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DICKENS TO ZANDONAI

I

There are few authors whose names can be as immediately identified by a large international public as that of Charles Dickens. Open any newspaper in any number of countries and you are likely to find a use of the adjective ‘Dickensian’ to describe social misery, poverty, squalor, deprivation in modern cities. These being still in the 21st century as prevalent in many countries as they were in the 19th, the writer’s name is as frequently invoked as ever to describe them. Dickens can thus indeed be described as a planet. He jokingly referred to himself as one when he wrote of the year of his birth 1812, the bicentenary of which was celebrated in 2012 – in Rovereto as everywhere else –, as the year in which «the planet Dick appeared on the horizon».

In the first part of what I shall present in this essay, I shall give the briefest general introduction to Dickens’s life and work. It is an incredible life from start to finish. First in childhood: Dickens’s father was a navy pay clerk, and the novelist followed him around from one seaside town to another as the navy fought against Napoleon and then, after Waterloo, was scaled down. He was born in Portsmouth, spent the happiest part of his childhood in Chatham and Rochester, and then misery set in when his father was no longer needed in the port cities and was transferred to London. In London keeping up the kind of sociable lifestyle he liked to lead was more expensive than it had been hitherto. He got into debt as a consequence, and in those days that meant prison. Dickens’s father spent time in the Marshalsea, the debtor’s prison that would later form the focus of the first half of one of his greatest novels, *Little Dorrit*.

As a result, the boy, who had previously been a bright pupil in a thoroughly adequate school in Chatham, experienced humiliation. He

was sent out to work, at the particular urging of his mother, whom he never forgave. The memory of the period of suffering that ensued when he was employed to paste labels on bottles of shoe polish later found expression in an autobiographical fragment which gives a powerful account of private misery, shame and desolation at the loss of status and above all of hope for the future.

Through this traumatic experience Dickens perhaps derived that sympathy with suffering and deprivation which is synonymous with his work. But it also galvanised him, as his father's fortunes improved and he grew up once more as a lower middle-class boy, into strong adhesion to many of the classic values of Victorian England: hard work, discipline, effort, Goethean striving, thoroughness, and financial probity. Dickens was determined that the disgrace that had befallen his father should never come anywhere close to himself. Aware of a certain bohemian 'vagabond' streak in his nature, most particularly where his partiality for acting and the theatre were concerned (rather fortunately for everyone, perhaps, he fell ill with a cold on the day in 1832 when he was supposed to audition as a professional actor), he became at the same time a highly ambitious and socially upwardly mobile young man. He moved from employment in a lawyer's office, which he hated, to engagement as a Parliamentary reporter at the time of the Reform Bill of 1832, and then from copying speeches to writing his own sketches, adopting the pseudonym 'Boz' after a family nickname for his youngest brother Augustus. He made an upwardly mobile marriage, successfully wooing Catherine, one of the daughters of Sir Walter Scott's former literary agent George Hogarth.

Dickens first established himself in the figure of a first rate journalistic city flaneur, walking the streets of London and interpreting what he saw by reading the external signs of human appearance and behaviour, thus catering to a desire to know and understand the enticing but frightening new urban world that emerged in the 19th century. Yet when Dickens undertook his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, he was still relatively unknown. He was employed at first as second fiddle to a famous illustrator, but when this latter committed suicide after the first two numbers had appeared, Dickens took over direct control of *Pickwick Papers* in that decisive and masterly fashion that would henceforth characterise his dealings with publishers. With the introduction of Pickwick's servant Sam Weller in part 4 – establishing a kind of equivalent of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza – its sales began to take off in a sensational way. Almost overnight, he became the first example of a new modern phenomenon, the bestselling author, easily surpassing all previous pos-

sible rivals such as Sir Walter Scott. Indeed, part of the general significance of Dickens is that he, more than anyone else in the English-speaking world or beyond, ensured the triumph of the novel as the most highly regarded and widely read of literary genres.

