
Act One

The castle of the Counts of Coigny

On the eve of the French revolution, the nobility continue to lead their usual lifestyle. Preparations for a ball are underway at the castle of Coigny. A young servant, Carlo Gérard, whose father is employed in heavy labour, shows his contempt for the nobles, pitying the fate of the lower classes. He is, however, secretly in love with the Countess' daughter, Maddalena, who arrives with the guests who are totally unperturbed by the news of riots in Paris. Among the guests is a young poet, Andrea Chénier. The Countess of Coigny asks him to improvise a poem, but he declines the request. Maddalena and the other guests mock him and the young poet replies defending his ideals strongly and inviting those present to respect such a noble sentiment as love in the moral decline of society. Maddalena is struck by his words. While the guests prepare for the ball, the party atmosphere is dampened by the appearance of a group of beggars, introduced into the castle by Gérard. The Countess confronts her servant over the intrusion. He reacts by stripping off his livery and leaving, taking his father with him. The ball continues with the guests dancing a gavotte.

Act Two

Paris, one day in June 1794

In Paris, at the time of the Terror, Chénier is suspected by the revolutionary government and kept under surveillance by an *incroyable* under the command of Gérard, who has meanwhile become one of the revolutionary leaders. For some time, a mysterious woman has been writing to the poet, asking for his help. The woman in question is Maddalena, who has lost her mother, murdered by the revolutionaries, and is forced to live in hiding. Chénier is invited by his friend Roucher, who has found him a passport, to escape in order to avoid arrest. Still, despite being fully aware of the danger, Chénier wants to discover the identity of the unknown woman. Maddalena's former maid manages to bring a message to the poet arranging a meeting with Maddalena that very evening. The two young people meet and Chénier recognises the young Countess, who, since they last met, has lost her air of superiority and is greatly changed. The two fall in love with each other. But Gérard has been warned by the *incroyable*, and he surprises them. He challenges the poet to a duel during which Chénier inflicts a serious wound on him. Gérard generously allows his rival to escape taking his beloved with him before the revolutionaries can find him. When help arrives, Gérard declares that he does not know the man that has assaulted him.

Act Three*The Revolutionary Tribunal, first section*

France is under threat and the *sans-culottes* Mathieu asks citizens for recruits and money to cover military expenses. His words rouse little enthusiasm, but Gérard, who has recovered from his wound, sets the crowd alight with his patriotic speeches. Madelon, an old blind woman, gives him her only young grandson as a soldier. While outside the song of the Carmagnole can be heard, the *incroyable* informs Gérard that Chénier has been arrested. Required to sign the bill of indictment, Gérard hesitates out of remorse for such a cowardly action, but in the end enters the name of the poet on the list of the accused. Maddalena offers herself to him in exchange for Chénier's life; moved by her act, Gérard promises her to do all he can to help the young man. He retracts the charges and passionately defends Chénier in court. But this is not enough to save the poet from being sentenced to death.

Act Four*The courtyard of the prison of St Lazare*

Chénier is visited by Roucher while he is writing his last verses, which he reads to his friend. Once they have parted, Maddalena arrives: thanks to the help of Gérard, she has been able to obtain permission to see the prisoner. The young woman bribes the jailer into letting her take the place of another prisoner, a mother who has already been sentenced to death. Gérard goes to see Robespierre to beg him to spare Chénier's life. Alone, the poet and Maddalena hearten one another and prepare to meet their destinies with dignity. At dawn they climb onto the cart of the condemned and set off, clasping each other, for the guillotine.

(Traduzione di Chris Owen)