

## LA TRAGEDIA DI ALICE



*(Disegno di Luigi Spagnol)*

Interpretare una fiaba è un'esigenza irrinunciabile dell'intelletto e del cuore. Ma guardare dietro a una fiaba - e smascherarla - può essere anche doloroso. Nel fondo di ogni allegoria fantastica vibrano tensioni umane. E nella fissità iconica della narrazione surreale si può cogliere la dura e subdola realtà. La vicenda della candida bambina inglese dell'età vittoriana che sprofonda in un mondo autoritario, capriccioso e crudele, pieno di incoerenza, menzogna, cinismo e viltà, si presta ad ogni sorta di interpretazioni. Il viaggio dell' Alice di Lewis Carroll è lui stesso uno specchio deformante in cui ci si può contemplare, per uscirne magari turbati, anziché divertiti. La storia di Alice, tra l'altro, ha poco della fiaba: manca la matrice popolare, e vi si percepisce invece un mondo di ombre inquietanti che guizzano dietro alla storiella irreali di oggetti, fiori e animali parlanti. L'idea di cucire un'opera tradizionale - intesa come luogo dell'emozione e dell'espansività lirica - addosso a questo viaggio sotterraneo, assurdo e visionario (quasi in sospetto di LSD ante litteram ) mi è sembrata una bella scommessa, da seguire con curiosità. Tanto più che gli autori - Testoni e il poeta Danilo Bramati - hanno inteso Alice come metafora di quel desiderio di libertà fantastica tipico dell'artista, le cui aspettative poetiche vengono frustrate da un mondo gretto. Non un' Alice "psicanalitica" frastornata dagli ormoni della pubertà in arrivo, ma un' Alice adulta e responsabile, tragica e sconfitta, che non a caso viene processata da un mondo in caricatura. In quest'opera neo-romantica avvolta intorno a un romanzo per l'infanzia è come se scorressero linfe d'inquietudine che la differenziano molto da altri esempi di fiabe operistiche, da Humperdinck, a Siegfried Wagner, a Rimskij-Korsakov. Testoni sa di possedere una mano

