Romualdo Marencio:
*Excelsior and Sport*
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**EXCELSIOR**

Azione coreografica, storica, allegorica, fantastica di Luigi Manzotti

Musica di
Romualdo Marenco

**SPORT**

Ballo in 8 quadri di Luigi Manzotti

Musica di
Romualdo Marenco

Compiled and Introduced by

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Romualdo Marenco
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INTRODUCTION

Romualdo Marenco, Luigi Manzotti and the ballo grande/azione coreografico

Romualdo Marenco was born on 1 March 1841 at Novi Ligure. He was involved with music from an early age, and began his professional life as violinist and second bassoonist at the Teatro Andrea Doria in Genoa. His career as a composer was also launched at this theatre with the music for the ballet *Lo sbarco di Garibaldi a Marsala*, and in addition he wrote two symphonies at this time. He remained dissatisfied with these compositions, and briefly resumed his studies in counterpoint and composition with Emilio Taddei, but soon decided to study alone, using the methods of Fenaroli and Stanislao Mattei. For a while he became principal violinist in various orchestras before being appointed deputy concert leader and director of ballet music at La Scala Milan, a position he held for seven seasons. Marenco worked with dance masters like Ferdinando and Giovanni Pratesi (*Tentazione* for the 1874 Carnival), and also wrote a few operas: *Lorenzino de’ Medici* (3 acts, librettist G. Perosio; Lodi, Teatro Piontelli, 1 December 1874) and *I Moncada* (2 acts, F. Fulgonio; Milan, Teatro Dal Verme, 16 October 1880).

But most significantly it was during this period that Marenco met the famous choreographer Luigi Manzotti. It was a meeting of true minds, and the composer began a musical collaboration with Manzotti that was to bring them both great fame. Manzotti was the master of the ballo grande which used historical and allegorical subjects treated with great seriousness for their deeper significance, and employing huge casts and elaborate *mise en scène* to create an overwhelming spectacle. Their collaboration was firstly on a Nordic theme *Sieba, ossa La spada di Wodan* (Turin, 1878), and continued in the famous trilogy: *Excelsior* (Milan 1881), *Amor* (Milan 1886) and *Sport* (Milan 1897). In these works Manzotti celebrated the positive achievements of the times, a yearning for social progress and the spread of humanitarian ideals. These works generated enthusiasm at La Scala and throughout Europe. The most famous of them, *Excelsior*, depicted the apotheosis of human civilization and proposed the brotherhood of all humanity. It was produced with a cast of 508, and given 103 times in its first year. In 1889 it was performed by the Scala company in Paris at the newly created Eden-Théâtre. Marenco’s music was spread all over the world by this success: it was always carefully moulded to the choreographic action, and was well written, with melodic verve, formal invention, and an overwhelming sense of rhythmic dynamism. The music is fast-moving and vivacious, rarely sentimental, and often induces a torrential sense of lyrical exhalation.

During the period of his great fame Marenco had also responded to the growing popularity of operetta, and produced two works: the French *Le Diable au corps* (librettists: E. Blum and R. Toché; Paris, Bouffes-Parisiens, 19 December 1884) and the Italian *Strategia d’amore* (Milan, Teatro Eden, 20 July 1896). His last ballet was *Luce* (choreographer: G. Pratesi; Milan, La Scala, 25 February 1905). The composer died in Milan on 9 October 1907. His opera *Federico Struensee* (4 acts, with libretto by the composer) was produced in his home town of Novi Ligure as a posthumous tribute (7 October 1908).

Luigi Manzotti

On 15 March 1905 one of the most popular choreographers of the late 19th century died. This is how ‘Doctor Verita’ characterized Manzotti in the *Conversazione della Dominica* of 1886:

“...were one to meet him on the road one would mistake him for a sacristan. There was nothing artistic about him, neither in his face, his bearing, nor his personality. He appeared to be a good citizen who could have been anything, a grocer, a broker, an accountant, anything but a choreographer. He had a wan face, with light beard and hair, the aspect of a lymphatic man. He spoke in a low voice, entwining one hand with another, with the timid and embarrassed air of a priest dressed in lay clothes, afraid of being surprised by his bishop in his secular guise. What appeared to be cold and inconclusive was in fact the snow beneath which a volcano was rumbling, preparing for its eruption...”

