

Synopsis

Ravenna and Rimini in the early 14th century

Act I Ravenna, courtyard of the Polentani castle, May

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 8:05 PM)

Act II Rimini, tower of the Malatesta castle, December

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 8:55 PM)

Act III Francesca's room in the Malatesta castle, the following March

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 10:00 PM)

Act IV

PART 1 Hall in the Malatesta castle, September

PART 2 Francesca's room, the same evening

Act I

In the house of the Polentani family in Ravenna, servants joke with a jester. They are interrupted by the arrival of Ostasio, who, for political reasons, plans to trick his sister Francesca into marrying the cruel Giovanni Malatesta, known as Gianciotto, who is deformed. Francesca, who has never met her future husband, has been led to believe that she is to marry Paolo, Gianciotto's handsome brother. Francesca enters, upset at the prospect of leaving her home, and is comforted by her sister. The servants rush in to tell her that her bridegroom has arrived; they declare him the fairest knight in the world. It is Paolo, arriving in place of his brother. The sisters say goodbye as Paolo enters the courtyard. Francesca offers him a rose and, without exchanging a word, they at once fall deeply in love.

Act II

Francesca now lives in Rimini as Gianciotto's wife. During an attack on the Malatesta palace by a rival family, she meets Paolo and gently reproaches him for the fraud practiced on her. He begs her forgiveness and asks how she would have him die, then rushes off to battle, fighting furiously. Francesca prays for God's protection. An arrow seems to strike Paolo in the head and he collapses. When Francesca rushes to him, he tells her that he is unharmed—it is his love for her that is killing him. Gianciotto arrives, surprised to find his wife amid the

fighting men. Francesca offers him and Paolo a cup of wine in celebration of their victory. When Malatestino, Giovanni and Paolo's younger brother, is carried in, Francesca bandages his wounded eye with her scarf. The men rush back to finish the battle.

Act III

Francesca reads the story of Guinevere and Lancelot to her ladies, who entertain her with dancing and singing. She dismisses them when her maid Smaragdi brings news that Paolo, who had left Rimini to forget Francesca, has returned. He enters and Francesca begs him to give her peace, but he declares his love. They continue to read from the tale of Guinevere and Lancelot and finally kiss, following the lead of the legendary lovers in the story.

Act IV

Malatestino, who is desperately in love with Francesca, pleads his case with her, even offering to poison Gianciotto. She is repulsed by his advances, and he leaves just as Gianciotto arrives. Francesca tells her husband of Malatestino's behavior. When Gianciotto confronts his brother, Malatestino reveals that he has seen Paolo entering Francesca's room at night. Gianciotto demands proof of his wife's infidelity, and the two brothers agree to surprise the lovers that very night.

Francesca has bad dreams and is comforted by her ladies. Paolo arrives and both renew their declarations of love. When Gianciotto's voice is heard from outside, Paolo tries to escape through a trap door but is caught by his brother, who forces his way into the room. Gianciotto is about to stab Paolo when Francesca jumps between them and is killed. Gianciotto then stabs Paolo and the lovers die in each other's arms.

Riccardo Zandonai

Francesca da Rimini

Premiere: Turin, Teatro Regio, 1914

Both a grand historical epic and a passionate romantic tragedy, *Francesca da Rimini* is among the most ambitious operas in the Italian repertoire. Its story is derived from a memorable and poignant (albeit brief) episode in Dante's *Inferno* that is based on historical fact and has inspired adaptations in a variety of genres over the centuries. The action of the opera centers on a refined young woman from a powerful medieval Italian warrior family. Married for political reasons to the deformed Giovanni Malatesta, known as Gianciotto, she falls in love with his handsome brother, Paolo. The Italian writer Gabriele d'Annunzio created a tragic play from the legend, replete with a wealth of poetic invention, that was adapted into a libretto by music publisher Tito Ricordi, Jr. The opera's grand scale and lofty stylistic ambitions reflect the currents of debate among artists in Italy at the time of its composition. The verismo movement of real-life dramas set among common people, so shocking and exciting two decades earlier, seemed exhausted. Puccini, the most successful composer of the day, resisted Ricordi's efforts to make him write a "grand" Italian opera and continued to base his works on international (even American) sources and everyday characters. Ricordi eventually turned to young Riccardo Zandonai, who had written a reasonably successful opera, *Conchita*, on a libretto rejected by Puccini. Though *Francesca da Rimini* didn't succeed in knocking Puccini out of the public's esteem, it is a thrilling and unique score—a marvelous synthesis of French Impressionism, post-Wagnerian grandeur, and the emotional intensity of Italy's own verismo.