Dickens's incredible success was based in many respects on the method of publication he chose. None of his novels was ever written as one unified, entire manuscript submitted complete for publication in one or more volumes. All of them were published in instalments, usually monthly, commonly in 20 parts spread over 18 months, but in some instances weekly. People literally died for the next serial number of each novel to appear (in Mrs Gaskell's novel *Cranford* a man is run over by a train and killed as he reads the newly arrived instalment of a Dickens novel). Although as he grew older Dickens became more carefully about planning ahead and conceiving his novels as a whole, the actual writing of individual episodes never took place more than about two or three months before the part in question was due to appear.

This method of publication entailed a particularly close form of relationship between writer and audience. Dickens watched his sales very carefully, and would alter the intended course of his novels if they fell off, as with *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a novel which gets off to a rather slow start. He responded by sending Martin off to America, something never originally intended. Sure enough, the result was a significant improvement in the sales of later parts, but this and other features of Dickens's writing strategies led many to question his integrity as an artist.

There was a widespread expectation that the Dickens phenomenon would not last. He wrote too quickly and pandered too much to popular taste, it was said: Anthony Trollope caricatured him in *The Warden* as 'Mr Popular Sentiment'. He made other writers jealous, in fact, and Dickens simply kept rising, but the reputation he principally enjoyed for most of his lifetime was that of a great comic writer, the equal of Shakespeare or Cervantes in his ability to create for all time mythic figures of fun.

After the initial relative failure of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens learnt important lessons, and reshaped his career in a manner that enabled him later to produce what nowadays are regarded as his greatest masterpieces – the later, darker novels that contain profound and searching analyses of the degradation of human relationships in modern capitalist society. He decided he needed a sabbatical, and went to Italy for an entire year, choosing Genova as his place of residence and falling in love with that city. For ever after he dreamed of returning to Italy, where, living in the magnificent Palazzo Peschiere, the boy who had worked in

a blacking factory whilst his father languished in a debtors' prison had finally put all that behind him.

Upon his return from Italy Dickens began a new novel, *Dombey and Son*, a decisive milestone in his career. He made sure this time to start with a bang – the birth of the hero, and the death of his mother in childbirth – as he did for ever after in his later career. In *David Copperfield* the birth of the boy with a caul and the strange appearance of the eccentric Aunt Betsy Trotwood, who storms off because he is not a girl, in *Bleak House* the fog, in *Hard Times* the classroom, in *Little Dorrit* the Marseilles prison, in *A Tale of Two Cities* the night-time coach ride, in *Our Mutual Friend* the fishing for corpses in the Thames, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* the opium den, above all perhaps in *Great Expectations* the great scene of Magwitch rising from the tombstones – all these ensure that the reader of a mature Dickens novel is gripped at the outset by unforgettably powerful and intense images that compel our attention.

Yet even as Dickens triumphed with *Dombey and Son*, a novel about a capitalist with atrophied human emotions, and about the impact of the railways on contemporary society, his first serious artistic rivals began to appear on the Victorian scene, in particular Thackeray, with *Vanity Fair*. Despite the fact that Thackeray himself considered his rival to be *il miglior fabbro*, all those who had been waiting for Dickens to stumble proclaimed that he would henceforth fall into relative neglect.

This did not happen. However, Dickens's personal life underwent a severe midlife crisis in the mid to late 1850s. He fell in love with a girl of seventeen named Ellen Ternan whom he met during amateur theatricals, and as a result, engineered a separation from the wife who had born him ten children. Controversy still rages about the nature of their relationship: were they lovers, or was this simply an idealised platonic infatuation? Did Ellen give birth to one or more children? On the one hand there are those like Claire Tomalin, whose book *The Invisible Woman*¹ is the subject of a fine film directed by Ralph Fiennes, who answer yes to both questions, and others like Peter Ackroyd who stress that there is no proof that they consummated their relationship and that it is more likely that Dickens chose Ellen as the reincarnation of his sister-in-law Mary who had died in his arms at the age of 17². Whatever the truth of the matter, it makes good business for Dickens biographers that the matter be unresolved.

