Synopsis

France, late 18th century

Act I
The Château de Coigny near Paris; spring, 1789

Act II
Paris, along the Cours-la-Reine; spring, 1794

Act III
The courtroom of the Revolutionary Tribunal; July 24, 1794

Act IV
St. Lazare Prison; July 25, 1794

Act I
Preparations are under way for a party. Gérard, servant to the Countess de Coigny, is disgusted by the ways of the aristocracy. He riles against the servants' life of slavery and prophesizes death to his masters. Maddalena, the countess's daughter, appears and Gérard reflects on his secret love for her, while she complains to her servant, Bersi, about the discomfort of wearing fashionable clothes. Guests arrive, among them Fléville, a novelist, who has brought his friend, the poet Andrea Chénier. The latest distressing news from Paris is discussed, then Fléville cheers the company with a pastorale he has written for the occasion. Maddalena teases a reluctant Chénier into improvising a poem. He responds with a rapturous description of the beauties of nature that turns into an appeal against tyranny and the suffering of the poor. The guests are offended but the countess begs their indulgence and commands a gavotte to begin. Just then, Gérard storms in with a group of starving peasants. Furious, the countess orders them out. Gérard takes off his livery, declaring he won't have anything to do with the aristocracy any longer, and departs. The countess invites the guests to resume the dance but they leave. The countess is left alone.

Act II
The revolutionary Reign of Terror is in full force. Bersi tries to fend off the Incredibile, a spy, by pretending to be a daughter of the Revolution, but he is not deceived as he has seen her looking at Chénier, who is sitting by himself in a café. Roucher arrives, urging his friend Chénier to leave the country before it's too late. The poet replies that it is his destiny to remain—he has received anonymous letters from a woman and hopes to find the love he never experienced. Their

conversation is interrupted by a group of leaders of the Revolution passing by, among them Gérard. The Incredibile asks him about a woman Gérard has been looking for. Gérard gives a description of Maddalena and the Incredibile tells him he will see her that evening. Meanwhile, Bersi asks Chénier to wait at the café for someone who is in great danger and wants to meet him—the writer of the letters. Maddalena appears, revealing her identity and begging for Chénier's protection. He promises to help her and both declare their love. The Incredibile, having observed them, brings Gérard to the scene. In the ensuing fight, Chénier wounds Gérard, who has recognized his opponent but tells him to get away and to protect Maddalena. When the Incredibile returns with guards and asks about the assailant, Gérard claims it was a stranger.

Act III

Mathieu, a revolutionary, is unsuccessfully urging the crowd to donate to the cause. Gérard arrives, recovered from his injuries, and in an impassioned appeal calls on the women to give their sons and their jewelry to the motherland. The old Madelon, who has already lost a son and a grandson to the Revolution, offers her youngest grandson as a soldier. As the crowd disperses, the Incredibile appears. He tells Gérard that Chénier has been arrested that morning and that this will certainly draw Maddalena from her hiding place. As Gérard writes Chénier's indictment, which will rid him of his rival, he reflects on his situation: once a slave of the aristocracy, he has now become a slave of passion. Maddalena enters. Gérard admits that he has laid a trap for her and confesses his love. Desperate, she offers herself to him in return for Chénier's freedom, then tells him of her miserable life since her mother was killed and their home burned. Gérard is touched by her devotion to Chénier and promises to try and save him. The tribunal assembles and the accused are led in, among them Chénier, who defends himself as a patriot and man of honor. Even though Gérard admits to the judges that his accusations were false, Chénier is sentenced to death.

Act IV

Chénier reads a final poem to his friend Roucher, in which he compares the sunset of his life to that of a spring day. Roucher leaves and Gérard arrives, together with Maddalena, who bribes the jailer to allow her to take the place of a condemned young woman. Gérard leaves to once again plead Chénier's case with Robespierre. Maddalena and Chénier are reunited and she tells him she has come to die with him. They share a final moment together before being taken to the guillotine.

Umberto Giordano

Andrea Chénier

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 1896

Giordano's most successful opera blends verismo's focus on the raw emotions of everyday people with the spectacle of historical grand opera. The sweeping drama depicts a high-minded poet (based on the real-life André Chénier) who falls victim to the French Revolution at the same time as he falls in love with the aristocratic (and also doomed) Maddalena de Coigny. The opera's marriage of sound and text is exemplary; the libretto presents gripping situations in sharp, pithy poetry whose very sound can impress even listeners who don't understand a word of Italian. More than anything, *Andrea Chénier* relies on engrossing performances from its lead performers for success. But the central characters are placed within an effective, larger musical canvas that bolsters the compelling star turns, rather than relying on them wholesale.

