Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's "Ozymandias"

Massimo Ossi

In the late 1950s Hans Moldenhauer began an extensive correspondence with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco that continued until the composer's death in 1968. In addition to some 134 letters to the collector, the Archives include a wealth of scores that the composer sent to Moldenhauer, the result of what the composer, writing in 1959, called his "library cleaning." Among the musical items are sketches and preparatory materials, including those for several of the Shakespeare overtures and for the cycle for guitar and narrator setting selections from Juan Ramón Jiménez's collection of prose poems *Platero y yo*, as well as autograph scores for major works such as the Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra, op. 99, composed for Andrés Segovia in 1938-1939, just before the composer's move to America.

Castelnuovo-Tedesco left his native Italy for the United States in 1939; of Jewish descent, he sought to escape the anti-Semitic atmosphere of Benito Mussolini's rule. By 1940, after a brief period in New York, he settled in Beverly Hills, California, where he remained until his death. A student of Ildebrando Pizzetti, Castelnuovo-Tedesco had been composing actively since the first decade of the century, and his reputation was well established by the time he left Italy: several major orchestral works had received premieres in Europe and the United States under the direction of Arturo Toscanini and Sir John Barbirolli and with such soloists as Jascha Heifetz and Gregor Piatigorsky. His arrival in California coincided with the beginning of a long period of great productivity. In the early 1940s he began composing film scores (his earliest was *Tortilla Flat* in 1942, and he went on to write over one hundred more between 1942 and 1956). He also produced a variety of solo and chamber compositions, ranging from songs with piano and other accompaniment to pieces for guitar, for which Castelnuovo-Tedesco is perhaps best known, as well as a number of large-scale works, including four operas, two ballets, five oratorios and other choral pieces, six symphonic Shakespeare overtures, several orchestral works, and concertos for guitar, violin, and other solo instruments.

The letter of February 6, 1959, stands as an example of the range of musical matters included in Castelnuovo-Tedesco's "library cleaning." It introduces a group of eighteen items, (see Table of Works), including, as the composer wrote to Moldenhauer,

1) old music, "middle-aged" music, recent music; 2) published music, unpublished music, music which will never be published!; 3) good music, mediocre music, bad music (I don't want you to think that I always write good music!).

As the last comment suggests, Castelnuovo-Tedesco was disarmingly and charmingly candid in assessing the works he was sending to Moldenhauer. The fantasy on Donizetti's *Daughter of the Regiment* was "an amusing pastiche" but "too long"; *Liberty, Mother of the Exiles* he characterized as "another of my choral songs, and a *bad one*!"; the Chopin transcriptions were "another of my sins!" done because "the American publishers, who refused to publish my original music, were asking for transcriptions."

Not all was bad, of course, and the composer singled out *The Fiery Furnace*, the *Six Proverbs of Solomon*, and the *Sacred Service* as works he particularly liked. The last held a great deal of personal significance: written in 1943, it marked the end of what Castelnuovo-Tedesco regarded as his "bad years" of 1939-1942, his first as an expatriate, and the composer wrote that "with this work my 'recovery' started." It was dedicated to the memory of his mother, who had died the year after he had arrived in America, and, he wrote to Moldenhauer, "[it] contains some of my most moving pages."

Among the pieces listed in the letter was also "Ozymandias." It dates from 1944, and according to the composer's account it, too, records a personal reaction, in this case to the news that on July 24-25, 1943, the Fascist Grand Council had deposed and arrested Mussolini. Although Mussolini was freed from prison by German commandos in September 1943 and managed to assemble a rogue government in the small town of Salò on the shores of Lake Garda until April 1945 when he was finally captured on his way to Switzerland and shot, the events of July 1943 represented the turning point in the war, preparing the way for the Italian government's capitulation to the invading Allied forces.

It was presumably to the first wave of optimism following the fall of the Fascist dictatorship that "Ozymandias" belongs, although the historical circumstances surrounding the genesis of this song suggest either that the composer, writing some fifteen years later, may have misremembered the date of its composition as having been later than it actually was, or that he waited at least several months--into 1944--before setting the text to music. As he wrote to Moldenhauer:

Prod. _____ Title _____

Nothing beside remains. Around the decay of that co—

lo—sal wreck boundless and bare the

lone and le—vel sands stretch far a—way

Shelley

Ozymandias

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Beverly Hills, Calif. June 8, 1964

269 So. Clark Drive
Beverly Hills, Calif

Feb. 6, 1959

Dear Hans.

The results of some more „library cleaning", which I am going to send you one of these days... In the meantime some „explanations"... There is little of everything: 1) old music... „middle-aged" music, recent music; 2) published music, unpublished music, music... which will never be published!...; 3) good music, mediocre music, bad music (I don't want you to think that I always write good music!...).