Luigi Manzotti was born in Milan in 1835. His father was a greengrocer for whom he kept the accounts, but in 1857, in love with a Signorina Rachele, and helped by the mime Bocci, he abandoned his father’s occupation to take lessons in mime and dance. In every way, anecdotes apart, Manzotti already at this stage loved the art of mime, as Ugo Peaci reported: “he already demonstrated an instinctive love for the art of gesture, standing with open mouth to watch, rather than to hear, Salvini and Ernesto Rossi at the Teatro Re”. After a few months he was in the position to start as a mime at the Canobbiana in Alessandro Borsi’s *L’Incornazione di Corinna*, to great applause. Passing on then to the Pergola in Florence and to the Alibert in Rome, he dedicated himself entirely to choreography. “...he no longer saw any friends. What was happening with him? If one forced an entry into his house one found him closed in his room in front of a huge table, which served as a stage and on which were arranged in various and fantastical ways little pellets of bread in which were fixed tiny flags in paper of various colours—blue, green, red. ‘What are you doing?’ his friends demanded in unison. Manzotti, serious and dry, replied: ‘See for yourselves: I am composing a ballet...’ ”
His first work, in which he also played the protagonist, was *La morte di Masaniello* (1858), which was very successful and marked the beginning of his famed career in danced theatre. The 14 years he lived in Rome provided him with the knowledge of all the arts and disciplines pertinent to the dance, and during that time he completed the preparations for his *ballo grande* with *Il Moro Antille* (1865) and then *Michelangelo e Rolla* (1869).

His Roman career culminated in the production of the *ballo storico-spettacoloso* (historical-spectacular ballet) *Pietro Micca* (1871) which in those years, with the memories of the Risorgimento still vivid, succeeded in generating profound feeling. It dealt with the heroic undertaking of the miner Pietro Micca, who sacrificed his life in defending Turin from the besieging French in 1706. The ballet took up the current celebration of the Savoy dynasty, and as Paolo Taglioni had already done in *Flik und Flok*, equally shared the danced parts with mimed elements, especially those expressing patriotic sentiments. Manzotti, who was the principal interpreter, at various moments aroused the rapture of the crowds, as in, for example, the farewell of the hero and his wife in the seventh scene. When the encores of the scene which the public demanded could no longer be conceded, it provoked such disorder that the police had to intervene.

In 1873 at the Teatro Apollo in Rome, Manzotti brought out *Galileo Galilei*, with music by Leopoldo Angeli. This work, which anticipated the themes of light and science, is fundamental to *Excelsior*.

In 1872 Manzotti was called to La Scala as first mime in Pratesi’s *Bianca di Nevers*, but his great triumph as a choreographer came only three years later in the revivals of *Pietro Micca* and *Michelangelo e Rolla* (presented at La Scala in 1876 under the title *Rolla*). In the same year he composed *Sieba* with music by Romualdo Marenco and costumes by Alfredo Edel, so initiating a collaboration which was to last for a long time and bring great success to all three. The *colossale* was already evident in this work with the introduction on stage of ships, temples, Valhalla, and great massings of figurants. It was produced again the following year at La Scala, in 1880 at the San Carlo in Naples and at La Fenice in Venice, and in 1882 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome. Thanks to its enormous success, the spectacle did the rounds of many theatres in various cities, among them Lyons.

King Harold (Araldo) of Thule is threatened by the conspiracy of his minister Kafur and his ally, the piratical mercenary Holerut. The god Wotan sends the young king a miraculous sword, brought to him by the valkyrie Sieba. The spiteful Surtur, a wicked god and enemy of Wotan, causes Sieba to fall in love with Harold, and be loved by him in return, against the laws of the valkyries. On the battlefield the pirates capture the King as planned by Kafur, who steals the magic sword and takes command of the army. Meanwhile Sieba is condemned to the horrors of the underworld, to which the triumphant Surtur drives her. At last Wotan allows her to return to the light, and assigns her to life among the mortals. Sieba, with the help of the boy Cadmo, a slave of the pirates, sets her beloved Harold free, thanks to the intervention of Wotan, who blows up a tempest that drowns the pirates and preserves the young slave and the two lovers. Thus King Harold is restored to his people, and marries Sieba.

The use of a subject drawn from Germanic myth in a ballet (following in the wake of *The Goddess of Valhalla* by Pasquale Borri a few years earlier at La Scala), can certainly be attributed to the effects of Wagner’s operas on the musical theatre of the late 19th century. *Sieba* marked the beginning of the successful collaboration between Manzotti and the composer Romualdo Marenco, as well as the first appearance of the fantastic transformation scenes so typical of Manzotti’s *ballo grande*. Most memorable among the later productions supervised by the choreographer was the ballet’s first revival at La Scala Milan on 11 January 1879, with scenery by Carl Ferrario, and danced by Rosita Mauri, Bice Vergani (Aroldo), Carlo Coppi (Cadmo), Giuseppe Grezzi (Wotan), and Francesco Baratti (Kafur). It was revived again at La Scala on 14 January 1933, danced by Attila Radice, Placida Battaggi, Gennaro Corbo and Tony Corcione.

