

# La donna è mobile

David Kettle

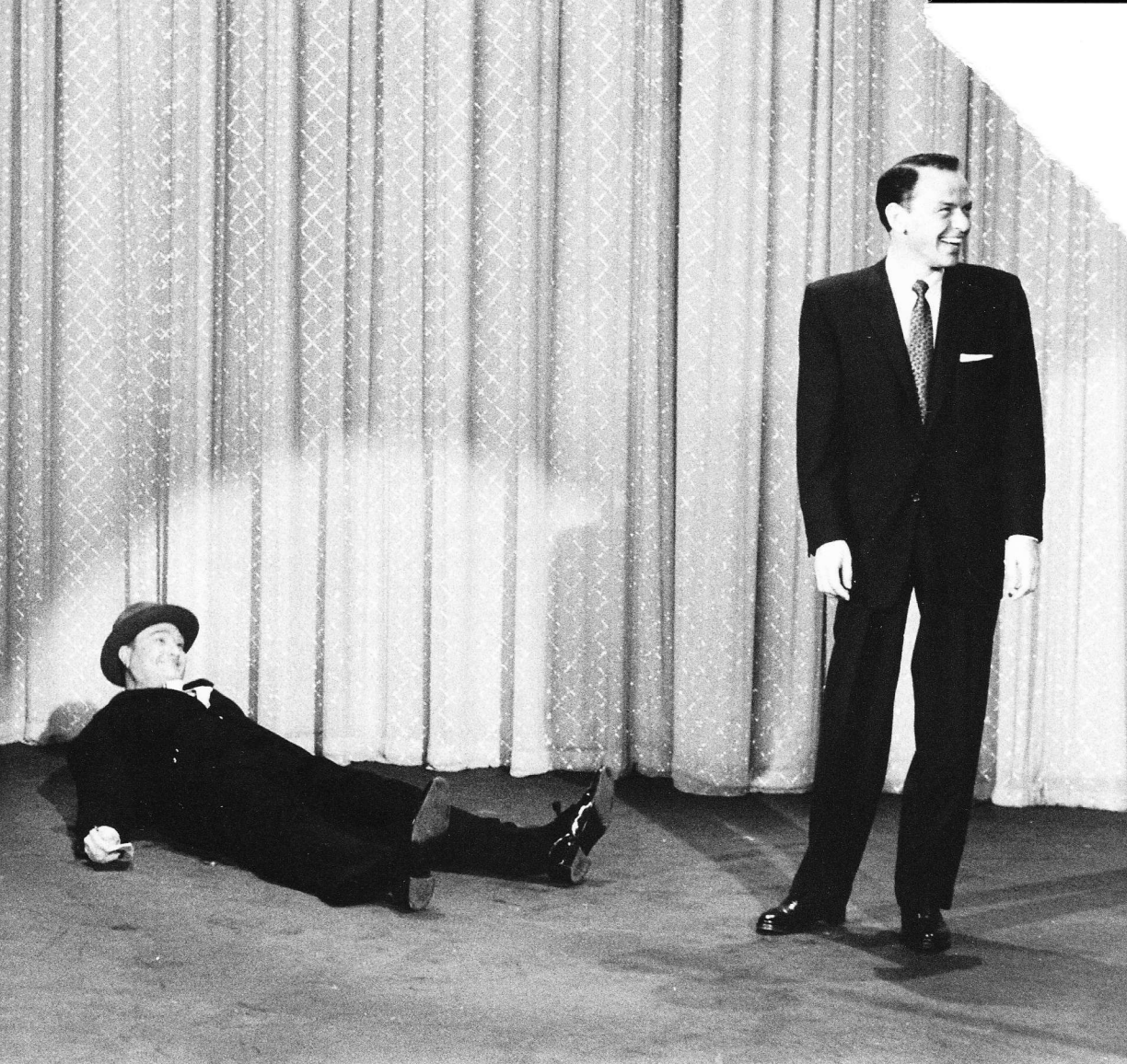
With the possible exception of a certain Neapolitan tune that for many is indelibly associated with Venetian gondoliers bearing ice cream cornets, *Rigoletto's* Act III *canzone* 'La donna è mobile', sung by the Duke, must surely rank as the most famous Italian song of all time. Everybody (or nearly everybody) knows it; many love it; and a few despise it (the Swiss composer Arthur Honegger, for instance, declared in a letter that its banality was enough to stifle a barrel organ in Paris's nightclub-lined rue de Lappe). Banal or not, it's undeniably catchy, cheerful, tuneful, and ruthlessly effective. Once heard, it's never forgotten. Like many who attended the premiere of *Rigoletto* in 1851, you may well find yourself (perhaps involuntarily) whistling it all day tomorrow. And the day after.