di strumentatore mirabile. Ottiene dall'orchestra colori, vortici e velocità. Incanta con le atmosfere del sogno. Affascina con una forza travolgente. E soprattutto ha un senso del bello e del "lusso" musicale di grande attrattiva, senza mai cedere al decorativismo fine a se stesso. Ammirabile è soprattutto il gusto raffinato che mostra il suo impasto strumentale, sempre accurato e spesso screziato da un cangiante brillio. Però tutta questa qualità musicale è dirottata verso un'espressione tesa e per nulla pacificata. Nell'Alice assistiamo a un'enfaticizzazione romantica dell'assurdo narrativo. Il gioco verbale e il nonsense di Carroll, interpretati dai bei versi di Bramati, sono tradotti in gioco musicale crudele e ossessivo. La propensione ipercinetica di questa musica genera a tratti smarrimento. A un primo ascolto sembra una musica tradizionale, addirittura inattuale per chi è rimasto legato a un'inaccettabile concezione evoluzionistica della musica. Ma questa musica "finto-tradizionale" e "finto-romantica" imbrocca percorsi inediti dell'invenzione melodico-armonica, disattende la memoria e la convenzione, quasi inseguendo le visioni distorte della parabola di Alice. La costruzione sinfonica di ogni singola scena - perfettamente omogenea e ben differenziata dalla successiva - ha una sua coerenza formale basata su di una ripetizione sovrabbondante e continuamente variata. Sintomatico il fatto che tutte le arie dell'opera - dell'Uovo, del Coniglio, di Alice, del Gatto - appartengano alla sfera del dolore: moderne reinterpretazioni dell'antico topos del "lamento". L'opera stessa, pur mantenendosi sul filo di un grottesco appena accennato, scivola verso una drammaticità sempre più evidente, fino a un terzo atto decisamente plumbeo, ove lo smarrimento e l'indignazione della protagonista giungono al culmine. Però il percorso non è lineare: il primo atto attiene alla sfera del magico, mentre il secondo ha tratti di comicità circoscritti alla prima scena. Testoni, nel narrare in forma operistica una vicenda insolita per l'opera (e sulla quale pende comunque una continua minaccia di sopraffazione e di morte), ha utilizzato un linguaggio musicale molto teso. C'è tuttavia una discrepanza fra il canto, semplice e lineare nel seguire i corretti accenti della prosodia italiana, e la conduzione armonica, dotata di una continua torsione, che genera un senso di movimento interiore nelle sue continue risoluzioni e cadenze. Alice è un'opera grandiosa e ambiziosa. Un'opera che è anche un atto di fiducia nella forma dell'opera, per molti anni dichiarata obsoleta nel nostro secolo, con parole e "opere". Non è un'opera per l'infanzia infarcita di filastrocche come ci si potrebbe aspettare. Il soggetto fantastico pare scelto per dare sfogo all'urgenza della fantasia musicale. È un'opera percorsa da rivoli di belcanto: si ascolti quello suadente e femminile di Alice, sempre più gravido di sconforto nel finale. Posta a mezza via fra la commedia lirica e l'opera buffa, Alice è in realtà un'opera d'atmosfera notturna che volge al tragico. La sua ricchezza sta nella varietà delle situazioni emotive: c'è tanto lirismo triste, vi abbonda il gesto possente, la robusta ritmica dà concretezza reale alle situazioni, la forza nervosa del policromo continuum tende a sopraffare l'ascoltatore, ma vi sono anche molti schivi ripiegamenti verso la seriosità. L'eleganza aristocratica dello stile tiene conto della grande tradizione del Novecento e del passato romantico, nei quali l'autore si riconosce. Non è una questione di nostalgia, ma la certezza che il grande fiume della musica tonale è lingua viva, che non ha ancora esaurito le proprie possibilità espressive. Testoni abbraccia questo passato nello stesso momento in cui sembra idealizzarlo, ma il risultato si discosta dal modello, poiché ciò è nella natura delle cose. La sua musica è dotata di una velocità interiore che potremmo collegare all'urgenza espressiva della sua natura di artista, indifferente alle categorie della modernità, e legata invece a un'idea di forma in cui il musicista incanala un'invenzione sovrabbondante. Quasi un supremo atto di fede in un mondo musicale che Testoni ha voluto abbracciare tutto quanto in questa sua opulenta "opera prima".

Franco Pulcini