¹ CLAIRE TOMALIN, *The Invisible Woman*, Random House, New York 2013 [1990].

² PETER ACKROYD, *Charles Dickens*, Random House, New York 2002 [1990].

Whatever the truth of this particular matter, critics since the Modernist renaissance of interest in Dickens have regularly explored the darker corners of his psyche and biography. Since Edmund Wilson's famous and influential essay, *Dickens: The Two Scrooges* in the 1930s there has been a common view, especially in North America, that Dickens's life is to be understood as a rather tormented one, governed by trauma and unhappiness. There is a particular interest amongst feminist critics in the obvious failure of his intimate relationships with women, and a general conviction that the lack of credibility of many of the female characters in his novels is in some way related to this.

Here I want to approach the dark side of Dickens's psychology in a different way by stressing that whatever impact it had upon him, his inner turmoil served not to inhibit or restrain him as an individual, but to make him the most active, energetic, driven, even fanatically driven, of mortals, which, combined with the most extraordinary array of talents at his disposal, turned his life, essentially, into a triumphant one. Before I close this first section, I want to look briefly at the astonishing range of Dickens's achievements, not just as a novelist, though his novels obviously represent his chief claim to the world's attention, but as a writer and activist in a huge variety of fields.

First of all, in his short fiction, Dickens clearly had an important role in the construction and institution of the virtually global modern phenomenon known as Christmas. His annual *Christmas Books* and *Christmas Stories*, spanning nearly 30 years of his life, helped by their very recurrence and persistence of theme not only to preserve ancient customs of celebration but also to foster the special modern ritual of consumption that Christmas has become. Whether or not Dickens can be said to have 'invented' modern Christmas he most certainly played a significant part in formulating some of its central myths, conventions, and values. Ebenezer Scrooge is another Dickens myth and name that has entered near universal consciousness – indeed in English to hear someone called a Scrooge is about as common in everyday speech as to hear someone called a miser. You might say that Dickens invented a kind of 'Philosophy of Christmas' that justified Christmas merriment and excess as a means of enabling hardened capitalist materialists to recover their humanity.

Secondly, to return once more to the adjective 'Dickensian', I want to stress that Dickens was a great journalist, as both writer and editor. With an alert eye, nose and ear for noticing extraordinary detail in what he saw, smelt and heard about him in great cities remained with him throughout. For the last twenty years of his life, he edited two weekly

periodicals, the first «Household Words», from 1850 to 1859, and then until his death in 1870, «All the Year Round». His essential precept – practised as well as preached – was «to dwell on the romantic side of familiar things».

Dickens was also a great actor and performer and tireless organiser of amateur theatricals, and although the plays he wrote, alone or in collaboration with his friend Wilkie Collins, are not of the same quality as his novels, his work cannot be understood without sufficient emphasis on its theatricality. Furthermore, in his later years Dickens became a professional reader and public performer of scenes from his own novels, drawing huge crowds wherever he went, in Britain, France and America. These activities continued for many years until shortly before his death in 1870, when he was forced to abandon them.

These readings can in fact be seen as the final act of this incredible man's life. Dickens as public reader illustrates perhaps more than any other feature the driven aspects of his personality. Against the advice of doctors, family and friends he chose to continue them well beyond any need for financial security – including new readings, such as a highly dramatic and stressful performance of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes from *Oliver Twist*. Many critics see this compulsion as the expression of a latent death wish, and indeed it is difficult to escape the conclusion that they did in fact help to bring on his death from an aneurysm in June 1870 at the early age of 58.

