

LA GIOCONDA

Ponchielli

Act I

Courtyard of the Doge's Palace in Venice. 17th century.

Barnaba, a spy for the Council of Ten, is watching a festive crowd on its way to the regatta. He ardently desires the lovely ballad singer Gioconda, who has already rebuffed him several times. However, when the girl enters, with her blind mother, Barnaba has no hesitation in declaring his passion to her once again. But Gioconda sends him packing, and goes off to look for her beloved Enzo Grimaldo, a Genoese prince who has been banished from the Venetian republic and is believed by all to be a Dalmatian sea captain. To get his revenge, Barnaba publicly accuses the blind woman of witchcraft while Enzo, who has entered with Gioconda, does his best to defend her. Only Laura Adorno, the young wife of Alvise Badoero, who is one of the most powerful heads of the State Inquisition, manages to intercede to rescue Gioconda's mother from the enraged mob. The blind woman expresses her gratitude by giving Laura a rosary. To keep Enzo away from the beautiful ballad singer, Barnaba, who has discovered the true identity of the Genoese nobleman, promises him an encounter with Laura. He knows in fact that Enzo and Laura have been passionately in love ever since they first met in Genoa. But as soon as Enzo goes out, Barnaba sends Alvise an anonymous letter informing him of his wife's betrayal, and revealing the lovers' rendezvous to him. Gioconda, unseen, has witnessed this episode, and decides to find Enzo and to confront her rival.

Act II

A brigantine seen from her starboard side, along a deserted shore.

Enzo is waiting in trepidation for Laura, who enters with Barnaba. The lovers exchange passionate words and make ready to escape. Left alone, Laura is attacked by Gioconda, who has resolved to kill her rival. But when she sees the rosary, the singer recognizes in Laura the woman who saved her mother. She decides to save her too, by helping her to get away. By the time Alvise arrives on the scene, Laura is already safe. To avoid capture by the Venetian fleet, Enzo sets fire to his vessel and jumps into the sea.

Act III

Scene one

A room in the Ca' d'Oro.

To punish his wife for her betrayal, Alvise orders her to drink poison. Meanwhile however Gioconda has sneaked into the Ca' d'Oro while a grand reception is being held in the adjoining hall. She substitutes the poison with a potent narcotic capable of provoking an apparent death, and persuades Laura to drink it in order to escape Alvise's vengeance.

Scene two

A sumptuous hall in the Ca' d'Oro.

At a splendid ball, Alvise Badoero receives his guests and invites them to watch the "dance of the hours". But the happy atmosphere is quickly spoiled by the chimes of a bell tolling the death of Laura. When the masked Enzo hears this news, he discloses his identity and is arrested. To save Enzo, Gioconda promises herself to Barnaba. Alvise shows his shaken guests the corpse of his wife, whom he has thus punished for her infidelity.

Act IV

The front hall of a ruined palace on the island of Giudecca.

Under the effect of the narcotic, Laura is borne into Gioconda's abode. The despair caused by the disappearance of her mother and by her own unhappy love has left the singer contemplating suicide. She changes her mind, however, when Enzo rushes in. But he, choking with rage, seizes Gioconda whom he believes to be guilty of removing the corpse of his beloved. But Laura now regains consciousness and tells Enzo of Gioconda's generous gesture. Before making their escape, the two grateful lovers bless the girl. Meanwhile Barnaba, who is determined to demand fulfilment of their pact, accosts the singer but she stabs herself in his arms. In a fury, the spy shouts into her ear that he has drowned her blind mother. But Gioconda by now can no longer hear him.