## THE TRAGEDY OF ALICE

Understanding fairy tales is a fundamental necessity of the human heart and intellect. However, probing and unmasking fables can be a painful business. Human angst lies at the heart of every fantastic allegory, and in the icon-like immobility of the surreal narrative one can glimpse hard, devious reality. The story of the innocent Victorian child who is catapulted into an authoritarian, capricious and cruel world, full of inconsistencies, lies, cynicism and meanness, lends itself to all sorts of interpretations. The journey of Lewis Carroll's Alice is in itself a distorted mirror in which one can contemplate oneself, emerging perturbed, perhaps, rather than amused. Alice's story has little of the fairy tale about it anyway: it lacks the ethnic matrix, and instead reveals glimpses of a world of uneasy shifting shadows behind the unreal tale of objects, flowers and animals which talk. The idea of creating a traditional opera - in the sense of an outlet for emotion and lyric effusiveness - from this absurd and visionary (one might almost suspect the influence of LSD) underground journey seems to me to be an exciting challenge, to be followed with interest. The creators - Testoni and the poet Danilo Bramati - have interpreted Alice as a metaphor for the desire for creative liberty which is typical of the artist, whose poetic aspirations are frustrated by the shabbiness of society. This is not a "psychoanalytic" Alice, disorientated by the rising tide of pubescent hormones, but an adult and responsible Alice, tragic in her defeat, whose trial in this world of caricatures is inevitable. It is as if currents of uneasiness flow through this neo-Romantic work, built around a children's novel, distancing it from other operatic fairytales, from Humperdinck to Siegfried Wagner to Rimsky-Korsakov. Testoni knows he is an admirable orchestrator. He draws from the orchestra colours, vortices and speed. He weaves a spell of oneiric atmospheres. He fascinates with his overwhelming strength. And, above all, he has a magnetic sense of musical beauty and "luxury", without ever succumbing to ornamentation for its own sake. What I admire most of all is the elegance of his instrumental combinations, their accuracy, the way they are frequently speckled with fluctuating brilliance. All this musical flair, however, is directed towards an expression of angst, of nearaggression. In Alice we witness a Romantic emphasizing of the narrative absurdity. Carroll's nonsense and verbal play, rendered brilliantly by Bramati's verses, are translated into a cruel and obsessive musical game. The hyperkinetic tendency of this music at times leaves us bewildered. On a first hearing, the music could seem traditional, even obsolete for those who have remained linked to an unacceptable evolutionistic conception of music. But this "fake-traditional" and "fake-Romantic" music leads us on unknown paths of harmonic-melodic invention, disregarding memory and convention, as if following the distorted visions of Alice's story. The symphonic construction of each scene perfectly homogenous and clearly differentiated from the others - has a formal coherence based on an over-abundant and continually varied repetition. It is symptomatic that all the opera's arias - those of the Egg, the Rabbit, Alice, the Cat - originate in the sphere of pain: they are modern interpretations of the ancient topos of the lament. The opera itself, although it is characterized by the continual hint of the grotesque, becomes increasingly dramatic, the third act being distinctly oppressive, as the heroine's bewilderment and indignation reach their climax. However, the procedure is not straightforward: the first act maintains the atmosphere of magic, whereas the second has elements of comedy, although limited to the first scene. Testoni, narrating in operatic form a somewhat unusual plot for an opera (over which hangs a continual threat of suppression and death), has made use of a tense musical language. There is, all the same, a discrepancy between the song, which is simple and linear and follows the correct accents of Italian prosody, and the harmonic direction, endowed with a continuous torsion, which generates a sense of interior movement in its flow of resolutions and cadences. Alice is a grandiose and ambitious opera, an opera which is also an expression of faith in the operatic form, which the words and actions of much of the 20th century have declared obsolete. This is not a children's opera, full of the nursery

