



**Revived Masterpiece: Franco Alfano and *Cyrano de Bergerac***  
*by Konrad Dryden*

A vague footnote for more than fifty years, Franco Alfano remains one of the most undervalued composers, regardless if he arguably represents the best of Italy's post-Puccini contemporaries. He was the vibrant author of innovative operas emanating elegiac poetry and sweeping passion, complemented by atmospheric symphonies that, as an art form, originally lacked an enduring tradition in his native country. Furthermore, he was a superb crafter of finely wrought art songs (based on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore), a gifted concert pianist, and the director of a string of Italian music conservatories, when not serving as *sovrintendente* of Palermo's Teatro Massimo or doubling as stage director.

Why, then, are San Francisco Opera audiences only now receiving their first hearing of his swashbuckling heroic drama *Cyrano de Bergerac*? The reason is simple: when Puccini left *Turandot* incomplete upon his death in 1924, his son, Antonio, inquired during July of the following year (after weeding out other contemporary composers) whether Alfano would consider finishing the opera based on his father's nearly indecipherable sketches. Alfano was aware of the "enormous responsibilities" such a project entailed. However, following immense pressure, he signed his name to a contract in August 1925, and, by January 1926, the orchestral score was complete. Lofty expectations from the international music scene took their toll on the sensitive composer: he nearly lost sight in his right eye from the strain, restricting him to a serious state of convalescence for the better part of three months.

Arturo Toscanini, La Scala's artistic director and conductor designate for the world premiere of *Turandot*, was largely unhappy with Alfano's efforts and decided to baptize the opera without the latter's finale. Additional performances employing a drastically edited version that essentially had little to do with Alfano's original intentions followed. From then on, Alfano's name unfortunately became associated with his "unsuccessful" effort. Sorely maltreated during his lifetime, he represents a grossly unjust chapter in music history demanding reevaluation.

The composer was born into a family of silver engravers in Posillipo, a few miles south-west of Naples, on March 8, 1875. His father was Italian and his mother French, thereby enabling him fluency in both languages: an advantage when later adapting Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* as operatic fare. Following studies in Naples, Alfano, at twenty, left for Leipzig, Germany, where he sought to perfect his understanding of orchestration, and where he acquired his third language. Inspired by the music of Grieg, Schumann, Bizet and Massenet, Alfano wrote numerous piano pieces prior to attempting his first opera, *Miranda*, based on the Antonio Fogazzaro novel. A second stage work, *La fonte d'Enscir* (*The Spring of Henshir*), followed. This was a slightly preposterous costume drama in an exotic setting more suitable for Cecil B. De Mille than a young composer intent on refining his craft. The work nevertheless received kudos from both Puccini and Toscanini, regardless if the opera was later produced in far away Poland in 1898.

Yearning for the success that seemed to elude him in Italy, Alfano ventured to Paris to compose two ballets for the Folies Bergères, one of which, *Napoli*, ran some 160 consecutive performances. Fortunately, he kept his goal in mind, and, in 1902, happened to see a dramatization of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. He completed the first two acts in the French capital, the third in Berlin and portions of the fourth in Moscow. *Resurrezione* became a work of searing intensity and memorable melodic invention catapulting the composer to international fame following its 1904 premier. A sought-after vehicle for great singing actresses (including, later, Mary Garden), it prompted Alfano to become a leading exponent of the so-called "giovane scuola," a new form of operatic realism (*verismo*) inspired by the literature and art of its day.

*Il Principe Zilah* (*Prince Zilah*), an attractive work, albeit of lesser stature, based on the lengthy French novel by Jules Claretie and adapted for the stage by Luigi Illica, followed in 1909. Fatigued by projects forced upon him by publishers, he next risked alienating audiences upon embracing modernism with the complex *L'ombra di Don Giovanni* (*Don Giovanni's Shadow*). The fact that it premiered at La Scala in 1914 illustrates further his sudden importance on the Italian music scene following *Resurrezione*.

Inspired by Puccini and Massenet for *Resurrezione*, and by Richard Strauss for *L'ombra di Don Giovanni*, he now ventured into the realm of French impressionism coupled with Straussian vocalism for his next opera, the exotic, esoteric, and exceedingly difficult *La leggenda di Sakùntala*, based on the play of the same name by the Sanskrit writer Kalidasa (c400 AD). It remained his preferred opera for the sumptuous otherworldliness of its orchestral score, and, above all, for its spiritual significance.

The period following the *Turandot* debacle witnessed a composer both psychologically and physically debilitated. Chosen to complete Puccini's swansong due as much to his docile temperament as the technical prowess demonstrated in *L'ombra di Don Giovanni* and *La leggenda di Sakùntala*, Alfano now yearned for a lighthearted work seeking to assuage a still rampant hurt. This evolved to become

the Balzac-inspired *Madonna Imperia*. The delicately hued music of this “boudoir” opera in a single act was initially unveiled at the Metropolitan Opera in 1928. Less than successful—partially due an unidiomatic cast headed by Maria Müller—Alfano complemented the opera by another slightly retrogressive work culled from *Little Lord Fauntleroy* entitled *L'ultimo Lord (The Last Lord)*, futilely hoping to provide Mary Garden with a part in breeches: a wish never fulfilled.