The Creators

Composer Umberto Giordano (1867–1948) was born in southern Italy and studied in Naples. His first operatic effort (the almost entirely forgotten *Marina*) was an entry in the same competition that gave birth to Pietro Mascagni's revolutionary *Cavalleria Rusticana* and to the hot-blooded verismo movement as a whole. *Andrea Chénier*, several years later, was Giordano's first success, followed swiftly by the fervent melodrama *Fedora*. Luigi Illica (1857–1919), the librettist, was a colorful poet who had also written the libretto for Catalani's *La Wally* (1892), though his greatest fame would rest on his collaborations with Giacomo Puccini. In fact, while busy with *Andrea Chénier*, Illica was also at work on Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Tosca*.

The Setting

Andrea Chénier is set in Paris amid the drama and turmoil of the French Revolution (1789–1794). By focusing on individuals caught up in a wildly dramatic moment in history, the opera manages to be both human and epic in scope. The title character is based on a fanciful interpretation of the life and death of the poet André Chénier (1762–1794). Born in Constantinople, well-traveled throughout Europe and Morocco, Chénier was guillotined a mere 48 hours before the collapse of the Reign of Terror, the final, most brutal phase of the Revolution. The historical figures of General Dumas and the bloodthirsty public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville appear in the opera; the characters of Maddalena de Coigny and the servant-turned-revolutionary Gérard, on the other hand, are dramatic inventions.

The Music

Giordano's score is lush and stirring, with emotions expressed powerfully and immediately by the orchestra and by the singers. In Act I, for example, the title character's famous solo "Un dì all'azzurro spazio") pulls the listener directly into the world of *Chénier*. The soprano must produce an amazing depth of expression in her great Act III aria, "La mamma morta," and the baritone has a thrilling and dramatically impressive solo in the same act, "Nemico della patria." The tenor and soprano express their love in two of the most charged duets in Italian opera, one in Act II, another as they face the guillotine together in the opera's finale. The score does not depend entirely on spotlight moments for its impact, however. The subtle touches of secondary characters such as the Incredibile or the old blind woman Madelon (whose brief but shattering solo in Act III can steal the show) and the handling of the chorus in the crowd scenes (most notably in the Act III courtroom scene) unite with the magnificent solos to form a remarkably integrated score.

Andrea Chénier *at the Met*

Star power has been the driving force behind productions of *Andrea Chénier* since the work's Met premiere in 1921. Beniamino Gigli, touted as the heir to Caruso, starred in the first performances, his prima donnas over the years including the electric verismo sensation Claudia Muzio (in 1921 and 1922) and the spectacular young American Rosa Ponselle (1921–32). The opera surged in popularity in the postwar period, with such tenors as Mario Del Monaco (1954–57), Richard Tucker (1954–70), Carlo Bergonzi (1958–77), and Franco Corelli (1962–71) vying for their respective Maddalenas. Zinka Milanov was preeminent among sopranos in this period; she sang the role 36 times between 1954 and 1966. Plácido Domingo took on the title role in 1970 opposite Renata Tebaldi and repeated it in 1977 and 2002. The current production by Nicolas Joël and Hubert Monloup premiered in 1996 with Luciano Pavarotti, Aprile Millo, and Juan Pons in the leading roles and James Levine conducting. Its most recent revival in 2007 featured Ben Heppner and Violeta Urmana.

Program Note

Umberto Giordano (1867–1948) is luckier than most verismo composers in that he achieved immortality with not one but two works, *Andrea Chénier* and *Fedora*. That said, he is still best-known for *Chénier*, which places him in the company of Leoncavallo, Mascagni, and Cilea, each of whom had a single tremendous verismo hit when they were young and spent the rest of their lives—often over a half-century—trying to follow it up. All would be stuck in the shadow of Puccini, who turned out a shelf of repertory material, but each of their sole smash operas endured.

The story of Giordano—the son of a pharmacist who tried unsuccessfully to discourage his son's musical leanings—really begins with an 1888 contest for a one-act opera sponsored by the powerful Italian publisher Edoardo Sonzogno. The winner was *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Mascagni's launching pad, but Giordano's entry, a still-unpublished and unperformed opus called *Marina*, received honorable mention and enticed Sonzogno to commission a full-length work. But after a short-lived potboiler, *Mala Vita*, and the less successful *Regina Diaz*, Giordano was unceremoniously dumped by Sonzogno, who brazenly accused the composer of "lacking musical talent." It took personal persuasion by Giordano's friend, the composer Alberto Franchetti, to get him back in the publisher's good graces. Franchetti also gave Giordano a libretto that Luigi Illica had written for him on the subject of André Chénier, a posthumously recognized giant of French literature who was guillotined in 1794 only 48 hours before the end of the Reign of Terror. (It would not be the last time that Franchetti gave away a future hit libretto by Illica—*Tosca* was the other one.)