The Creators

Born in a northern region of Italy then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Riccardo Zandonai (1883–1944) belonged to the generation immediately following Puccini, Mascagni, and other composers of the verismo genre. *Francesca* remains the most popular of his dozen or so operas. A close relationship between music and text is one of the key factors that have kept his works better known in Italy than abroad. Tito Ricordi, Jr. (1865–1933), inherited the directorship of the principal Italian music publishing firm, Casa Ricordi, from his father Giulio (a close friend and associate of Verdi's) in 1912. *Francesca da Rimini* was among his first projects in this position, whose success he struggled to repeat. Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863–1938), a complex figure who remains controversial today, rose to prominence as a writer in several genres, successfully assimilating the "decadent" styles of French Symbolists and British Aestheticists into Italian literature. He wrote his five-act tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* (1902) for the talents

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of his mistress, the celebrated actress Eleanora Duse. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), the supreme poet of the Italian language and a towering figure in the history of literature, is primarily remembered for his *Divine Comedy*, a long poem describing a journey through the realms of the afterlife. The character of Francesca da Rimini appears among those damned in hell for sins of the flesh. She tells her story in a mere 38 lines of the poem, which formed the basis for d’Annunzio’s play.

The Setting

The opera takes place in the early 14th century in the northern Italian cities of Ravenna and Rimini, during the complex internecine wars of the Ghibellines and the Guelphs, two factions who battled for centuries over control of Italy.

The Music

The score of *Francesca* aims beyond the brilliant set pieces that were typical of Italian opera and, at the turn of the 20th century, increasingly perceived as impediments to the form’s evolution. The beauty of the music is found in colors, textures, and moments of intense drama rather than in arias and other traditional forms. The refined ambience of a medieval Italian noble court is represented by the madrigal-like ensembles of Francesca’s ladies-in-waiting, especially in Act I. The sudden shift to the jarring sounds of battle that blaze throughout Act II are typical of the extreme contrasts in this work and aptly depict the duality of sophistication and brutality that is at the core of the drama. The two lead characters share four duets, each with its own distinct ambience. Especially the one in Act III unmistakably shows Zandonai’s admiration for the musical innovations of Debussy, Strauss, and other modernists of his day. One of the high points of the score is the ravishing cello solo at the end of Act I that accompanies the lovers’ first meeting. The fact that this crucial moment is represented by an instrumental solo rather than a standard love duet underscores how intensely Zandonai was trying to distance this work from the conventions of Italian opera. The Act IV scene between the second tenor and the baritone harnesses all the energy of the traditional operatic oath duet while blasting forth into new realms of gritty—even gruesome—realism.

Francesca da Rimini at the Met

Francesca premiered at the Met in December 1916 with Frances Alda and Giovanni Martinelli as the lovers and Pasquale Amato as Gianciotto. They all appeared in the company’s ten remaining performances of the work through 1918, after which the opera fell out of the repertory for 66 years. The current production premiered in 1984 with James Levine conducting Renata Scottò, Plácido Domingo, Cornell MacNeil, and William Lewis. Director Piero Faggioni, set designer Ezio Frigerio, and costume designer Franca Squarciapino all made their company debuts with this staging, which has not been seen at the Met since 1986.

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A century ago, Riccardo Zandonai was being groomed as the rising new star of Italian opera. Tito Ricordi, by now in control of the powerful family-based publishing house Casa Ricordi, hoped to replicate the savvy move his father Giulio had made a generation earlier by banking on a young composer named Giacomo Puccini. Tito had his own sights on the driven, fiercely disciplined Zandonai as the composer most likely to inherit Puccini's mantle. Written in 1913, when he was only 30, *Francesca da Rimini* marked the climax of Zandonai's partnership with Ricordi and would become his most-celebrated work, though he continued to write operas for three more decades. (Six more followed *Francesca*, with a seventh left unfinished by the time of his death in 1944.)

Born into a working-class family in a part of far northern Italy still in the possession of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Zandonai had been a precocious student of Pietro Mascagni. After a modest first commission—a well-received setting of Charles Dickens's novella *The Cricket on the Hearth*—Ricordi offered his budding composer a libretto initially intended for but rejected by Puccini (*Conchita*, from the novel by Pierre Louÿs that was later adapted into the Marlene Dietrich film *The Devil Is a Woman*). Zandonai's treatment won both popular and critical success. He was hailed as the pioneer of a new path and a composer with “the temperament of a symphonist.”

Conchita's triumph must have struck Ricordi as an auspicious echo of Puccini's breakthrough in 1893 with *Manon Lescaut*. He decided the time had come to take a gamble with Zandonai on a large-scale opera and secured the rights to the five-act tragic drama *Francesca da Rimini* by Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863–1938), controversial and egocentric literary high priest of the Decadent movement. The play's original (and absurdly expensive) production in Rome in 1901 had caused a scandal. Even though, in the episode of *Dante's Inferno* that immortalized the story of Francesca and Paolo, the lovers are damned for their adulterous crime, d'Annunzio's sensational adaptation was forced to close early, “prohibited on grounds of morality,” as the *New York Times* reported. His play not only shows Paolo and Francesca in flagrante but includes copious amounts of blood and gore.

