

The Transcriber's Art - #48
Alfredo Catalani, *In Sogno*
By Richard Yates

The preparations to stage an opera at the prestigious Teatro Carignano in Turin were derailed at the last moment by the abrupt withdrawal of a temperamental conductor. The company could find no substitute until the tenor, Nikolay Figner, suggested that a 19-year-old cellist be asked to fill in. Despite all objections, the cellist was brought in to play the score—having never before seen it—while the composer listened from nearby concealment. This rushed and impromptu audition was so impressive that the composer immediately insisted that the young man be hired to conduct the opera. He later wrote, “I, utterly unknown to everybody, young, too young, was to conduct his new opera before the very public that most admired him—and yet it was me he chose!” The composer later wrote, “It seemed to me that he was stepping on to the rostrum not for the first time, but that already he possessed twenty years of experience. He is a veritable prodigy; his fortune is assured.” Thus began the career of the most famous of conductors, Arturo Toscanini, but you will not likely have heard of the opera’s composer, Alfredo Catalani.

A deep friendship developed between the conductor and the composer that would last the rest of Catalani’s brief life. Toscanini promoted Catalani’s music throughout his career and even named his own daughter Wally after Catalani’s 1892 opera. His admiration and devotion to the composer and his music is shown in a letter that he wrote in 1837 to the pianist Ada Mainardi, with whom he was in love. “You know, it crossed my mind to transcribe for you, by heart, that beautiful lyric piano piece of Catalani’s, *Sogno*, so that you would learn it and play it while I am far away from you ... I want you to have before your eyes something that I love a lot and that I practically saw being born.” And the next day he continued, “I believe that I have reproduced the beautiful lyric piece without mistakes, so that you can play it and fix it in your memory as it is in mine—and may it be a sweet, ideal recollection in our thoughts during our cruel separation.”

Alfredo Catalani

Although he showed early promise and then success at the Paris Conservatoire, Catalani’s productivity was severely impaired due to a life-long and ultimately fatal battle with tuberculosis. Despite a short list of compositions, Catalani is recognized as an important figure in Romantic Italian opera before the *verismo* school, epitomized by the works of Giacomo Puccini. Of his four operas, *La Wally* has survived with the best reputation. Other extant works include a handful of songs and other vocal works, and piano solos, the highlights of which are his 10 *Impressioni* published in 1888. Several of the *Impressioni* are worthy of scrutiny by guitarists. Another transcription of a piano solo by Catalani, *Recordo di Lugano, barcarola*, is available as a free download from my web site.

In Sogno

The second piece of the 10 *Impressioni* is *In Sogno* (“Dreaming”). Barely 50 measures long, it nevertheless manages to incorporate a whole opera’s worth of drama. The several episodes are held together by a pervasive, off-the-beat repetition of the fifth scale degree in a middle voice. As an essential element of the structure of the composition, it was necessary to approach the guitar transcription with the goal of preserving this voice clearly and consistently. The original key of A flat major was, of course, unsuitable on the guitar, and the search for a better key was constrained in two ways: first, as is usually case, to those keys in which the shape of the melody could be preserved without undue damage through octave transposition, but also to keys where, for practical reasons, the essential middle voice note could be played on an open string. This is a narrow range of possibilities, but happily all the requirements were met by using the key of C major and thus having available the G on the open third string. Although the fourth string, fifth fret G sometimes needed to be substituted, much of the opening sits very nicely, even idiomatically, on the guitar in this key.

The importance of the repeated middle voice occasionally presents problems of notation as well as performance, as at the end of measure 14 where the durations of notes with downward stems do not seem to add up. This is not an uncommon problem in guitar music, especially where octave transposition of the bass line has placed the two lower voices close to each other. Here, combining notes onto one stem would have obscured the true texture, so I have left it to the player to sort out the durations. A moment’s reflection will clear up any ambiguity.

The beginning of measure 28 shows another notation problem that often crops up in transcriptions. The A flat cannot be held for its full notated duration, as the open third string is needed for the G. As before, I have preserved the clarity of the original texture rather than show the sounded duration more precisely. In such spots it is usually sufficient to show enough detail with the fingering numbers to prevent confusion.

The switch from the first to the second left-hand finger for the E flat in measure 30 might look unusual. At this point the original score has fuller chords with notes duplicated in other octaves supporting the *forte* dynamic. These were not possible on the guitar, so the indicated fingering was chosen to maximize the sustain of the accompanying notes and help cover for the missing duplications.

Take care in measure 11 to keep the 3 finger on the bass note G, although it requires some compression of the left hand and attention to the angle of incidence to the strings in order not to muffle the open third string.

In one piano recording that I heard while researching this article, the A flat that is tied from measure 33 to 34 was inexplicably held for only a half note. I can only assume that this was a simple error in counting the duration but it is worth mentioning as it was made by a well-respected pianist. A strong vibrato can help sustain the sound and the interest of that note.

A video recording of my transcription of *In Sogno* is available on YouTube. Just search on YouTube or Google for “RYatesGuitar”

References

John W. Klein, 'Toscanini and Catalani: A Unique Friendship', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Jul., 1967), pp. 213-228.

The Letters of Arturo Toscanini, compiled, edited and translated by Harvey Sachs, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

Rare Finds for Piano, compiled, edited and recorded by Joseph Smith, The Steinway Library of Piano Music, 2005.

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In Sogno

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Melodia

Alfredo Catalani
(1854–1893)

Poco lento

8 *p e legato* ⑤

4 *dolcissimo*

7 ③

10 *dim.* *p*

13 *cresc.*

16 *dim.* V₄

19

p

22

p

24

pp

26

p

28

cresc. e affrettando

30

f *agitato*

32

ff *assai mosso* *dim. e riten.*

34

p a tempo

37

p

40

pp *f animando*

42

f poco più

44

riten.

46

a tempo e dim. *pp e molto*

49

riten. *p lento* *ppp*