'La donna è mobile' is everywhere, to the extent that it's now accepted shorthand for Italian opera in general. It's heard in films, TV series and even video games. Lisa sings it in *The Simpsons*; Kenny sings it in *South Park*; and a Venetian gondolier sings it in *Futurama*. It has even found a firm foothold on football terraces – albeit with new lyrics. It's fortunate that the adulatory 'We've got Cesc Fabregas' and 'Paulo di Canio', or the more brutal 'Your ground's too big for you', fit the tune's distinctive rhythm so perfectly.

Verdi knew exactly what he had created when he unleashed the song on an unsuspecting world. Before the premiere at Venice's La Fenice opera house, he withheld the song's score from the performers until the very last moment, afraid that his creation would be discovered by the public before its official unveiling. Even when the opera's first Duke, tenor Raffaele Mirate, had the music in his grasp, the composer forbade him from singing or even whistling it outside rehearsals before the premiere, lest his beast should escape. Given the way the song burrows itself into the brain, this may have been well-nigh impossible. In any case, the opera was a huge success, and Mirate's performance of 'La donna è mobile' was hailed as the highlight of the evening.

Since then, every tenor worth his salt has had the song in his repertoire. Enrico Caruso, Mario Lanza, Giuseppe di Stefano, Jussi Björling and Andrea Bocelli have all sung it. For crossover artists such as G4, Russell Watson and Il Divo, it's a must. The Three Tenors famously took 'La donna è mobile' to even greater popularity when they performed it in Los Angeles before the 1994 FIFA World Cup final.

But what exactly is it about the song that makes it so effective? Well, plenty of things. For a start there's that distinctive moment of silence in



the introduction, which attracts the attention and leaves the melody hanging and unresolved, forcing us to listen further in order to discover how it's going to continue. It may be unkind to say that the tune is repetitive, but there's no getting away from the fact that the second phrase is simply a repeat of the first a note lower, and that the same is (almost) true of the third and fourth phrases. During the song's two-minute length, the lucky listener gets to hear those melodies a total of six times, so it's hardly surprising that they stay with you. The harmony is gloriously simple, and the orchestration dispenses with the subtleties found elsewhere in the opera in favour of a straightforward oom-pah-pah accompaniment. Which is not to denigrate the song at all: it's a masterpiece of simplicity, bright and brash, and infernally catchy.

Yet there's a heavy irony at work here. How many that know the tune, and maybe even know the song's first line, actually know what the song

*Above: Frank Sinatra laughs as comedian Red Skelton clowns around during an episode of *Toast of the Town*, New York, 12 August 1956. Carl Mydans/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.*

is about? If they realised that the words contained such gems as 'Women are fickle, like feathers in the wind' and 'He who trusts them is always miserable', would they still feel comfortable whistling it in the street?

In fact, the song is quite a cruel attack on women by one of the most 'fickle' characters in *Rigoletto*, the Duke. The fact that he first sings it in a tavern while waiting for his wench for the night only serves to emphasise his hypocrisy. And rather than being 'fickle', the female characters in *Rigoletto* are generally far more steadfast and faithful than the men – as epitomised by the tragic Gilda.

Of course, Verdi can claim innocence: 'La donna è mobile' is the Duke expressing his own opinions, so in many ways it's his song rather than the composer's. Likewise, in musical terms, the song stands apart from the darker musical world of the rest of the opera. Its bright, bold character reflects the Duke's privileged, hedonistic attitudes, contrasted with the grittier, earthier music depicting the other characters and their daily concerns. In Victor Hugo's play *Le Roi s'amuse*, which Verdi and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave adapted to create *Rigoletto*, the song similarly stands apart from the main dialogue as 'Souvent femme varie/Bien fol est qui s'y fie' (Women are often changeable, and he who trusts them is quite mad).

Yet things get darker still. *Rigoletto* is a tenebrous tale of curses, revenge and murder, and the three occasions that we hear the light-hearted 'La donna è mobile' – first when the Duke waits in Sparafucile's sinister tavern, then as he falls asleep there, and lastly when Rigoletto believes he has the slain Duke at his feet – are some of the grimmest moments in the work, throwing the song's superficial gaiety into stark relief.

Why on earth choose those dark moments for such a cheerful song? For dramatic effect, of course. 'La donna è mobile' is astonishingly effective in its own terms, but it's even more so in its context in the opera – it's flashy and facile while the rest is subtle and evocative; it's glittering and gay as opposed to sinister and doom-laden. Verdi's genius lies not only in composing a song that is so effective and so memorable, but also in challenging his audience by creating something so dripping in irony, and in conveying something so cynical and sinister in one of his most attractive, catchy creations.

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