Finally, Dickens was also in many ways a great letter writer. There are over 14,000 of them and new ones turn up all the time. They express support for endless causes, charities, and political involvements at home and overseas, and in particular, with the cause of the Risorgimento in Italy. Dickens belongs in the great English radical tradition of tireless involvement in protest and critical intervention in political affairs in order to bring out significant change and improvement in the social fabric of Britain. He lived a thoroughly public and active life, at a time when the voice of writers and artists might still have important public weight, and only a small if significant proportion of his letters to special friends tend to explore intimate personal moods, feelings, and anxieties: they more commonly express anger than doubt. But they give us the fullest picture we have of the astonishing life of a very great creative artist.

II

In my next section I offer a general introduction to the Christmas Book by Dickens on which Zandonai's opera is based. It was written in 1845, just after the return from Italy, in a period in which Dickens was still writing relatively little, and still missing Genova – «I regret that Palace and that City very much; and am full of hopes and plans for seeing Italy again, one day», he wrote at the time³. By contrast he found London at that time «as flat as can be. There is nothing to talk about, but Railroad shares. And as I am not a Capitalist, I don't find anything very interesting in that».

The Cricket on the Hearth began life, not as the name of a story, but as a title for the periodical that Dickens always dreamed of editing. He returned from Italy with a plan for a magazine to be entitled «The Cricket», to be characterised by «a vein of glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home, and Fireside»⁴. This was quickly dropped, however: in late July 1845 Dickens refers to «our abandoned little weekly», but expresses his determination to use the idea as «a delicate and beautiful fancy for a Christmas book, making the Cricket a little household god»⁵.

Thus, very obviously, *The Cricket on the Hearth* is about the home, a favourite subject for bourgeois Victorians. Its title comes from the great English poet John Milton, whose *Il Penseroso* of 1645 explores the pleasures of melancholy, and imagines the poet in some «still removed place.../Where glowing embers through the room/Teach light to counterfeit a gloom;/Far from all resort of mirth,/Save the cricket on the hearth».

Dickens had already explored a similar mood in his writing when he praises a clock whose regular tic toc is compared to the sound of a cricket by the fireside:

And what other thing that has not life could cheer me as it does?
what other thing that has not life (I will not say how few things
that have) could have proved the same patient, true, untiring
friend? How often have I sat in the long winter evenings feeling
such society in its cricket-voice, that raising my eyes from my
book and looking gratefully towards it, the face reddened by the

³ *Letters by Charles Dickens*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson, Oxford University Press, (The Pilgrim Edition), Oxford 1977, vol. IV, 1844-1846, pp. 360-361.

⁴ *Letters...*, p. 328.

⁵ *Letters...*, p. 337.

glow of the shining fire has seemed to relax from its staid expression and to regard me kindly⁶!

But the idea of the cricket as the lares and penates of the domestic fireside has in fact a long history, and it would be easy to find other poets besides Milton – Keats and Southey for instance – who sing its praises. To quote Andrew Sanders, Dickens's writing «is an art rooted in a popular literary tradition, in legend and in fairy-tale»⁷.

But on to the story itself. I want to argue, that it develops the theme of domestic harmony in a problematic way, reflecting both the tensions that surfaced in Italy in the Dickens marriage itself and the novelist's response to the popular theatrical forms he had experienced there, in particular in the figure of Pantaloon in the *commedia dell'arte*, which he saw in its original form in Naples and in puppet versions elsewhere. *The Cricket on the Hearth* is about age disparity, and asks whether happiness can be realised in homes where this is apparent. It examines the issue through comparing three couples – man and wife, in the case of John and Dot Peerybingle, would-be husband and reluctant wife-to-be in the case of Tackleton and May Fielding, and even father and daughter, in the case of Caleb Plummer and Bertha.