rhymes one might expect. The subject seems to have been chosen in order to express a compulsive musical fantasy. This is an opera permeated with rivulets of belcanto: listen to the smooth, womanly voice of Alice, pregnant with unease in the finale. Halfway between lyric comedy and opera buffa, Alice is, in fact, an opera of dark atmospheres which tend towards the tragic. Its substance lies in the variety of its emotional situations: there is a great deal of mournfully lyricism, an abundance of powerful gestures, the rhythmic robustness anchors the situations in reality, the nervous impulses of the polychromatic continuum overwhelm the listener, and yet there are moments of an almost shy retreat towards gravity. The style's aristocratic elegance takes into account both the great 20th century tradition and the Romantic past, with both of which the composer identifies. This is not a matter of nostalgia, this is the certainty that tonal music is a river, a living language, which has yet to exhaust its expressive possibilities. Testoni embraces this past whilst at the same time seeming to idealize it, but the result is distinct from the model, since that is the nature of all things. His music is gifted with an internal speed which could be linked to the expressive urgency of his artistic nature, indifferent to the categories of modernity, linked instead to an idea of form in which the musician channels an over-abundant creativity. It resembles a supreme act of faith in a musical universe which Testoni has decided to embrace wholly, in this opulent "opera prima".

Franco Pulcini

## GENESI DI ALICE

L'idea di realizzare Alice in forma di opera lirica risale al 1984. In quell'anno realizzai un brano orchestrale, *Wonderland Variations*, eseguito più volte a Napoli e Milano, che contiene a guisa di disegno preparatorio, alcuni temi che confluiranno nella prima scena del primo atto dell'opera. Con il poeta e amico Danilo Bramati, decidemmo che il soggetto, e il personaggio di Carroll, poteva prestarsi bene ad essere manipolato per la sua struttura narrativa così aperta alle più diverse e contraddittorie interpretazioni, nessuna delle quali ci soddisfaceva. Così Bramati inserì nel testo originale la sua personale visione drammaturgica e poetica, trasformando un'innocente e svagata storiella per colti bambini anglosassoni in un misterioso viaggio tra vittime e carnefici dove la realtà e la crudeltà della vita reale attentano la necessità visionaria che appartiene allo sguardo dell'artista. L'esperienza dolorosa di Alice cambierà quello sguardo ma con conseguenze incalcolabili, tragicamente e sottilmente. Il libretto era pronto alla fine del 1986. Nel gennaio 1987 terminai la stesura del primo atto, sotto forma di spartito per canto e pianoforte; nel luglio 1988 il secondo atto e nell'ottobre 1989 il terzo. dal novembre 1989 all'estate del 1992 tutto lo spartito veniva riscritto più volte, contemporaneamente alla strumentazione. La partitura orchestrale fu terminata nel gennaio 1993. Intanto un proficuo contatto con il Teatro Massimo di Palermo concretizzava la messa in scena che si realizzò il 30 aprile dello stesso anno con altre sette recite nel maggio successivo tra polemiche e contrasti critici e festosissima accoglienza di pubblico e musicisti, con la regia di Sandro Sequi e le scene e i costumi di Giuseppe Crisolini Malatesta. L'organico orchestrale, molto vasto, comprende: 4 flauti (anche 2 piccoli), 2 oboi, corno inglese, clarinetto piccolo, 2 clarinetti, clarinetto basso, 3 fagotti, controfagotto, 4 corni, 3 trombe, 3 tromboni, basso tuba, timpani, percussioni varie tra cui glockenspiel, campane, vibrafono, 2 arpe, celesta, pianoforte e archi. Per concezione dimensioni e organico impiegato Alice appartiene a quella significativa "famiglia" di opere liriche del nostro secolo, dirette discendenti dal teatro musicale di Janacek, Britten e Strauss.

Giampaolo Testoni

## THE GENESIS OF ALICE

The idea of creating a lyric opera out of Alice dates back to 1984. In that year I composed an orchestral work, *Wonderland Variations*, performed several times in Naples and Milan, which contains, as a sort of preparatory sketch, certain themes which would reappear in Act one, scene one of the opera. With my friend, the poet Danilo Bramati, we decided that Carroll's subject and characters were ideally suited to be manipulated, given that the narrative structure is open to the most varied and contradictory interpretations, none of which satisfied us. Thus Bramati incorporated his personal dramatic and poetic vision into the original text, transforming an innocent and slightly surreal fable for well-educated English children into a mysterious voyage between victims and persecutors in which the reality and cruelty of life itself assail the creative needs which are part of the artist's vision. Alice's painful experience alters that vision but with tragically and subtly incalculable consequences. The libretto was completed by the end of 1986. In January 1987 I finished drafting the first act, in the form of a score for voice and piano: in July 1988 I finished the second act, and in October 1989 the third. From November 1989 until the summer of 1992 I re-wrote all the scores several times, as well as orchestrating. The orchestral score was completed in January 1993. In the meantime, my close relationship with the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, Sicily, resulted in the production which premiered on the 30th April 1993, with seven other performances the following May, amidst critical debates and arguments and the joyful reaction of the audience and musicians. The production was directed by Sandro Sequi, with scenery and costumes by Giuseppe Crisolini Malatesta. A large orchestra was involved: 4 flutes (and 2 piccolos), 2 oboes, English horn, clarinet piccolo, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, timpani, mixed percussion including glockenspiel, bells, vibraphone, 2 harps, celesta, piano and strings. Given its concept, dimensions and required orchestral resources Alice belongs to the important family of 20th century lyric operas, the direct descendants in the musical theatre of Janacek, Britten and Strauss.

Giampaolo Testoni

## ATTOPRIMO

Scena 1: La stanza di Alice; sotto, la tana del Coniglio Bianco (Alice, Coniglio Bianco, Gatto del Cheshire, Coro di Fiori e Animali).

Scena 2: Una spiaggia "metafisica", ove approdano gli Animali (Alice, Gatto del Cheshire, Lorichetto, Tartaruga, Dronte, Topo, VallettoPesce, Coro di Animali).

Scena 3: Un bosco pieno di fiori (Alice, la Rosa Parlante, Coro di Fiori).

Scena 4: La casa della Duchessa, nel bosco (Valletto-Pesce e Valletto-Rana, Alice, la Duchessa, la Cuoca, il Bimbo-maialino, il Gatto del Cheshire).

## ATTO SECONDO

Scena 1: Un bellissimo giardino (Humpty Dumpty, Tweedle Dee e Tweedle Dum, Coro di Carte da Gioco).

Scena 2: Nello stesso giardino, un "tè da matti" al tramonto (Alice, Cappellaio Matto, Lepre Marzolina, Ghiro).