And here is the list (in chronological order):

1) 2 Canti Greci for Mixed Chorus (1916, unpublished, no opus number). They belong to my „school years" (I was still studying with Pizzetti; they were performed at the Conservatory, Rome... my wife was singing in the chorus!); I believe they are still good...; and at least they may prove you how „well trained" we were in choral writing at that time.... (I made the copy and the English translation here in Beverly Hills)

2) Stars - 4 Sketches for Piano (1940, unpublished). Here... we jump many years and we come to the first year I was in America. These were written before I came to Hollywood, and are an indication of the style "I would have liked to use in motion-pictures (but I never could!...). They were never published, because all publishers objected. "Movie-stars become old! and then who remembers them?"... Anyway here you have Greta Garbo in a romantic mood, Deanna Durbin vocalizing, Marlene Dietrich in a cabaret-mood,

Ozymandias. A song on a poem by Shelley (1944, unpublished, which should be op. 124, Nr. 1). Raymond Gram Swing, the commentator, read this poem at the radio the evening of Mussolini's downfall, and I set it to music...; but no publisher ever wanted to publish this "gloomy song" (although it was sung in concert). Anyway this is the first *autograph*.

The association of "Ozymandias," Shelley, Mussolini and Castelnuovo-Tedesco draws a neat historical rectangle. According to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, the "Tomb of Osymandias" was the remains of the Theban *Ramesseum*, the funerary temple of Ramses II (1279-13 BC) which was famous for its fifty-seven-foot statue of the Pharaoh ("Osymandyas" was a corruption of Ramses's prenomen, Usima re). In Diodorus's account, the temple carried this inscription:

King of Kings am I, Osymandyas. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works.[1]

Interest in Egyptian antiquity ran high in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, following the discovery of the Rosetta stone in 1799 and its subsequent decipherment, published first by Thomas Young in 1814 and then by Jean-François Champollion in 1821-1822. The English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) probably encountered Diodorus's account in his readings of classical Greek and Roman letters, which he pursued with his friend Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), whom the classical scholar Thomas Taylor dubbed "Greeky-Peeky" for his interest in ancient Greece.[2] Shelley interpreted the image of the great Pharaoh's shattered statue in light of his lifelong concerns with social justice and revolutionary political movements in Europe: in the sonnet "Ozymandias" (1817) he drew from it an ironic parable of the transitory nature of absolute political power and ambition.

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."[3]

Unlike Shelley, Castelnuovo-Tedesco was no political activist, but Swing's association of Shelley's commentary on Ramses II's fallen colossus with Mussolini's larger-than-life figure and his ouster from power obviously touched a chord in the émigré composer just as he was emerging from a difficult period. Indeed, the origins of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's interest in composing works on Jewish themes, most of them sacred, appear to have coincided with the decline of the Fascist government: his first essay in this new genre, the highly personal Sacred Service, was written in the year of Mussolini's downfall (1943, op. 122), and a setting of the *Kol Nidrei* follows shortly thereafter (1944). Religious themes recur with frequency throughout Castelnuovo-Tedesco's output after this point: to cite but one example, *The Fiery Furnace* (1958, based on the *The Book of Daniel*), the cantata listed in the letter that accompanies "Ozymandias," was the third in a series of biblical works that included *Naomi and Ruth* (1947, based on *The Book of Ruth*) and *The Queen of Sheba* (1953). "Ozymandias" can perhaps be counted as a secular counterpart to works of this sacred vein, since it responds to those historical and political events that most upset the core of the composer's personal identity--his nationality, both old and new, his Jewishness, and his family, divided by exile.

The choice of an English Romantic poet also fits with Castelnuovo-Tedesco's highly refined literary tastes, which ranged from Medieval Italian and Provençal poetry to modern Spanish poets such as Jiménez and García Lorca. It was English lyric poetry and drama, however, that were central to his production. He had begun composing the series of Shakespeare overtures in 1940 (the first was *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture to a Fairy Tale*, op. 108), and in 1944-1947 he set twenty-eight of the poet's sonnets (op. 125); subsequently, two of his operas, *The Merchant of Venice* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, were also based on Shakespeare. In the 1960s he turned to Keats, setting a number of his works (the first of these settings is "The Mermaid Tavern," from 1962, also included in the group of manuscripts sent to Moldenhauer together with "Ozymandias"); and a chamber opera deals with a libretto based on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1961-1962).