A brief summary of the plot. Peerybingle is a carter with a much younger wife Dot and a new born baby who brings home one day an old man apparently in need of shelter. In reality he is young Edward in disguise come to claim his former fiancée May Fielding, who is about to enter a very reluctant marriage, at the urging of her mother, with a lecherous and sadistic elderly toy manufacturer Tackleton. He is the Pantaloon of the story, as well as a representative of the class of capitalists that Dickens so despised in the mid-1840s. His wickedness is illustrated in many ways: to begin with, in the way he mistreats his employee Caleb Plummer, who has a blind daughter whom Caleb deludes into thinking that he in fact works for someone thoughtful and kind to spare her unhappiness. Worse is to come however, because he wants not only to enjoy young female flesh himself but to destroy the happiness of the Peerybingles. He conducts John to a place where he can see his wife Dot apparently *in flagrante delicto*, embracing and kissing Edward.

⁶ CHARLES DICKENS, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, Introd. Derek Hudson, Oxford University Press (The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens), Oxford 1958, p. 32.

⁷ CHARLES DICKENS, *The Cricket on the Hearth* (Facsimile edition), Introd. Andrew Sanders, Genesis Publications, Guildford 1981, p. 16.

At this John passes through a crisis in which he initially plans to kill the young man who appears as a deadly rival, but eventually, through the benign intervention of the cricket, decides that he must sacrifice his own happiness so that Dot shall enjoy someone nearer her own age. But as in *commedia dell'arte*, all ends with the triumph of the youthful *innamorati* Edward and May. The former unmask himself and marries May before the ceremony with Tackleton can take place. It is clear now that Dot was embracing him as a brother, not as a lover. The Peerybingle couple are consequently reconciled, Caleb and Bertha remain inseparable even when she learns the truth about Tackleton, and even Tackleton himself, like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, eventually reforms. He turns up with plentiful food at Edward and May's wedding feast and joins in the dance, this time with someone of suitable age, May's mother.

Yet as is so often the case with Dickens, it is evil rather than good that generates most of the interesting writing in the story. Tackleton declares his negative Pantaloon 'essence' the moment he opens his mouth, bumping into the virtuous Pantaloon Peerybingle on his doorstep in the first of a number of sudden surprise entrances (like those of Harlequin in the tradition), and complimenting him on his «pretty wife. Handsomer every day... And younger ... that's the Devil of it»⁸. He is here sowing the seeds of anxiety and doubt in the carrier's mind about the fidelity of his wife Dot, who has recently welcomed into their home 'The Stranger', the male *innamorato* in disguise. Tackleton is motivated first by sheer innate viciousness, but also by bitter jealousy of Peerybingle, for his own bride-to-be, unlike Dot, shows no sign of affection for him.

We see then how Tackleton bandies about the word 'Devil'. Worse than that, his totem is not, like other *commedia* figures the cat or the horse or the chicken, but the raven, the bird of evil and ill omen. Thinking humorously of his own pet raven Grip, Dickens depicts him in a perpetual state of «one eye wide open and one nearly shut»: «He didn't look much like a bridegroom, as he stood in the Carrier's kitchen, with a twist in his dry face, and a screw in his body, and his hat jerked over the bridge of his nose, and his hands tucked down into the bottom of his pockets, and his whole sarcastic ill-conditioned self peering out of one little corner of one little eye, like the concentrated essence of any number of ravens»⁹.

⁸ CHARLES DICKENS, *Christmas Books*, Introd. Eleanor Farjeon, Oxford University Press (The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens), Oxford 1989 [1949], p. 173.

⁹ DICKENS, *Christmas Books...*, p. 175.

Moreover, the mixture of the sinister and the comic inherent in Pantaloon stories expresses itself in absurd, even surreal verbal incongruity. As Tackleton muscles in on Dot, in order to learn how happy marriages between old and young can be constructed, he crows ridiculously – «*Ubi sunt?*», he asks – «where are your gay young bridegrooms now?» – and revels in a sense of erotic power in a wonderful surreal comparison to «a fresh young salmon on the top of the Great Pyramid»¹⁰.

