

Andrea Chénier Synopsis

Act I

The Winter Garden at the Château Coigny, 1789

The Contessa di Coigny is about to host an elaborate party. One of her footmen, Carlo Gérard, watches with pity as his elderly father, a gardener at the château, struggles to help with the preparations. Gérard is disgusted at the idleness of the aristocracy and looks forward to the imminent destruction of their privileged lives (*T'odio, casa dorata!*). The Contessa enters with her daughter Maddalena and Maddalena's mulatto companion Bersi, and gives copious orders to the servants. Gérard, who has been secretly in love with Maddalena since they were children, watches resentfully.

The guests arrive. They include the writer Pietro Fléville, who has brought with him two protégés, the poet Andrea Chénier and the musician Flando Fiorinelli. The Contessa's Abbé arrives with the latest news from Paris. The guests are alarmed by his tales of political unrest in the capital. Fléville attempts to distract them with the entertainment he has organized for the evening, a pastoral idyll. The Contessa asks Chénier to recite a poem but he declines, much to her annoyance. At Maddalena's provoking insistence, Chénier improvises some verses. His theme is the delineation of 'love'. He contrasts his feelings of patriotic love for France with the idle indifference of the aristocracy and church to the sufferings of its people (*Un dì all'azzurro spazio*). Moved and shamed, Maddalena asks to be excused and rushes from the room. The Contessa's guests are appalled by Chénier's words. Chénier leaves. Gérard, who has listened intently, remains in a state of high emotion.

Musicians strike up a gavotte and the Contessa invites her guests to dance. The angry voices of a mob are suddenly heard outside, approaching the château. Gérard flings open the windows to let the starving peasants in. The Contessa orders the footmen to throw them out. Gérard defies her, throwing off his servant's livery, and leaves with his father and the crowd. The Contessa is shaken but commands that the party continue.

Act II

The Café Hottot, by the Perronet Bridge, Paris, 1794

France has been in the throes of Revolution for five years. The King and Queen have been executed and the government, dominated by Robespierre's Jacobin party, have imposed 'The Terror'. Show-trials and executions take place daily.

Chénier is seated at a table, writing. Mathieu, a *sans-culotte*, is busily attending to an altar celebrating the Revolutionary martyr Marat. Bersi, now a *merveilleuse*, is also there, closely observed by the Incredible (an *incroyable*), a Jacobin spy who notes with interest her attempts to catch Chénier's attention. Confronting him, she declares herself a patriotic daughter of the Revolution, but the Incredible is suspicious of her connection to a mysterious fair-haired woman he is searching for. He resolves to watch her and Chénier closely.

Chénier's friend Roucher arrives with a passport he has procured for him. Initially a leading figure of the Revolution, Chénier has fallen from favour, as an outspoken critic of the Jacobins. Roucher advises him to leave France as soon as possible. Chénier is reluctant; he is intrigued by a series of ardent letters he has received from a mysterious woman, who signs herself only with the single word 'Hope'. Roucher deciphers the letters as the work of a *merveilleuse* and advises his friend to give them no more thought.

A crowd gathers to see the Representatives of the National Convention process by, led by Robespierre himself. Gérard, having prospered in the Revolution, is now a popular Jacobin and is acclaimed by the people as he enters. The Incredible draws him aside; it is Gérard who has set him the task of finding the fair woman he suspects to be associated with Bersi. The Incredible promises to track her down by nightfall. Bersi returns with a group of

merveilleuses and tells Chénier that ‘Hope’ will come to meet him that evening by the altar of Marat. Roucher says he will keep watch during the assignation. All the while, the Incredible is listening and observing.

As darkness falls, the mysterious woman appears and Chénier approaches her. It is Maddalena. Hidden for months by Bersi, she has written to Chénier in the desperate hope that he remembers her and will offer her his protection. Chénier has never forgotten the young woman at the Château Coigny. They realize that they love each other (*Ecco l’altare*).

The couple are suddenly surprised by Gérard and the Incredible. Roucher drags Maddalena away to safety and Chénier draws his sword. He fights and wounds Gérard. Recognizing the poet whose words inspired him five years earlier, Gérard warns Chénier to flee with Maddalena; Chénier’s name is on the list of the Public Prosecutor, Fouquier-Tinville. When the *sans-culottes* arrive, Gérard says he does not know who attacked him.

Interval

Act III

The Hall of the Revolutionary Tribunal, a few months later

Chénier and Maddalena have fled Paris and are in hiding. Mathieu attempts to stir up support for the Revolutionary cause: France is in danger, threatened by foreign invasion and internal rebellion. But the listening crowd is silent and sullen. Gérard arrives, recovered from his wounds, and stirs the people with an impassioned plea. He directs the women of France to offer their sons and jewels to the Revolution. A blind old woman, Madelon, comes forward. She has lost both her son and eldest grandson, fighting for their country, and now offers her youngest grandson, all that remains of her family, in their place. The crowd are moved and give whatever money and jewellery they can before filing out.

The Incredible has not given up his pursuit of Maddalena and he now arrives to tell Gérard that Chénier has been taken, hiding at a friend’s house in Passy. Outside, newspaper vendors are heard crying abroad the arrest of the poet Andrea Chénier. The Incredible is certain that Maddalena will be forced out of hiding and come to Gérard to try to save her lover. Despite himself, Gérard is tasked with framing an indictment against the poet. He reflects bitterly on his hypocrisy in denouncing Chénier – once the servant of the aristocracy, he has become the slave of his own passions (*Nemico della patria?*).

