

Maximiliano Amici

The Pit and The Pendulum

Monodrama in five scenes after E. A. Poe's short story of the same name (1842).

Libretto for the Concert Version (Baritone, Piano and Electronics)

Characters

THE CONVICT

Baritone

First Scene – The Sentence (Lettura e aria recitata)

CONVICT:

For the victims of the tyranny of the Inquisition,
There is the choice of death
With its direst physical agonies,
or death with its most hideous moral horrors.

I know my judges; I have been reserved for the latter.

I awoke.
My consciousness lost.
Weary, with unending agony.
The universe was silence, stillness, and night.
Memories started to form.

Dreadful sentence of death
– *animadversio debita* –

The fallacy of my eyes
Shaped the judges' lips,
Acrimonious, thin,
Supreme disdain of human grief.

They decreed my fate.

There stole into my fancy,
Like a rich musical note,
The thought of what sweet rest must be in the grave –
What sweet rest must there be in the grave!

Then the blackness of darkness supervened;
My soul swallowed up, in a mad, rushing descent into Hades;
Filled with horror was my spirit, yet with otherworldly peace.
The universe was silence, stillness, and night.

Second Scene – The Pit (Recitativo)

CONVICT:

Mere consciousness of being,
Without thought,
I exist.
Only a feeble auto-perception.
I still struggle to exercise my reason.
I remember, again, with anguish.

Where am I?
Am I awake?

I could not say.
 I have no answers,
 I only desire to lapse into insensibility.
 Oh! Silence, and stillness, (and) night!
 Oh! Eternal blackness!

Left to perish of starvation
 In this subterranean world of darkness;
 What fate awaits me?
 I dare not to think.

I know my judges,
 The result will be death,
 a death of bitterness.
 Of that I'm sure,
 But in which form,
 I yet could not say.

Walking around the cell,
 I stumbled, and fell,
 On the brink of a circular pit.
 I eluded the plunge by mere accident.
 I retreated.
 In other conditions of mind
 I might have had courage to end my misery at once
 by a plunge into one of these abysses;
 but now I am the veriest of cowards.
 The veriest of cowards!

And I know my judges.
 I know they know.
 Another milder destruction awaits me.
 Milder! Is that not ironic?

Third Scene – The Pendulum (Introduction, Arioso alla Marcia, Coro)

CONVICT:

Inexpressible sick, and weak. I am bound.
 I can see some light.
 Death now appears as a figure of Time... in motion?
 Time holding a pendulum with crescent-shaped blade,
 Descending upon me...
 Is this a nightmare?
 There rushes a half-formed thought of joy – of hope.
 What business have I with hope?
 Hope that prompts the nerve to quiver,
 Hope that whispers to the death-condemned
 Even in the dungeons of the Inquisition.
 A half-formed thought of joy – of hope.
 As it forms, it perishes.
 In vain I struggle to perfect it.
 In vain...
 A death of bitterness awaits me,
 I know my judges.

They know I know.

Time!

The pendulum descends, inexorable.
Some ten or twelve vibrations
Would bring the steel in contact with my robe.
The calmness of despair
Makes me think clearly,
For the first time since I'm here,
Many hours – or days.

Again, that idea of deliverance.
Feeble,
Scarcely sane,
Hardly definite,
But still entire:

Let the vermin eat the bandages that enchain me.
Let them leap in hundreds upon my person,
Let them writhe upon my throat,
And seek my lips with theirs.
Tolerate a disgust, for which the world has no name,
To let them set me free.

With a more than human resolution, lay still.

Let them set me free...
Free... in the hands of the Inquisition...
Is that not ironic?

Fourth Scene – All is not Lost (Introduction and Cantilena)

CONVICT:

All is not lost.
In the deepest slumber!
In delirium!
In a swoon!
In death!

Even in the grave all is not lost.
Else there is no immortality for man.

Arousing from the most profound of slumbers,
We break the gossamer web of some dream,
Uncovering memories of the gulf beyond.
And that gulf is—what?
How shall we distinguish its shadows
From those of the tomb?

He who's never swooned,
Is not he who finds strange palaces
And wildly familiar faces in coals that glow;
Is not he who beholds floating in mid-air
The sad visions that the many may not view;
Is not he who ponders over the perfume

Of some novel flower—
Is not he whose brain grows bewildered
With the meaning of some musical cadence,
Which has never before arrested his attention.

All is not lost.
Even in the grave all is not lost.
Else there is no immortality for man.

Fifth Scene – Rescue (Recitato and Final Scene)

CONVICT:

My understanding is broken.

The chamber burns in a glow
On the brink of the pit, I can now see its inmost recesses.
The vapor of heated iron comes to my nostrils,
And a suffocating odor pervades the prison.
I gasp for breathing....

Fiendish portraitures disfigure the walls.
A richer tint of crimson diffuses itself
Over those pictured horrors of blood.
I cannot force my imagination
To regard them as unreal.
Those fearful figures thrill my nerves;
Wild, demonish eyes,
Unreal, ghastly vivid fiends,
Glare upon me in a thousand directions.

I know my judges...

A death of bitterness awaits me!

Thoughts come in swirling succession.
I cannot grasp them,
They suddenly surface,
Only to plunge again
Into the depths of my consciousness;
As waves of terror
Thoughts shatter my being.

And I only dare to imagine
What a relief a sudden death would have been!
How unspeakable!
Oh! Horror!
Oh! For a voice to speak!
Horror!
Oh! Any horror but this!
Any death but this!
Death!
Any death but the pit!