The True History of the Vespers of the Blessed Virgin by Alessandro Grandi

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It was early morning on 2 May 1630, when the telephone rang in my country house on the first hills of Rimini. That annoying sound took me by surprise… Who could it be at this hour, especially in these gloomy times, with the breaths of the plague reaching the city of Bologna?

For over a year we had been locked in our homes, in keeping with the provisions of the Legate of the Papal States, Cardinal Stefano Bonaccinus. His guards wandered not only in the cities, but also through the alleys of the countryside often sowing terror in someone who, in defiance of the severe provisions but moved by real necessity, dared to wander beyond the 175 feet allowed from their home. A few days earlier we heard of a farmer flogged for recovering his plow and a poor ox in a field a little further away. Unhappy, the henchmen also whipped the innocent animal. The news does not report whether, either out of ignorance or mercy, the soldiers spared the plow from the same fate.

With these dark thoughts, not yet properly coordinated due to the abrupt awakening, I rushed to the device which continued in its undeterred sound. A lost little voice on the other side of the cable, that perhaps had lost any hope of getting an answer, said: *'Andrea, it's Alessandro, Alessandro Grandi from Bergamo'.*

Now, you can imagine my surprise at hearing those words! I hadn't heard from him for almost four years, since September

1626 to be precise. I met him and Claudio (Monteverdi) in a tavern of the lagoon city where the latter was in charge as *Maestro di Cappella* in San Marco and the former was his deputy. It is known that there was no good blood between the two, especially more recently when they were working together in the great basilica. In fact, in 1610, Claudio had published his famous '*Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*' as a unitary work, composed as a musical 'unicum'. My friend Alessandro had assembled one, for liturgical purposes, using pieces that he composed between 1610 and 1625. The fact that his 'Vespers' was a kind of patchwork is confirmed by the absence of the antiphons sung before and after the Psalms and of the Magnificat.

The Landsknechts

During that September meeting, as soon as Claudio had left the tavern a little tipsy, I got hold of a handwritten copy directly from the hands of my friend who said to me: *'Here, please take a look, I can't stand that he composed a Vespers and I didn't.'* I took a quick look at that pile of paper and then, perhaps naively, I replied: *'Alessandro, these are your previous works, you can't compete with Monteverdi …'*.

I think my answer annoyed him extremely, as he left that

stinky tavern irritated and yelling I don’t know what insults, a mixture of unrepeatable words that he must have learned during the Ferrara years borrowed from the usually refined language of the Venetians.

If I were not convinced that it had been a ploy to leave me alone to settle the bill of what the two ravenous mouths had consumed and gulped down, I would probably have now put down the receiver gracefully without waiting for any reply. But as I was aware of his impetuous but genuine character, I also felt sorry for him as he had lived for the past three years in the city of Bergamo, which together with Milan was a target of the terrible plague, so I waited for him to continue the conversation. *‘Do you remember my Vespers?’*, he said. *‘You had looked at it absently then, but I have to tell you that you were wrong, my friend, I would like you to publish it’.*

This news left me startled and with a touch of indignation. It was not a masterpiece, perhaps a good collection of songs, but how was it possible to invest time and money in a project of dubious quality? Or was I wrong? I had to check immediately, and I could do so because the copy that he had given me at that time still lay in some chest in my basement.

I was surprised, however, by the last thing he said to me: *‘Andrea, come to Bergamo please, the situation is serious, the plague is decimating us and I would like to entrust you with the latest revision, the one you will give to the press.’* He had to be crazy to ask me this, when perhaps everything could be discussed and viewed on *Skypus*, the new system of connection between the State of the Church and the Duchy of Milan and Mantua. A quick consultation gave us the answer that we feared and that he perhaps already knew: the *Landsknechts*, on their way to Mantua had torn the cables leaving the population north of the Po without any hint of what was happening south of the river. All I could do was to leave.

I collected the essentials that I could use together with a

whole variety of face masks, the PF4, FFPP1, TRP34, HMN67, which according to the noblemen of the place it was mandatory to wear in order to cross the respective border. Obviously, they were all the same, but each duke or prince made them on their own to pocket taxes and duties from the people. Finally, the papal scribe wrote a certificate in which I declared that I could go, at my own risk, to Bergamo for an 'unspecified work commitment.'

After two days of travel, forced to change buggies every few hours, I entered the Duchy of Milan. I assure you that the situation appeared to me in all its seriousness, really similar to what I would have read 230years later in Manzoni's poem. At the gates of Bergamo I was amazed and I thought that hell really had to be there, so similar it was to what Dante had told me before. The terror of the absence and of the lazaretto sharpened the brain: the sick were not reported, the Monatti and their supervisors were bribed; from the clerks of

the tribunal, deputed by it to visit the corpses, false certificates were received with money.

Alexander had to be, if still alive, holed up in the rectory of Santa Maria Maggiore and so I thought of going there without delay. I ran away from a poor passer-by who I tried to ask for directions, but I was lucky to see the dome of the basilica standing out against the low profile of the other houses. Once in the small square I looked around to try to see a known face or just for help. *'Andrea, you've arrived, come!',* shouted a gaunt figure from the top of a wall onto which small and half-closed windows faced. He gestured with his hand to indicate a door to the left of the building and I returned the greeting, happy to see him, perhaps not in good health, but alive.

We did not embrace each other (the strict rules on social distancing if not respected would have caused us serious trouble with the guards) and we talked all the time wearing the approved mask in use in Bergamo, the ORB22, which I did not have in my bag and therefore Alessandro generously deprived himself of one, giving it heartily to me.

Alessandro Grandi (1590-1630)

He knew that both he and I were short on time for various

reasons and therefore our dialogue was reduced to dealing with what I was there for: the new edition of the Vespers of the Blessed Virgin. *'Listen,'* he said to me, *'I also tried to make a virtual recording of it, I wanted to make you feel the beauty of the sound reproduced, in addition to the impression you could get from the paper; unfortunately I did not make it, many choir members died of plague, and then there were many problems with the connection that works in fits and starts. These are difficult times, my dear.'*

A sincere emotion came over me: I was there, in front of that man who was aware of being a rickety boat on a stormy sea. He was putting all his hope in me to leave behind a work that, if not as beautiful as that by Claudio, was of excellent quality, and showed those characteristics of a lot of sacred music of the time – a combination of first and second practice with a very strong attention to the text and its affections.

The next morning, after a sleepless night talking about that music and how I could help him, I left his house with the conviction that yes, his Vespers would be worthy of publication!

The journey back proved to be much less difficult, except for a meeting from afar with the *Landsknechts* near Poggio Rusco. Exactly five days after my departure, I was home again and I had in my hands those sheets that only in 2007 did I deliver to Rudolf Ewerhart, a German musicologist friend, who made that edition that we all admire today.

You will wonder why I waited so long before deciding what to do. I have no answers to this question … I have probably lived for many years with the Hamletic doubt whether it would be better to still serve a respected musician almost overshadowed by the famous Monteverdi or to deprive the world of a work perhaps not so interesting to be listened to.

It was one morning at the end of June 1630 when a phone call

from the eminent Doctor Ricciardo announced that Alessandro, his wife and his 10 children had died from the plague that still had no end in sight…

Santa Maria Maggiore, Bergamo. Alessandro Grandi's window is on the right side, second floor of the little house besides the church

Edited by Louise Wiseman, UK