Although Illica gave bit parts to real 18th-century figures—René Dumas, president of the Revolutionary Tribunal, Public Prosecutor Antoine Fouquier-Tinville, poet Jean-Antoine Roucher—and conscientiously mentioned other names and period details, he was not above taking extravagant liberties with Chénier's actual life story. For one thing, the love story is a fake; there is no record of a Maddalena in André's life. It is true that Chénier's most famous work, the poem *La Jeune Captive*, was written as a come-on toward a beautiful new prisoner in the Maison Lazare, the Duchesse de Fleury, who as a member of the Coigny family was probably the inspiration for Maddalena. But the poem never got to the duchesse and she certainly did not write letters to André, let alone sacrifice herself with him at the guillotine. Gérard is a total fabrication, an opportunity to provide the third side of the ever-useful romantic triangle that so often drives the engines of verismo. Act IV supposedly takes place in the Maison Lazare prison, but inconveniently enough, Chénier did not spend his last night there; instead he was transferred to the Conciergerie, where the condemned awaited swift execution. Moreover there is no record of exactly what Chénier did on his last night.

Yet for all the historical flimflam, Illica, prodded by Giordano, was able to capture a good deal of the character of André Chénier, man and poet. "Un dì all'azzurro spazio," one of two famous arias for the title character, is partially

based upon André Chénier's own "Hymn to Justice," swerving from an ode to love into a broadside against the callousness of the government and clergy toward the poor. Chénier's poem "Comme un dernier rayon," written days before his execution, forms the heart of the other big tenor aria, "Come un bel dì di maggio." Here Illica tones down the political thrusts yet preserves the essence of Chénier's poetic ruminations about his approaching end and his faith in the power of words. Chénier, the unrepentant idealist and sensitive romantic, does shine through despite the opera's fictionalized plot, and even Gérard becomes a vehicle for genuine working-class resentments of the time.

The young composer labored for two years on the score, finishing it on January 27, 1896, and La Scala agreed to perform it. There was opposition again from within the Sonzogno house—and this time, in another of those uncanny path-crossings in the verismo community, Giordano asked Mascagni to intercede for him. Indeed, Mascagni went so far as to jump out of a new Tuscan electric streetcar in order to greet Giordano that day, an act that may have saved his life since the tram took off and crashed minutes later, killing several aboard. The lead tenor bailed out of the production and Giuseppe Borgalli, an inexperienced but game substitute with nothing to lose, was discovered quite by accident on the street by the composer. And there was public hostility toward anything emanating from Sonzogno in the wake of several recent failures.

Luckily for everyone concerned, when the premiere rolled around on March 28, 1896, *Chénier* was an instant success right from the opening scene. The timing was right; verismo was in the driver's seat in Italian opera, and Giordano used many of its familiar tactics—setting up the action with deceptively light-hearted washes of local color, providing voluptuous eruptions of ardor for the principal voices when they feel amorous, composing straight through in the manner of music drama. But perhaps it was the historical subject matter that drove Giordano toward creating a score with more dignity and poise than one would expect from a so-called verismo composer; he respects the audience enough not to go over the top with sentimentality in order to drive home obvious points. *Chénier* was a sign that verismo was growing up, touching upon ideas and politics in the tradition of Verdi instead of merely telling seamy local tales.

Although New York first heard *Andrea Chénier* less than seven months after the world premiere, it didn't reach the Met until March 1, 1921, in a performance given on tour in Philadelphia. But when it did, the opera immediately became a perennial favorite, performed in every season until 1932. Beniamino Gigli practically owned the title role during his 12 years at the Met, and his silvery-voiced 1922 recordings of "Un dì all'azzurro spazio" and "Come un bel dì di maggio" come from this period. Sadly, New York never got a chance to hear Caruso sing Chénier; he was supposed to appear in the 1921 Met premiere but illness—his final one, alas—intervened.

As for Giordano, only 28 years old at the time of *Andrea Chénier*'s premiere, this would be the high-water mark of his career. He came close on his next try, *Fedora*, which had the advocacy of Caruso on its side and still receives moderate attention today. But it would be a steeper downhill curve from there as he rode the verismo route to oblivion in company with fellow one-hit-wonders Mascagni, Leoncavallo, and Cilea. His last try was *Il Re* in 1929 and then he gave up, although he toyed with the idea of a Rasputin opera late in life.

Like Mascagni and Cilea, Giordano survived until mid-century, dying three years after Mascagni and two ahead of Cilea, united in the eyes and ears of the pundits as irrelevant relics in the age of serialism. Yet the gist of verismo is obviously very much alive at the box office today—and *Andrea Chénier*, with its fascinating historical backdrop and nicely turned outings for star singers, is one of that era's sturdiest landmarks.

—Richard S. Ginell