But the power of erotic contentment is rendered more substantially in another, contrasting context. *The Cricket on the Hearth*, I believe, differs from conventional sentimental and uncritical Victorian celebrations of the hearth in the attention it gives to sexual love. Here I follow recent critics like Natalie McKnight, Holly Furneaux, and Catherine Robson, and read sections of the novella as written in a kind of code that attempts to convey the vital role of sexual contentment in domestic bliss. In mid-nineteenth century England it was impossible to write about sex in any direct way, but that does not mean – as Dickens's friend Wilkie Collins emphasised at the time – that it is absent from his work.

What such a perspective may enable us to see is a glimpse at least of the fact that – despite Peerybingle's reasonable anxiety about being usurped by the much younger stud Edward Plummer – John and Dot do enjoy a satisfying sexual relationship. Much stress is laid from the start on John's 'pipe', but even if he is indeed an older man it is clear that Dot is thoroughly prepared to help him out with it. You may laugh at my implied reading of a scene where she is represented as an expert preparer and filler of this 'pipe', about which I do not intend to go into detail:

She was, out and out, the very best filler of a pipe, I should say, in the four quarters of the globe. To see her put that chubby little finger in the bowl, and then blow down the pipe to clear the tube, and, when she had done so, affect to think there was really something in the tube, and blow a dozen times, and hold it to her eye like a telescope, with a most provoking twist in her capital little face, as she looked down it, was quite a brilliant thing. As to the tobacco, she was perfect mistress of the subject; and her lighting of the pipe, with a wisp of paper, when the Carrier had it in his mouth – going so very near his nose, and yet not scorching it – was Art, high Art¹¹.

¹⁰ DICKENS, *Christmas Books...*, pp. 198, 196.

¹¹ DICKENS, *Christmas Books...*, p. 180.

Reading in this way would also enable us to understand why, when Tackleton comes on his bullying visit with the Fieldings, she seems to become nervous and lose the skill of filling the pipe, and why at the novel's end she is entirely on song again, sitting out the dance when she might have been expected to participate and staying in her husband's company by the hearth paying further attention to his 'pipe' and successfully lighting it once more.

To sum up then: *The Cricket on the Hearth* is perhaps unjustly neglected nowadays because it is assumed to be a mere conventional outpouring about domestic bliss conforming to the ideology of the Victorian bourgeois family when it in fact has rather more to say than meets the eye about sexual relationships, especially where disparity of age is concerned. It began to lose favour in the modernist period of rejection of Victorian values, represented in England most famously by the Bloomsbury group including Virginia Woolf – whose family had an historic antipathy to Dickens – and by Lytton Strachey's classic *Eminent Victorians*. Lenin too, according to Nadezhda Krupskaya, once walked out of a theatrical representation of *The Cricket on the Hearth* in protest at its sentimentality. Is it perhaps time to look at it – and the numerous dramatic versions and operas it gave rise to, including Zandonai's – with a fresh eye? In my final section I shall consider this possibility.

III

In my third and final section I shall provide a brief general sketch of the history of theatrical adaptations – particularly operatic adaptations – of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and of the place in these of Zandonai's version. Of all Dickens's works, it has the richest and longest history on stage. Some of the main reasons for this are not hard to find: Dickens gave this story a particular form that would make it easy to adapt for dramatic performance. Tired of having his work, and in particular the Christmas books, pirated and often travestied in unauthorised dramatic adaptations for the stage, from which he received not a penny in royalties, Dickens gave this one an unmistakable three-act structure (he named the three parts 'chirps,' after the sound made by the cricket) to make it immediately amenable to dramatization, and passed them ahead of publication – as soon as they were finished in fact – to his friend Albert Smith, who was thus able to open his authorised play on the very same day as the book appeared. But this did not prevent a welter of later

versions, of which Dion Boucicault's *Dot*, first produced in New York in 1859, but later enjoying long runs in London, was easily the most popular and influential.

The theatrical legacy includes four operatic versions written between 1873 and 1908. Italians came first and last – Galignani wrote a version premiered in Genova in 1873, and Zandonai's is the last. In between came operas by the Hungarian Goldmark, premiered in Vienna in 1896, and by Alexander Mackenzie, the Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in London, though this latter was not performed until just before the first world war, which condemned it alas to oblivion thereafter. Later than all of these is Massenet's incidental music to a French dramatization of the story in 1904. Thereafter silence, and when Dickens operas took off again after the Second World War composers turned to other works – *A Christmas Carol* for example – rather than this now rather forgotten work.