D'Annunzio wrote *Francesca da Rimini* as a vehicle for his lover and muse, Eleanora Duse, the actress to whose formidable reputation Chekhov pointedly alludes in *The Seagull*. Much as Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca*—created for Duse's older rival, Sarah Bernhardt—seemed destined to be transformed into an opera, *Francesca da Rimini* overflows with a heady mixture of Wagnerism, violent passion, and fin-de-siècle aesthetics that made it intensely attractive to Zandonai's generation.

But the story's leap to the opera stage faced stumbling blocks, including the writer's exorbitant fee for the rights to adapt it. Tito Ricordi brokered a deal by

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having the eager Zandonai agree to give up most of the composer's customary advance in favor of d'Annunzio. At the time, d'Annunzio had attracted a considerable cult following mesmerized by the Nietzsche-inspired reach of his ambitions. Even Puccini mulled over a possible collaboration, though his own style would hardly have been compatible with d'Annunzio's overcharged rhetoric. (The composer eventually parodied him in *La Rondine* with his depiction of the amorous aesthete Prunier, who actually refers to Francesca da Rimini.)

In Dante's *Inferno*, the poet's compassion for Francesca's plight is intensified by the fact that a literary catalyst unleashed her and Paolo's passion. Reading of the legendary love between Lancelot and Guinevere, the couple lost all restraint at the description of their kiss: "That day we read no further..." Dante thus recounts in retrospect the story that in the play and opera unfolds "in real time," as it is actually happening. In fact, a central component of the lovers' punishment seems to be the act of recollecting the past: "There is no greater pain than to remember a happy time in misery," Francesca laments, reversing the famous line from the *Aeneid* by Dante's guide Virgil ("one day, perhaps, remembering these [travails] will be pleasant").

Dante's own unforgettable reaction to this encounter—"for pity I fainted as if in death"—foreshadows the peculiar appeal the story of Paolo and Francesca would hold for artists of the Romantic era. More than just another variant on a tragic love triangle or a crime of passion, their predicament involves the power of art itself to activate a desire that defies the false constraints of convention. Numerous 19th-century plays and operas predate the versions by d'Annunzio and Zandonai, while the most celebrated musical accounts are found in concert music: in the *Inferno* movement of Liszt's *Dante Symphony* and in the early symphonic poem *Francesca da Rimini* by Tchaikovsky. The latter had even considered an operatic treatment of the story; after his death, his brother Modest furnished the libretto for Rachmaninov's 1906 opera about the doomed lovers.

The bare bones of the story found in Dante had been expanded by Boccaccio's commentary on the *Divine Comedy* to include the element of deception by which the "proud" Francesca is tricked into marrying the grotesquely misshapen Gianciotto. D'Annunzio amplifies the contrast with Paolo's beauty by adding a sadistic, blackmailing, one-eyed younger brother to the Malatesta clan.

For Zandonai's opera, Tito Ricordi himself prepared a very competent libretto, pruning away many of the play's excesses (which was said to last some five hours in performance). Each of the four acts centers on a different stage in the progress of Paolo and Francesca's fatal passion, from deception and then anxiety to heedlessly blissful acceptance by the end. D'Annunzio's patterning after Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is still very much evident in the opera's imagery and structure. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere inspires them to give in to their love (the "galeotto" or matchmaker, as Dante's Francesca says), but in the

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first scene the jester Simonetto entertains by attempting to retell the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Francesca later wonders whether her confidante Smaragdi has pulled a Brangäne by mixing a potion of desire into the wine she shared with Paolo. And of course their night of ecstasy is violently interrupted when Gianciotto catches them, thanks to a ruse the jealous Malatestino might have borrowed from Melot.

But Zandonai's score offers much more than imitation Wagner mingled with newer accents from verismo, French opera (especially Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*), and Richard Strauss. The ritualistic scenario of Francesca's first encounter with Paolo at the end of the first act shows the undeniable influence of the recent *Der Rosenkavalier*, but Zandonai's extended, wordless "duet" (accompanied by chorus) creates a haunting and novel effect all its own. He amplifies the moment by sustaining a D major whose luminosity feels archaic in a landscape of often turbulent harmonies.

Zandonai's exquisite orchestration is an indispensable ingredient in his dramaturgy. As another archaism, he calls for the five-stringed "viola pomposa" (usually played by a cello) for the music associated with Paolo's beauty. He also uses striking rhythmic figures in tandem with tonal colors to enhance the atmosphere, as in the "stumbling" figure evoking the hobbling but frightening Gianciotto or the pent-up, suspenseful syncopations of the final act. The composer shows a special gift for creating suspense—above all in the moments culminating in the scene of the fateful reading in Act III.

Even though *Francesca* has remained on the outer edges of the repertoire, the colorful mix of elements in Zandonai's score retains its potency a century on. After its premiere and successful run at the Met in the 1916–17 season, the opera became a rarity on American stages but was chosen as the second of two new productions celebrating the Met's centennial season in 1983–84; that production is being revived in this 21st-century encounter with Zandonai's masterwork.

—Thomas May