Just as the Incredible predicted, Maddalena comes to plead for Chénier’s life. Gérard confesses his uncontrollable passion for her. She offers herself to him in exchange for Chénier’s freedom. She recalls the terrible death of her mother the Contessa, butchered by the mob before her eyes. She remembers fleeing with Bersi from the blazing château and how Bersi hid her in Paris, taking to prostitution to support them both. Only Chénier’s love has sustained her, has given her the will to continue living (*La mamma morta*).

Gérard becomes master of himself again. He swears to do all he can to save Chénier, as the public now swarms into the hall for the latest show-trial. Three defendants, including a young mother, Idia Legray, are quickly dealt with, but when Fouquier-Tinville reads out the indictment against Chénier, he demands to be heard (*Si, fui soldato*). Gérard comes forward as a witness and repudiates his own accusations. But the mob turn against their erstwhile hero and howl him down. The jury quickly deliberate and return their verdict. As Gérard turns Chénier’s face so that he may see Maddalena once again in the public gallery, the court condemns him to be guillotined.

Act IV

The courtyard of the St Lazare Prison, the next morning, before dawn

Chénier is writing, Roucher at his side. Chénier reads his final poem to Roucher (*Come un bel dì di maggio*), comparing the sunset of his life to the end of a fine spring day. Moved, Roucher embraces his friend and leaves with the verses in his hand. Gérard arrives with Maddalena. She and Gérard bribe the gaoler, Schmidt, into letting her take the place of Idia Legray, condemned to die that morning alongside Chénier. Gérard bids her farewell and leaves to plead once more with Robespierre for the life of Chénier. Alone together, Chénier and Maddalena jubilantly and fearlessly prepare for death. The dawn rises with no word from Robespierre. The lovers go to the guillotine (*Vicino a te s'acqueta*).

Synopsis by David McVicar

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FOOTNOTES

Tacco rosso (red heel); the gentlemen of the aristocracy favoured red-heeled shoes. Jacques Necker was a Swiss banker made Minister of Finance by Louis XVI. He was entrusted with solving France's crippling economic problems. His failure to do so was a major spur to the Revolution. The Third Estate was established in 1789 to sit in Parliament alongside the aristocracy and church. It was based upon the ideas espoused in a pamphlet, 'What is the Third Estate?' by Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, written in response to an open invitation to philosophers and political thinkers from Necker. The Third Estate represented 'the People' of France, though it was almost entirely composed of the bourgeois and professional classes. Their transformation of themselves into the National Assembly triggered the Revolution.

The sans-culottes (literally: without knee-breeches) were the radical, left-wing working classes who made up the ground troops of the Revolution in its early years. Jean-Paul Marat, scientist and writer, was a powerful Jacobin and an instigator of the Terror. He was murdered, lying in his bath, by a Girondist sympathizer, Charlotte Corday, in 1793, and was subsequently celebrated as a martyr of the Revolution. His embalmed corpse was displayed in tableau to the public in the former Notre Dame Cathedral. The *incroyables* and *merveilleuses* were in reality a revivalist aristocratic movement, who flourished from 1795–99, after the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror. They were remarkable for the extremity of their dress, the *merveilleuses* basing their gowns on Greek and Roman models, with revealing results that cast doubt on their sexual morals. Luigi Illica transfers them back to the Terror, maybe to add historical colour to his libretto.

Charles-Henri Sanson and his son Henri were the public executioners of Paris. Father and then son guillotined Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in turn. The tumbrel that took the prisoners to the place of execution was known as 'Sanson's chariot'.

All of the names cried out during the procession of the Representatives belong to historical figures; among them Georges Couthon, paralyzed and bound to a wheelchair of his own devising, the artist Jacques-Louis David, who survived to become court painter to the Emperor Napoleon, and Robespierre's youngest brother, Augustin. It is Augustin whom Chénier mockingly calls 'the little Robespierre'.

François Chabot was a revolutionary who began his career as a monk. He was a notoriously bad swordsman, hence Chénier's mocking use of his name to taunt Gérard.

Antoine Fouquier-Tinville was the fearsome Prosecutor of the Committee of Public Safety. His job was to put to trial and dispose of enemies of the State as quickly and efficiently as possible. To appear on his list was tantamount to a death sentence. He presided at the trial of Danton in April 1794. He was executed himself in 1795.

Charles François Dumouriez was a general of the Revolutionary army. Initially a national hero, he fell from favour with the rise of the Jacobins and was denounced by the National Assembly. He defected to the Austrians and was declared a traitor.

Toussaint L'Ouverture was the liberator of the former colony of Haiti.

Gérard wonders if Chénier was a student at the Military Academy of St Cyr, actually only established several years after 1794.

Illica sets the scene of Chénier's last night at the prison of Saint-Lazare. In fact, prisoners bound for the guillotine were held at the Conciergerie.

Robespierre signed André Chénier's death warrant with a single sentence: 'Même Platon a banni les poètes de sa République' (Even Plato banned poets from his Republic). Chénier died on 25 July 1794, aged 31. Robespierre was seized and executed just three days later, ending the Terror.