So our first question might be: why in the first place are there so many more early *Cricket on the Hearth* operas than settings of any other works? An initial answer might run thus: first, as already noted, because of the relative simplicity and clarity of structure of the Christmas Books in general, and this one in particular (how much harder it would be to turn a long or medium-sized Dickens novel into an opera – though Puccini, prior to tackling *Turandot*, seriously contemplated an operatic version of *Oliver Twist* centred as much on Nancy as on Oliver, to be entitled *Fanny*); and second, because of the central role of sound in this work.

The Cricket on the Hearth begins with a veritable symphony of sound. First a kettle is heard, then a clock, then the cricket itself, before a move shortly thereafter to the sound of *Dot*'s clogs on the paving stones outside. John Cage would have loved such a collection of noises – his favourite music was traffic noise. It's no surprise that composers like Goldmark and Zandonai were tempted to imitate such sounds, whether or not they were in thrall to the aesthetic of *verismo* that prevailed in opera around the turn of the century, following the phenomenal success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1890. But indeed, as far as the chirping of crickets is concerned, there was, as we shall see, a much longer musical tradition behind them.

I shall take you back here only to 1505, and the publication in Venice by Petrucci of a song by Josquin des Prez. It introduces some of the main reasons for reverencing the cricket as a household god:

El grillo è buon cantore
 Che tiene longo verso.
 Dalle beve grillo canta.

Ma non fa come gli altri uccelli
 Come li han cantato un poco,
 Van de fatto in altro loco
 Sempre el grillo sta pur saldo,
 Quando la maggior el caldo
 Alhor canta sol per amore¹².

Unlike birds, the song tells us, who sing momentarily and then turn their attention to some other activity, crickets are long-winded, and tend to stay put in one place as they sing. Chirping away at their ‘song’ for considerable stretches, they convey the idea of constancy and are thus worthy to stand both as ‘household gods’ and as faithful lovers. Their penchant for heat – crickets require a temperature of at least 80 degrees Fahrenheit and so come indoors in winter to be as close to the hearth as possible – associates them in addition with salamanders. Able it seems to withstand fire, they can serve too as symbols of eternity.

Staying with musical tributes to the cricket, I now take you forward from Milton to 1825, and another traditional association of crickets announced in Schubert’s song *Der Einsame*. It introduces the theme of the house cricket as a companion in solitude, in particular in the last verse of the poem by the *Biedermeier* Pomeranian writer Karl Lappe on which the poem is based:

Zirpt immer, liebe Heimchen,
 in meiner Klause, eng und klein.
 Ich duld euch gern, ihr stört mich nicht
 Wenn euer Lied das Schweigen bricht
 Bin ich nicht ganz allein¹³.

But the danger of sentimentality surely lurks in musical versions of stories about domestic paragons. It may have invaded Karl Goldmark’s version of Dickens’s story, for he and his librettist seem to have read it in a more conventional way than that proposed here. Goldmark describes in his biography *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* how he looked in vain for years for the right libretto for a new opera: «Ich sehnte

¹² The cricket is a good singer / He can sing very long / He sings all the time. / But he isn’t like the other birds. / If they’ve sung a little bit / They go somewhere else / The cricket remains where he is / When the heat is very fierce / Then he sings only for love.

¹³ Go on chirping, dear crickets, / in my hermitage so narrow and small / I put up with you gladly, you don’t disturb me; / When your song breaks the silence, / I am not quite alone.

mich nach einem Buche, einer Handlung mit einfachen, glücklichen Menschen. Ich suchte in dieser Richtung lange vergebens»¹⁴. And then, he tells us, at the beginning of 1894 the librettist Alfred Maria Willner (later contracted for Puccini's *La rondine*) came to him with his adaptation of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and he knew he had found what he wanted: «ein Kreis einfacher, glücklicher Menschen am traulichen Herd, in Liebe verbunden, durch eine kleine, aufregende Handlung vorübergehend gestört, aber bald wieder gelöst, das Ganze vom Zauber des Märchens umflossen»¹⁵.

