

# Alessandro Stradella (1639 – 1682)

## Out of the Shadows

In 2002, while driving to work, I was fortunate to be near enough to the Canadian border to listen to CBC Radio 2, specifically a program called *In the Shadows*. The show highlighted the lives and works of artists—mainly musical—who for a variety of reasons had been largely ignored or forgotten. One morning a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Italian composer, whom I and obviously many others had never heard of, was featured. His music was stunning: fluid and melodic, with clear expressive vocals and distinct instrumentations. His story was replete with romance and intrigue, triumphs and tragedy, like an opera drawing on the divinity and failings of gods and men.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot at work, I knew why I was listening. I “knew” Alessandro Stradella. I recognized his distinct voice, his swaying form, his infectious smile, and his wandering heart. I had witnessed the rise and fall of his talents, how his music had showered him with forgiveness if not fortune. I spent the rest of that morning and many hours more in pursuit of him, my writer’s urge “to do something with him” easier stirred than accomplished. He was so little on the pages of Google searches and music histories; a desire to create something significant out of my interest in him was soon frustrated and abandoned.

It wasn’t until 2005 that I returned to Stradella as the novel subject I was looking for. The timing must have been right, for “suddenly” resources, although still not in abundance, were easier to find. As I read my costly used copy of *Alessandro Stradella, the Man and his Music* by musicologist Carolyn Gianturco, I found an opportunity for imagining my way into his story, focusing on his last fateful days in Genoa—not to change history but quietly humanize it, not merely to appreciate a great musician but personalize him, to reveal the ordinary in the extraordinary and the significance of the insignificant. Equipped with specifics and speculation, a growing CD library of his music, and a fictional female protagonist stepping out of my own hopes and disappointments, I was ready to begin.

The title and main setting of the novel reflect the strong possibility that Stradella last lived in a house owned by Giuseppe Maria Garibaldi just off the *via Luccoli* in Genoa, records indicating this was where his possessions were inventoried after his death. Born April 3, 1639 in Nepi near Rome of minor nobility, Stradella was cultivated but also something of a vagabond. His life seemed to be a struggle between the discipline of his work and the recklessness of his behavior. He had excellent opportunities, early on as a page for the Lante family, residing in their palace for many years; also to study music, probably in Bologna, and to advance a career composing and performing for the aristocracy, theater and church in Rome. Unfortunately, financial difficulties—or at least so he claimed—tempted him to participate in marriage brokering that upset a Cardinal who was also the Vatican Secretary of State, proving disastrous to Stradella's reputation in Rome, almost landing him in prison and “persuading” him to leave the city. From there he went to Venice, invited by one of his patrons, Polo Michiel, and soon employed as music teacher to Agnese Van Uffele, the “friend” of a nobleman who didn't appreciate Stradella's romantic involvement with her. Stradella ran off with Agnese to Turin where he hoped to find work. For a while he gained favor at court and apparently planned to marry her. Misfortune struck Stradella once more when two henchmen, probably sent by Agnese's Venetian nobleman, violently attacked him. He recovered, except for suffering bad headaches from time to time, but the marriage was called off and Agnese is never mentioned again in any of his surviving letters. Soon after, in December of 1677, Stradella accepted an invitation to the Carnival of Genoa. He decided to stay in the port city where he had friends in the prestigious Doria Pamphilj family and must have impressed other nobles, a group of them deciding to give him a house, food, servant, and substantial yearly stipend for no other requirement than that he remain in Genoa for a few years at least.

Throughout his career, Stradella's output was versatile and copious, including operas, oratorios, serenatas, madrigals, and incidental music. He worked royally and nobly for the theater and the church, for grand and domestic occasions, celebrating life and love, using allegory and heart and humor, challenging singers and instrumentalists and the inventiveness of himself. He developed the aria and concerto grosso, his

work no less significant than Vivaldi's or Corelli's; if anything, more passionate and pioneering, his text interpretation and melodist abilities impressing Scarlatti and Handel, who freely borrowed from him.

Loving the wrong women and angering the wrong men held grave consequences and caused centuries of neglect for Stradella, who was a celebrity in his time. By the second decade of the 18th Century his compositions were rarely performed, the importance of his contribution to Baroque music eclipsed by the romantically enlarged legends that grew out of his life and death. He was the stuff misconceptions could so easily and profitably be made of, for the poet, the novelist, the so-called historian, and even other composers. Recently there has been some renewed interest in his music, but it remains obscure and underperformed as he only very slowly emerges from the shadows of his seemingly better behaved contemporaries.

Whether acting on a patron's whim or his own impulse, uncertainty and risk were inevitable for Stradella. It was his nature to embrace them, indulging in possibilities, captivating men and women known and unknown, seducing posterity with his reputation for making messes but also masterpieces. For a while, he enjoyed a fairly productive and settled time in Genoa. It wasn't to last.