Castelnuovo-Tedesco rendered the ironic remove of Shelley's poem with an austere syllabic setting whose severity, as much as its subject, may have led to its characterization as a "gloomy song" (the opening of the Andante lento section is marked "quiet and cold"). The overall tonality centers on a somber D Minor, although the introductory phrase momentarily highlights D Major; throughout, however, Castelnuovo-Tedesco makes use of richly chromatic and at times quite dissonant harmonies.

The song's form and prosody follow closely Shelley's sonnet, resulting in a balanced song of three sections with a brief recitative introduction. The main narrative (Andante lento, starting at measure 7) falls into three parts: two outer sections (of fourteen and seven measures each) balanced around the central quotation (six measures). The freely declamatory style of the introductory verse places it apart from the more melodic Andante lento of the narrative, and the climactic internal quote, "My name is Ozymandias..." is set off by brief piano interludes, as is the closing commentary, "Nothing besides remains..."

The opening piano phrase (measures 1-2), with its emphasis on parallel open fifths, establishes the sonority for both the beginning of the traveler's narrative (measures 7-8) and the central inscription from the base of the statue (measures 22-27), and evokes--without specific reference to Arabic music--a sense of the exotic associated both with the report from a distant land and with the self-aggrandizing words of a remote ruler.

In the outer sections, the sparse piano accompaniment juxtaposes a pulsating syncopated rhythmic figure in the left hand, which functions almost like a tolling bell, with, in the right hand, full chords that support the voice, moving generally in a slow harmonic rhythm of half-notes. For the climactic quotation, Castelnuovo-Tedesco exploits the wide range of the piano, spanning a full four octaves at "king of kings," and then continuing to emphasize low sonorities into the closing section, with its somber commentary on the unwitting irony of Ozymandia's (and Mussolini's) hubris.

Table of Works
Items listed in the letter of February 6, 1959

1) *Due Canti Greci* (1916, for mixed chorus, unpublished, no op. number)
2) *Stars, "four sketches for piano"* (1940, unpublished)
3) *Nocturne in Hollywood* (1941, for piano, unpublished, no op. number)
4) *The Daughter of the Regiment*, "a phantasy for violin and piano on themes of Donizetti" (1941, op. 110; only two movements, "Valse" and "Romance," published)
5) *The Mermaid Tavern* (1962, unpublished, op. 113, No. 1; versions for solo voice and for chorus)
6) *Sacred Service (for the Sabbath eve)* (1943, op. 122; only the organ interludes were published)
7) *Ozymandias* (1944, for solo voice and piano, unpublished, op. 124, No.1)
8) *Candide*, "six illustrations for a novel by Voltaire for piano" (1944, published as op. 123)
9) *Liberty, Mother of the Exiles*, choral song (1944, unpublished, no op. number)
10 and 11) Transcriptions for violin and piano of Chopin's *11 Preludes* (1946) and *Fantasie-Impromptu* (no date; neither was published)
12) *Psyche* (1951, song, published as op. 113, No. 5)

13) *Six Proverbs of Solomon* (1953, for male chorus a cappella, unpublished, op. 168)
14) *Songs of Oceanides* (from Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*; 1954, op. 171; versions for women's chorus, two flutes, and harp, and for chorus and piano; the version for chorus and piano was published)
15) *Two sonatas for trumpet and piano* (1955, unpublished, op. 179; the packet included a separate trumpet part, not in the composer's hand)
16) *Cherry-Ripe*, "a Madrigal for Mixed Chorus" (1955, unpublished, no op. number)
17) *The Fiery Furnace* (cantata for baritone, children-or women's-chorus, and piano, originally scored with an accompaniment of organ and percussion; 1958, to be piblished as op. 183)
18) *Pastorale and Rondo* (1958, for clarinet, violin, cello, ond piano, unpublished, op.185)

[1] See *Diodorus of Sicily, with an English Translation* by C. H. Oldfather (London: William Heinemann, 1933), vol. 1, pp. 166-69, and also Anne Burton, *Diodorus Siculus: Book I, A Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), pp. 147-48.

[2] On Shelley's sonnet and his pursuit of Greek literarure, see Desmond King-Hele, *Shelly, His Thought and Work*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 93-95. In the notebook that contains the drafts and fair copy of this poem, "Ozymandias" is partially written over notes taken from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. See *Bodleian MS. Shelley e.*4, ed. P.M. S. Dawson, vol. 3 in the series *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition, with full Transcriptions and Scholarly Apparatus*, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York and London: Garland, 1987), f. 85r-v, and p. xiii.

[3] *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Neville Rogers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 319-20. The poem dates from 1817 and was published in 1818, just before Shelley left for his final move to Italy, where he drowned in 1822, when his boat sank in a storm off the coast of Liguria.