Scena 3: Lo stesso giardino, all'alba (Alice, tre Giardinieri, Coniglio Bianco, Regina di Cuori, Coro di Carte da Gioco).

## ATTOTERZO

Scena 1: Una tetra sala, anticamera del Tribunale (Alice, Regina di Cuori, Coniglio Bianco, Gatto del Cheshire, Gran Carnefice).

Scena 2: Un'aula di Tribunale (Alice, Gatto del Cheshire, Coniglio Bianco, Re di Cuori, Regina di Cuori, Duchessa, Cappellaio Matto, Topo, Coro di Carte da Gioco).

Scena 3: La stanza di Alice (Alice, Gatto del Cheshire).

## SYNOPSIS

### ACT ONE

Scene 1: Alice's room. Below, the White Rabbit's burrow. (Alice, White Rabbit - Coniglio Bianco, Cheshire Cat - Gatto del Cheshire, Chorus of Flowers and Animals - Fiori e Animali).

Alice is on the verge of falling asleep when the Rabbit carefully slides into his burrow. Alice follows him. In the burrow, through a little door, Alice sees a magnificent garden. The Cheshire Cat appears and the little girl expresses her desire to enter the garden. The Cat invites her to accompany him to a beach, where some of his friends may be able to help her fulfill her desires.

Scene 2: A "metaphysical" beach. (Alice, Cheshire Cat, Lorichetto, Mock Turtle - Tartaruga, Dronte, Mouse - Topo, Fish- Valet - Valletto-Pesce, Chorus of Animals).

Alice meets some strange animals, who destroy her hopes: they behave foolishly, they tell absurd stories, they perform meaningless acts. Alice, annoyed, looks for the Cheshire Cat who, in the meantime, has disappeared. The other animals advise her to go to "the House of the Duchess". The fish-valet runs in and Alice follows him.

Scene 3: A wood full of flowers. (Alice, the Rose - la Rosa, Chorus of Flowers).

Searching for the house of the Duchess, Alice enters a wood full of flowers: amongst them is a superb Rose, who is offended by the stranger's arrival. The flowers praise Alice's beauty; a fierce argument breaks out between the child and the Rose, annoyed by the chorus of praise, at the end of which Alice tears off the Rose's petals.

Scene 4: The house of the Duchess, in the wood. (Fish-Valet, Frog-Valet, Alice, the Duchess - la Duchessa, the Cook la Cuoca, the Baby Piglet - il Bimbo Maialino, the Cheshire Cat).

The house of the Duchess, in the wood. Alice arrives, followed by the Fish-Valet, who knocks at the door. A Frog-Valet opens the door and the Fish-Valet hands him a letter in which the Queen invites the Duchess to "a game of croquet". A kitchen full of smoke and steam can be glimpsed through the door. The Duchess is sitting on a stool, rocking a child in a cradle, a Cook is labouring over a cauldron, the Cat is huddled in a dark corner. There is an exchange of words between Alice and the Duchess, during which the Duchess' perfidy becomes clear, as she threatens Alice and then takes it out on the baby, overturning the cradle which falls to pieces on the ground. Alice picks up the baby, which gradually transforms itself into a piglet and runs off into the woods. Alice, desperate, wonders who on earth she can talk to in this place full of idiots.

## ACT TWO

Scene 1: A beautiful garden. (Humpty Dumpty, Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum, Chorus of playing-cards - Carte da gioco).

A garden. Humpty Dumpty, the giant egg, enters, followed by the "terrible twins", Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, who are armed with sticks and carrying swords. They want to capture Humpty Dumpty in order to eat him for breakfast. They capture the egg, attack it with their sticks, and then argue between themselves as to how it should be cooked. They decide to drink it, but they start arguing again, and fight with their swords. In the meantime Humpty Dumpty tries to escape: the twins chase after him again, but in that moment the playing-cards burst onto the scene, forcing the twins to flee. Left alone, Humpty Dumpty sings an aria in which he bewails his existence; but the twins suddenly reappear and begin tormenting Humpty Dumpty all over again.

Scene 2: Sunset in the same garden. (Alice, Mad Hatter - Cappellaio Matto, March Hare Lepre Marzolina, Dormouse - Ghiro).

