

ANNA BOLENA

tragic opera (tragedia lirica) in two acts

libretto by Felice Romani
music by **Gaetano Donizetti**

premiere:

26 December 1830 Teatro Carcano, Milan

ACT ONE Windsor Castle. It's late at night in the Queen's apartments, and the King still hasn't arrived. Suspicious that the King's attention is turning elsewhere, the courtiers voice their worries regarding Anne's future. Summoned by the Queen, the court maid Jane Seymour enters. She is uncomfortable as she is the one who has been the object of Henry's affections. The Queen also arrives and, worried by the general silence with which she is received, asks her page Smeaton to sing a song to lift her spirits. His song is intense and full of emotion, as he is secretly in love with the Queen. He reassures her that her beauty is equal in both pain and joy. Unfortunately, the song continues by comparing her to a "virgin that first love sighs" reminding Anne of her love for Richard Percy: the Queen then interrupts the singer because she realises that the embers of her first love are still burning.

Anne retires with her ladies-in-waiting, while Jane returns to her apartments. On the one hand, she reassures herself that the secret of her relationship with Henry is still safe, on the other she feels deeply disturbed by the fact that she is not able to remedy the damage she has caused. Someone knocks at the door and the King enters through a secret door. Jane begs him to stop meeting her clandestinely; Henry agrees with her and declares that he finally wants to make their love public. Jane continues, arguing that the only way to save themselves is to make their love known with a marriage. Henry promises her a wedding, throne and sceptre. When the lady-in-waiting asks him how that might be possible, the King's response is enigmatic and reticent.

Windsor Castle Park. It is dawn. Lord Rochefort, Anne's brother, is surprised to meet his old friend Percy, who explains that he has returned from exile by order of the sovereign himself. When Rochefort confides to him that Anne no longer enjoys the King's attentions, Percy tells him how painful exile is, a pain equal to death. Groups of hunters, pages and noble men gather for the King's hunt. When Henry appears, Anne comes forward and begs to be able to return to her husband's graces. The monarch's words to her are both reassuring and threatening: He says that although he has neglected her, he is always watching her. As soon as he sees Percy, he deliberately denies having ordered his return home, claiming that it was Anne, convinced of Percy's innocence, who urged his forgiveness. The exile falls at the Queen's feet and kisses her hand, embarrassing her and risking compromising her with his excessive attention, as Henry had predicted in his plan. Rochefort tries to hold Percy back, while the King orders Hervey, one of his officers, to keep his eyes open for anything that may incriminate Anne. Before leaving for a hunting trip, he tells Percy he is to stay at court.

Smeton enters the Queen's rooms. Fascinated by her beauty, he wants to replace a miniature portrait of her, which he had stolen so he could admire her beauty. But the young man lingers too long contemplating the portrait, and when he hears steps approaching, he is forced to hide behind a curtain. Anne and Rochefort arrive: the latter manages to convince his sister to grant Percy an audience.



Expecting him to re-proach her for having turned her back on him in favour of the King, instead the Queen finds a Percy who is devoid of any feelings of anger, who declares that he loves her more than ever. Attempting in vain to curb his growing passion, Anne reminds him that she is the wife of the sovereign and urges him to leave England immediately. Never again, she tells him, are they to meet. In desperation Percy draws his sword to kill himself. Watching the scene secretly, Smeton misunderstands Percy's intentions, and in the belief that he is about to kill the Queen, he steps forward with his sword drawn to defend her. Anne faints and Rochefort reappears to warn them of the King's arrival. The situation is obviously completely in Henry's favour and, in the presence of the courtiers who rush to intervene, he deduces that the two men with drawn swords are both in love with the Queen and that they are fighting out of jealousy. Smeton denies the accusation but unfortunately drops the portrait of Anne – clear evidence for Henry of the favours his spouse granted the page. When she comes to, Anne protests her innocence, but the monarch commands that she be placed under arrest, suggesting that she spare her defence for the advice for the judges' council. To her horror, the Queen realises that her fate is sealed, and along with Percy, Smeton, and Rochefort she is taken to the prisons.

ACT TWO An antechamber of Anne's chambers in the Tower of London. While observing that the courtiers and even Jane herself, have stayed away from the Queen, Anne's ladies-in-waiting declare their unwavering loyalty. When Anne joins them, Hervey enters with the task of accompanying the ladies before the Council of Peers. They withdraw in tears. Left alone, Anne prays. Jane enters and tries to convince her mistress to plead guilty, in the belief that this may be the only way to save her life. Anne rejects the infamous proposal and curses Henry and his new lover. At this Jane burst into tears, as if it were a confession, and desperately asks for the Queen's forgiveness. Sensing the sincerity of her pain and regret, Anne makes her get up off the ground and declares that he the King, is the only culprit. Jane is even more upset by Anne's forgiveness and leaves in a state of extreme distress.

A vestibule outside the Council Chamber, where Anne's trial is underway. The courtiers question each other about how the trial is going. Upon leaving the Chamber, Hervey announces that Smeton has confessed everything and that any hope of absolution for Anne has now vanished. The King also leaves the court room, and one perceives from the words he exchanges with Hervey that the boy was deceived. In fact, he 'spoke', convinced in that way he was saving the Queen. Anne and Percy enter under escort. Henry is about to leave but his wife approaches him, blocking him; She makes one final plea asking to be saved from the disgrace of public judgement. The King repeats the accusations of treason against Anne and Percy and declares that they must both die. At this point Percy makes one last, desperate attempt to save his beloved: He declares that before she even became Henry's wife, Anne was legally married to him. Seeing that Anne remains silent, and neither confirms nor denies it, Henry announces that this umpteenth betrayal will fall on their heads. The guards take Anne and Percy back to the cells while Henry wonders if Percy's claims are true. Jane appears, still overcome with remorse, begging she is not to be the cause of Anne's death. Before the King can give her an answer, the Council is concluded, and the courtiers gather to hear Hervey's announcement: Anne and all defendants have been sentenced to death. The courtiers urge the King for clemency but despite Jane's pleas, the monarch stalls by saying that he will examine their requests.



Under the watchful eyes of guards, Percy and Rochefort meet in a room in the Tower of London. Percy regrets he is the cause of Rochefort's death; the latter, however, replies that he deserves it since he was the one who encouraged Anne's ascension to the throne. Hervey informs them that the King has decided to pardon them, but since the Queen's sentence remains unchanged, Percy declares he wishes to die with her. He urges his friend to accept the repeal of the sentence, but in vain: Rochefort also prefers death. While the two friends return to their cells, the ladies-in-waiting commiserate with Anne's suffering. When the prisoner appears, it is clear her mind is wandering. She is convinced that it is the morning of her wedding to Henry, and she is afraid that Percy will come to reproach her for her betrayal. Yet when she imagines him before her, he is smiling. Her imagination then takes her back to the "Dolce castel natio" where she grew up and where for the first time she met and fell in love with Percy. A roll of drums puts an end to her vision, bringing her back to the reality of the present. She greets Percy and Rochefort as they are taken from their cells, but they see Smeton who declares he is sure that he is the only one who has betrayed her. Anne relapses into her delirium. She imagines that the boy's harp is out-of-tune and that in its melancholy sound echoes the lamentations of his broken heart, which utters a last prayer to heaven. The festive sounds celebrating the wedding of Henry and Jane bring her back to the present. Anne immediately curses the guilty couple; but then she stops, saying that if she must die, she will die with forgiveness on her lips. Her increasing pain makes her lose consciousness, just as the soldiers appear to escort the condemned woman to the gallows.

