatens him with a pistol.

Gérard lunges at Chénier with a sword. In the ensuing duel the former lackey is wounded. Falling at the Marat shrine, he urges Chénier to flee and protect Maddalena.

A crowd gathers at the shrine. The spy rushes in, leading the national guard. Mathieu appears and recognizes the wounded Gérard. Asked who his assailant was, Gérard says only, "Unknown." But Mathieu shouts, "The Girondists ordered him assassinated." The crowd screams, "Death to the Girondists!"

ACT III

A Tribunal Chamber of the Revolution,
Paris; July 24, 1794

Mathieu and his attendant stand near a table with a wooden urn on it. On a pole hangs a banner that reads, "Citizens! Your country is in peril!"

Mathieu urges the rowdy court spectators to put money in the urn for the bankrupt Revolution. Gérard arrives, and the crowd hails him as a hero. He informs the citizens of their country's wretched plight, urging them to give their "blood and gold."

Among those who respond to his plea is an elderly blind woman named Madelon, whose son died in the capture of the Bastille. She is led to the altar by the last child of her blood, her 15-year-old grandson, Roger Albert, whom she offers as a soldier. Gérard enrolls the youth, and Madelon bids him a sad farewell.

Then the urn is removed from the courtroom. While the crowd disperses, Gérard sits and writes a report. Mathieu sweeps the room. From the streets outside the sounds of song and dance drift in.



Tribunal, Act III; 1990 Bob Jones University production

L'Incredible enters and reports to Gérard that Chénier has been captured but Maddalena cannot be found. Outside, a newsboy shouts that Chénier is under arrest. L'Incredible remarks that when Maddalena hears the news, she will attempt to contact Chénier, even at the risk of being captured herself: "Such is the power of love!"

Pressed by L'Incredible to write an indictment against Chénier as "an enemy of the state," Gérard fears that Maddalena will now hate him



Marc Rattray as Mathieu with the newsboys, Act III; 1990 Bob Jones University production

even more. As he piles up fraudulent charges against the poet, Gérard realizes with regret that even though he has thrown off his livery, he is still a servant. He merely serves a different master—the Revolution. He has stooped to the level of a cynical murderer, the servant of Hate rather than of Love and Peace.

Right after Gérard hands the indictment to the court clerk, Maddalena enters and asks why he has sent for her. He confesses that since her childhood he has felt a passionate desire for her. Now that he is in a position of power, she will be his, even if it must be against her will. At last Maddalena agrees to sacrifice herself to Gérard for the price of Chénier's freedom.

But Maddalena's helplessness and selfless love move Gérard to promise to intercede for the poet, who, if convicted in court, will be executed the next day. He resolves, "I betrayed him, and I shall save him!" Immediately, however, Gérard learns that Chénier has already been called before the tribunal.

A noisy crowd bursts into the hall to observe the daily trials. Watching the jurists take their places, Maddalena is almost overcome by fright. Chénier is the last prisoner to enter. As the prisoners' names are called one by one, the crowd mocks and condemns them. When Chénier's turn comes, the citizens loudly denounce him as a traitor.



Anne Risner as Madelon and Bob Grass as her grandson, Roger Albert, in the tribunal scene, Act III; 1990 Bob Jones University production

Chénier is then allowed to speak to the charges against him. He fearlessly defends himself and upholds his love for his country, yet he refuses to flatter the rabid crowd. Gérard confesses that he concocted the charges against Chénier, who is a true son of the Revolution. He decries the proceedings as "a ritual of hatred and revenge!"

Chénier is deeply moved by the transformation in Gérard. Then his eyes light on Maddalena, and he is content to face his fate. The jury returns and announces its verdict: "Death!"



Act IV; 1990 Bob Jones University production

ACT IV

Saint-Lazare prison courtyard,
before dawn on July 25, 1794

As they await the hour of death, Roucher requests that Chénier read aloud some of the poetry he has penned in prison. As Roucher parts from his friend for the last time, Mathieu can be heard singing the Marseillaise outside. Soon Gérard arrives with Maddalena, who bribes a guard to let her secretly take the place of Idia Legray, a mother condemned to die at dawn. Gérard leaves to implore Robespierre to pardon Chénier.

Reunited, Chénier and Maddalena sing of their undying love and of their imminent deaths, through which their love will triumph. Then they turn together to meet their fate beneath the guillotine.

SMART Vocabulary:

The French Revolution

Everything You Need to Know about Staging a Revolution...

Ancien regime: the social system in France before 1789 that created riches and privilege for the nobility and certain clergymen and left the rest of society, including merchants and professionals, unprivileged and, in many cases, oppressed

Bastille: a Paris fortress/prison/ammunition storehouse guarded by royal troops and stormed by Parisians of the unprivileged class on July 14, 1789, to inaugurate the Revolution

“cap of liberty”: red bonnet worn by the revolutionaries

Girondists: the majority party of the Revolutionary legislative assembly that wanted to extend the principles of constitutional monarchy to all of Europe and that for a time collaborated with King Louis XVI on a

war with Austria; opposed the Jacobins on the king’s death; fell to Jacobins in June 1793

guillotine: an execution device named for its inventor and first used in France in 1792; called “the national barber”; referred to by Charles Dickens as “a certain movable framework with a sack and a knife in it”

Jacobins: the party that opposed the Girondists, wanting to enact more radical social reforms in France; eventually was instrumental in the execution of King Louis XVI and many Girondists; led by Maximilien de Robespierre; set up a dictatorship that was ruthless in its powers of arrest and execution; fell in July 1794

Marat, Jean-Paul: a powerful journalist/extremist leader of the Jacobins who, after being murdered by a woman named Charlotte Corday, became the Jacobins’ most revered martyr

Reign of Terror: October 1793–July 1794, the period following the execution of King Louis XVI of France in which thousands of unprivileged French citizens, accused of disloyalty to the new ruling regime (the Jacobins), were executed

sans-coulottes (“without knickerbockers”): the name given to men who, to symbolize their alignment with the Revolution, wore the long trousers of the working class rather than the courtly knee breeches worn by aristocrats

tricolor: a flag representing the revolutionaries, created by adding blue and red (symbolizing blood) to the white banner of the Bourbon royal dynasty

tumbrel: a two-wheeled farmers’ cart used to transport condemned prisoners to the guillotine; also called “the little basket” and Sanson’s cart



left: The stage is set for a revolution, the 1990 Opera Association Andrea Chénier production.

below: angry crowd scene from the 1981 Opera Association Andrea Chénier production



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