Willner and Goldmark go all out then, it would seem, for treating Dickens's story as a hymn to *Kinder, Küche und Kirche*, simplifying the plot even more, for example, by leaving out Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter. Dot, I think, becomes a rather more conventional housewife-figure than she is in Dickens. She chides the cricket for simply chirping and shirking, not like herself, always busy keeping the hearthside clean. She is jealous of the grocer's wife opposite; her husband, unlike John, does not have to leave home to deliver the mail. Most especially, she envies the grocer's wife's brood of children, longing herself to give birth.

Dot's pregnancy, indeed, is a central motif in this opera. In its very first scene she appears on stage alone to sing the work's most famous number, *Ein Geheimnis wundersüß*, announcing that she is carrying a child. This fact is however to remain a secret until late on, when it will have an important part to play in the opera's happy dénouement. In this, Goldmark and Willner again depart from Dickens, where there is a baby from the start.

Dot is conventional too in her stereotyped coquettishness. In this work, she *deliberately* tries to make Peerybingle jealous to keep him on his toes. «Mein Eheweib ist eine Dirn» («my wife is a whore») – he declares bitterly, as well he might, given Dot's enthusiasm for the pearls Edward brings home from overseas, which again have no basis in Dickens. The cricket of course intervenes to assure him that Dot is a faithful wife, but here there is no hint of the violence he contemplates in Dickens, in keeping with Goldmark's downplaying of the 'temporary disturbance' in the domestic idyll he wishes to portray.

¹⁴ «I longed for a libretto with simple, happy people in it. I looked in this direction in vain for a long time».

¹⁵ «a circle of simple, happy people round a cosy hearth, bound together in love, temporarily unsettled by which is however quickly resolved, the whole thing infused with the magic of fairy-tale».

In the absence of any complete recording of a work that was quite popular in its day, it is difficult to assess whether the work's musical qualities made up for its saccharine libretto. All I will say here is that Mahler, who conducted *Das Heimchen am Herd* on a number of occasions, did not admire the work: he said that it «first opened my eyes to the banality of his music, its weakness and sentimentality».

Turning finally very briefly to the initial reception of Zandonai's version, in Genova and Nice, we find once more a regular stress on the word 'sentimental'. «What kind of character does Zandonai's music have?» is the rhetorical question posed by a reviewer in «Il Secolo» of the 18th February 1911 in response to the work's first performance in Genova, and it prompts the response that it is «simply idyllic and sentimental». Writing in «Le Figaro» on February 20, 1911, another reviewer of the opera's first performance in France wrote that its music is «very melodic, also sentimental».

Yet it could be that a revival of the Zandonai work would be the more likely to gain favour with contemporary audiences than a revival of the Goldmark. Contemporary reviews stress not only the sentimentality of his version (whose libretto by Hanau, incidentally, seems to me superior to Willner's, retaining a good deal more Dickensian detail) but also its modernity. It is a work «full of originality», writes a reviewer in Nice, and Davenay in Paris, quoted earlier, refers to «a knowing orchestration that ignores nothing modern without abusing it». As it now seems time to revise our conventional views of Dickens's story itself, perhaps it is also time to dust the cobwebs off *Il grillo nel focolare*, and give it a full public performance to test the waters in a period of reviving interest in turn-of-the-century Viennese composers like Korngold, Schreker and Zemlinsky, with whom Zandonai would seem to have at least as much in common as he does with his Italian *verismo* contemporaries. I am excited by the steps that the Zandonai foundation are taking in this direction, and pleased to have played a small part in galvanising the present initiative.