The composer had long demonstrated interest in an operatic adaptation of Edmond Rostand's celebrated play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and it was Henri Cain, one of Massenet's librettists, who initially suggested he create an operatic version partially based on the historical Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac. Alfano was not the first composer tempted by the idea, since an adaptation by Walter Damrosch had already enjoyed a Metropolitan Opera premier in 1913, and Puccini himself had once considered the subject. The Swiss composer Arthur Honegger fortunately renounced the project in favor of Rostand's *La Princesse Lointaine*, prompting Cain's wife to write Alfano “*Cyrano is free!*” The work's rights were enormously expensive and, following Rostand's death in 1918 of the Spanish flu, his widow, Rosemonde, began leading discussions among eligible composers. Mary Garden even offered to purchase the rights for her friend Alfano, although the composer reluctantly refused.

Rostand's fame rested on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, with some four hundred performances given between 1897 and 1899. The playwright later recalled having written the piece with pleasure, but also with the idea of fighting against the tendencies of the time. One critic noted with pride that it in fact forced some fifteen hundred Parisians to alter their scheduled dining hour in order to attend the play's first act. Initially unveiled at the Porte-Saint-Martin Theatre in Paris on 28 December 1897, Rostand's play has fascinated audiences by its ability to graft a rather poetic text to a swashbuckling revival of French history reminiscent of Dumas *père* during an era drenched in the symbolism of a Maurice Maeterlinck. Authored to display the talents of the Comédie-Française actor Constant Coquelin, the core of the semi-fictitious legend of Cyrano weighs the importance of character against mere physical beauty. Rostand was initially drawn to the authentic Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655) after having read Théophile Gautier's *Les grotesques*, in addition to Cyrano's philosophic/futuristic novels *Voyage to the Moon* and *Voyage to the Sun*, wherein the poet's sharp mind and biting wit became the same lethal weapons that resurface in his letters. (“God created your tongue for swallowing and not for speaking!”)

Although *Cyrano de Bergerac* may initially astound the listener due to its bombastic grandeur, the composer essentially focuses on the poetic inner turmoil of his protagonist—thwarted desire and immense loneliness similar to Werther—through whose eyes we experience the work. Alfano captures the emotions of this antihero (in a subject dealing with purity and honor) in a most noble, sensitive, and subtle manner that captivates by his masterful employment of musical brushstrokes emanating a

constantly changing pulse, while remaining at the service of Rostand's text. Alfano clothes the piece with music of passion, power, and frustration.

The composer's respect for Rostand's original is apparent throughout the score; this is especially evident in the autumnal final scene depicting falling leaves of "Venetian gold." A crystalline nocturnal atmosphere that is fragile, bittersweet, and melancholic in its dreamlike subtlety pervades the work. Darkness provides the protagonist with his sole opportunities of self-expression. Alfano allows the action to unfold while tightly reigning in the spectator's emotions, culminating in one of the most moving scenes in all of opera, precisely due to its almost unbearable restraint. The composer reminds us that he is indeed a master portraitist, particularly exemplified in the haunting lament that accompanies Cyrano's reading of the letter. Here, he entrusts the orchestra to disclose the writer's identity, while eerie chords recalling Berg's *Lulu* (following Schön's death) depict convincingly Cyrano's transcendent journey from mortality to dissolution. Simultaneously, Alfano has taken pains to ensure that Rostand's text remains audible (including Cyrano's famed final line "Mon panache!"), thereby seamlessly bridging a gap between the operatic and the spoken stage. In fact, Alfano once wrote that his goal was to create a musical language resembling speech.

Additionally, since *Resurrezione*, Alfano was attracted to subjects concluding on a note of redemption, and, when not expressing this operatically, he made certain, as in the case of the First Symphony, the Quartet and the *Suite romantica*, that his music conveyed (similar to Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy) a sense of "moving from darkness to light." His was a belief in a positive "purification" and "renewal" of man's essential goodness.

"The operatic *Cyrano* is Alfano's *Cyrano*—no longer that of Rostand," was how the composer chose to describe an opera he knew would face opposition from those who criticized his choice of subject. He believed to have resuscitated Rostand's characters via his music. The composer hoped the opera would be judged from "Alfano's point of view and not Rostand's." His ability to deal with the subtleties of the French language was not only an enormous asset but also a prerequisite for this eclectic work.

*Cyrano de Bergerac* premiered (in an Italian version) at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera on January 22, 1936. Tullio Serafin, the work's dedicatee, conducted. Additional productions were then unveiled in Paris, Buenos Aires, Naples, and Turin.

Alfano's last years were spent reconstructing *La leggenda di Sakùntala* (*Sakùntala*) and revising *L'ombra di Don Giovanni*, which received its first performance in Florence during 1941 as *Don Juan de Manara*. He based his final opera, *Il dottor Antonio*, on Giovanni Ruffini's sprawling novel.

The composer's last months bore witness to his operas receiving a revival, thereby enabling him the advantage of bidding them farewell in a somewhat uncanny procession. Calling attention to his age

and the fact that La Scala would presumably honor him with a posthumous production of one of his works, he urged them to “do it now” while he was “still alive,” thereby permitting him to “enjoy the occasion.” *Cyrano de Bergerac* was the opera he wished to see performed. The stellar cast boasted Ramón Vinay. Maria Callas attended.

Alfano died in San Remo on 27 October 1954. The *New York Times*'s obituary branded the composer with an unfortunate (and rapidly spreading) legacy when choosing to harp on his *Turandot* completion. Not a word was lost on *Cyrano de Bergerac*. *Turandot* enabled a ready and superficial evaluation—an execrable example of incomprehension and a lethal assessment that, universally embraced, cast an unmerited (and inestimable) shadow on Italy's last verismo composer. Emergence, even a half-century later, has been exceptionally difficult.

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