A table, crowded with cups and teapots, is in the centre. Around the table, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare are taking tea, leaning their elbows on the Dormouse. Watches and the strangest hats imaginable are strewn everywhere. Alice enters. The Mad Hatter and the March Hare attempt to drown her out, but the child refuses to listen to them, and scats herself at the table. A "Mad Hatter's tea-party" begins: the Hatter and the Hare, moving continuously around the table and drinking from all the cups, bombard Alice with ridiculous questions, and tell nonsensical stories. After the final story, told by the Dormouse, they fall asleep and disappear into the dark leaving a stunned Alice alone in the garden.

Scene 3: Dawn in the same garden. (Alice, three Gardener playing-cards n. Two, Five, Seven - Giardiniere n. Due, Cinque, Sette, White Rabbit, Queen of Hearts - Regina di Cuori, Chorus of playing-cards).

Alice wanders through it, and suddenly spies three Gardener playing-cards who are busily painting a bush of white roses red. Alice asks them why and they reply that the Queen of the Garden had ordered them to plant red roses, but they had planted white ones by mistake and they were now remedying the situation. The White Rabbit appears, followed by the Court, then by the Queen of Hearts sitting on a throne carried by Knaves. On seeing Alice, she enquires acidly who the stranger is. However, nobody knows and they all ask to be pardoned for this lack of knowledge. The Queen's despotic character is immediately revealed; she threatens everyone with beheading, orders that Alice should be locked "in a cellar", and concludes by raging against the White Rabbit, forcing him to define himself as "the most stupid Rabbit in the Court". She then exits, followed by the Courtiers. Left alone, the White Rabbit begins to lament. The Queen immediately returns and orders him to announce the Court's engagements. The White Rabbit announces that later on there will be a trial, the defendant and the charge having still to be decided. The Queen compliments him on his brilliant idea.

### ACT THREE

Scene 1: A gloomy hall in the palace. A massive door marked "Courtroom". (Alice, Queen of Hearts, White Rabbit, Cheshire Cat, the Great Headsman - Gran Carnefice).

Alice, frightened, enters, escorted by two Knaves. The Cheshire Cat appears, and Alice complains to him of the Queen's cruelty. Suddenly the Queen appears behind her, followed by the White Rabbit. The tyrant decides that she hates the Cheshire Cat, and he must therefore be beheaded. The White Rabbit announces the arrival of the Great Headsman. The hooded Great Headsman enters, carrying an axe and places himself at centre-stage and begins a song of self-praise. The Queen orders him to proceed with the execution, but the Cheshire Cat, in a series of subtle arguments, succeeds in convincing him that to cut off the head of a cat is an act unworthy of the executioner's art. The White Rabbit tries to stop the Cat, but Alice defends him. The Queen, outraged, decides that the defendant in the trial will be the little girl herself. The Cheshire Cat and the Great Headsman, by now the best of friends, exchange pleasantries.

Scene 2: A courtroom. (Alice, Cheshire Cat, White Rabbit, King of Hearts - Re di Cuori, Queen of Hearts, Duchess, Mad Hatter, Mouse, Chorus of playing-cards and animals).

In the centre, Alice's bed. The inscription "Nihil firmum nihil est stabile" is clearly visible. The Playing-cards are seated on steps at the side. The White Rabbit announces the entrance of the Court. The King of Hearts, the Queen of Hearts and the Duchess take their places, followed by Alice and the Cheshire Cat, the defendants, escorted by Knaves. The Queen orders the White Rabbit to read out the charge: the Cat would like to overthrow the Queen with the help of Alice. The evidence of the witnesses, the Mad Hatter, the Mouse etc, agitates the Court, but the principal proof of Alice and the Cat's guilt is a completely blank piece of paper: the White Rabbit affirms that, if Alice had nothing to hide, "then she would have signed that note ... " Alice, enraged, rebels against the Court which suddenly disappears into thin air. The child collapses on the bed, exhausted.

Scene 3: Alice's room. (Alice, Cheshire Cat).

A feeble light illuminates Alice's bed. Everything has disappeared into thin air. Alice feels guilty, confused, defeated, swept up by an incomprehensible destiny. The Cheshire Cat comforts her, but at the same time confirms his own sadness. Alice goes back to sleep in her own bed, whilst the Cheshire Cat whispers to her the last, tender words ...