

# The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

## Act One

*The main square at Palermo*

In front of the governor's palace, Tebaldo, Roberto, Bethune, Vaudemont and other French soldiers drink a toast to their homeland, watched with rancour by Sicilians, who dream of insurrection against the Anjevin usurper. Enter duchess Elena, dressed in mourning for the death of her brother, who has been executed for treason by the French. Elena's beauty attracts the curiosity of the soldiers and Roberto, who is completely drunk, outrages the duchess by compelling her to sing a song in public. Elena consents, but her song reveals itself to be a clear incitement to revolt. By the time she has finished singing, the Sicilians have already drawn their daggers, ready to hurl themselves upon the Anjevin soldiers. To Elena's great disappointment, it takes only the arrival of the governor, Guy de Montfort, to cool the rebellious ardour of the Sicilians and to scatter the crowd. Elena is surprised to see her beloved Arrigo appear, since the young man had been arrested for treason, but then discharged on all accusations. Montfort and Arrigo are left alone. The governor is not really so grim as he seems and in his heart admires Arrigo's daring. He tries to convince Arrigo to come over to the Anjevin side and to slay away from Elena, whose love will be his downfall. Arrigo disdainfully refuses.

## Act Two

*A pleasant valley beside the sea*

A sloop disembarks the exiled Giovanni da Procida, who expresses his intense emotion upon setting foot once again on the shores of his beloved country. Elena and Arrigo welcome Procida, who informs them of his plans for revolt. He has won the support of the Aragonese, if the Sicilians will rebel against the Anjevin usurper. Elena is struck by Arrigo's heroism and, despite their difference in class she is disposed to marry him, if he will revenge her brother's death. Arrigo accepts. Bethune, with a retinue of French soldiers, brings a letter for Arrigo, with an invitation to a ball at the Montfort's palace. Arrigo indignantly declines, whereupon the soldiers drag him off bodily. Twelve future brides, one of whom is Ninetta, Elena's maid, walk down the hill preceded by young men, to perform an engagement ceremony. They dance a tarantella. Roberto and Tebaldo are present, together with other French soldiers. Impressed by the beauty of the Sicilian girls, they join in the dancing. Meanwhile Procida has a bright idea: he suggests to the Anjevin soldiers that they abduct the girls. Thus, he imagines, will the Sicilians at last rise in revolt. The idea appeals to the soldiers, who promptly put it into practice. But, to the sore disappointment of Procida and of Elena, the Sicilians' reaction is timid and inconclusive. At that moment a brightly decked out boat sails by, carrying ladies and gentlemen to the governor's ball. Procida decides to go to the ball in disguise, to lead the insurrection of the Sicilian people.

## Act Three

*Part one – A private room in Montfort's palace*

Montfort is alone, tortured by guilt over his tumultuous past. He is reading a letter from a woman whom he had ravished many years ago. Before dying the woman reveals that she had by him a child, who was brought up in hatred of the French usurpers. Montfort has a sudden backwash of paternal love and dreams of living happily beside his belatedly refound son. Arrigo is brought before the governor. Soon Montfort reveals to the young man that he is his father and shows him his mother's letter. Arrigo is shaken and torn between unexpected filial affection and an unshakable love of his country. When Montfort tries to embrace him, the young man repulses him and runs out headlong.

*Part two – A ball prepared for a ball*

A sumptuous ball is in progress at the governor's palace. Mingling with the guests are a number of masked figures. When the ball is over, Montfort and the guests go off, as Arrigo enters. Two masked figures, Elena and Procida, approach him. The duchess places a ribbon on Arrigo's chest, as a sign of recognition to the Sicilian plotters. When the two conspirators have gone out, Montfort enters and tries once more, in vain, to win Arrigo's affection. With contempt his son shows him the patriots' ribbon, which Montfort at once tears off, but which also puts him on his guard against imminent revolt. At that very moment Elena draws a dagger and flings herself upon Montfort, but Arrigo intervenes to prevent her from killing the governor. The insurgents, Elena and Procida included, are arrested. Arrigo would like to offer them help, but they reject it with scorn.

**Act Four**

*The courtyard of a fortress*

Arrigo goes to the prison where Elena and the other rebels await execution. The duchess replies to the young man's prayers with harsh disdain. Arrigo then reveals to her that he is Montfort's son. Deeply moved, Elena forgives him and declares all her love to him. In a burst of joy, the two lovers express their wish to die together. All is ready for the execution of the rebels, but Procida continues to scheme. He shows Elena a note announcing the armed intervention of the Aragonese in support of the popular revolt. Montfort arrives and Arrigo tells him that he wishes to die with the other condemned prisoners. Determined to defend his paternal rights, Montfort declares to Arrigo that, if he will call him by the name of father, all the prisoners will be freed. But Arrigo is adamant. The executioner enters, while the friars sing a lugubrious *De profundis*. Elena is already at the block, when Arrigo, consumed with anguish, cries out "Oh father, oh my father!". Montfort, as promised, pardons all the prisoners. Amid general rejoicing, Procida continues to meditate revolt.

**Act Five**

*Luxuriant gardens of Montfort's palace*

Outside the chapel where the wedding is to be celebrated, Elena receives a floral homage from her young lady friends and tells them how happy she is to be married soon, and wishes a peaceful future to Sicily. Arrigo enters and once again manifests his love for Elena, before joining his father in the palace. Elena is alone, when Procida approaches and informs her of another new idea. As Elena pronounces the words "I do", the bells will be rung as the signal for the Sicilians to rise in revolt. Arrigo returns, amid the waving of French flags. Elena is torn by a disquieting dilemma: she would not wish to betray her compatriots, but nor does she relish the prospect of being a widow so soon after marriage. At last, with the excuse of her dead brother, she announces to Arrigo that she can no longer marry him. Arrigo and Procida all turn against her, for different reasons. Montfort arrives, deeply content with his son's wedding, and will bear no objections. Taking the two young people by their hands, he joins them in matrimony. Procida rings the bells. Elena, in despair, incites Montfort to escape, but the tumultuous crowd can already be heard. Arrigo, who has still understood nothing, mistakes the noises for festive cries. The Sicilians swarm in from all sides and fall upon Montfort and the French.