At this point Manzotti conceived the idea of the ballet *Excelsior* to celebrate the triumphs of industry, civilization and thought. Returning to Milan he prepared this *ballo grande* which was produced at La Scala on 11 February 1881, with the protagonists Rosina Viale, Carlo Coppi and Cesare Coppini. Some 500 people participated in this spectacle celebrating the apotheosis of the 19th century. *Excelsior* became a rite celebrating the victory of Light over Obscurantism through the conquests of science, art and industry in the achievement of a universal peace. It was produced in theatres across the world. It was said that in Paris a special theatre, the Eden, was built expressly to produce the work (actually the story is legendary, since the theatre already existed, but it is nevertheless symptomatic of the importance attached to the ballet in this era). Into the early 20th century, it was still preferred in Italian theatres to the equally imposing Russian ballet. It was even arranged for the marionettes of Prodrecca’s Teatro dei Piccoli.

This extraordinarily spectacular ballet shows the rise of human civilization and the stormy progress of technical development as an embittered struggle between the Spirits of Darkness and Light. Following the invention of the steam ship, the iron bridge, electricity, telegraphy, and the building of the Suez Canal and the Mont Cenis Tunnel, the Spirit of Darkness admits defeat, and a Grand Festival of the Nations is celebrated with an apotheosis of light and peace.
The ballet enjoyed immense popularity and was constantly revived all over Europe. After its Vienna premiere in 1885, it remained in the repertory for 29 years, receiving 329 performances. There have been more recent stagings by Ugo dell’Ara for the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in 1967 and at La Scala di Milano in 1974.

After *Excelsior*, which procured fame and a comfortable existence for him, and after abandoning the project of staging *La Divina Commedia*, Manzotti choreographed the ballet *Amor*. This realized the Dantean idea of “the Love that moves the sun and the stars”, the idea of universal love. This work appeared at La Scala on 17 February 1886, after months of rehearsals, and after the enlargement of the stage to contain the 640 performers, as well as 12 horses, 2 oxen and an elephant. The interpreters were Antonietta Belbi (*prima ballerina*), Ernestina Operti (*prima mima*), Enrico Cecchetti (*primo ballerino*), and Carlo Coppi (*primo mimo*). The success equalled that of *Excelsior*, but because of the huge nature of the production, it was revived only once, in 1902.

Starting with Chaos and finishing with the Temple of Love, Manzotti presented a display of spectacular scenes, among them Parnassus, the Pantheon of the Arts in Greece, the Triumph of Caesar, the Destruction of Rome, Barbarossa and the Battle of Legnano. Together with hundreds of dancers, mimes, children, and extras, a live elephant and several horses and oxen also appeared on stage.

Manzotti’s next ballet *Sport* (La Scala, 10 February 1897), which glorified all kinds of sporting activities, was on the scale of his previous productions. It was also very popular, and was revived by E. Coppini with success in 1905 and 1906. *L’Illustrazione Italiana* observed:

“*Sport!*...*Sport!*...*Sport!* Everyone is talking about it! Manzotti’s ballet which saw the light of day at La Scala this week is the great event of the season... We follow this trend and dedicate several pages to the event. *Sport* unfolds before the eyes of the spectators; it provokes the emotions of a real racetrack, a real regatta, of Alpine climbing in all its stress; we attend ice-skating in Canada, and find ourselves transported to the racecourse of Longchamps, and to the enchanting banks of a lagoon.”

Manzotti’s last composition *Rosa d’amore* (La Scala, 1899), with music by Bayer, was greatly inferior to its predecessors.

According to Gino Tani, Manzotti’s choreography now appears elephantine and Baroque, but we must appreciate the originality that pulled together the traditions of the 19th century and served as the inspiration for certain aspects of the work of choreographers like Marius Petipa and George Balanchine. In the 20th century, the figure of Manzotti has often been belittled, frequently to underline that basically, he, the son of a *verzeratt* (greengrocer), was lacking culture. But, analyzing his works and the success they enjoyed in a period when ballet was generally in decline, one is not able to deny them a well-informed mastery and a stageworthiness, however banal, as well as a capacity for grand communication that validates the title ‘Cavaliere della Repubblica’ proposed for him by the minister Guido Baccielli (Minister of Education and Agriculture of the Kingdom of Italy from 1874 to 1903).

**Excelsior**

A historical, allegorical, spectacular ballet in six parts and eleven scenes  
Choreography and scenario by Luigi Manzotti  
Music by Romualdo Marencu  
Sets and costumes by Alfredo Edel  
First performance: Milan, La Scala, 11 January 1881  
Principal dancers: Bice Vergani, Carlo Montanara, Rosina Viale, Carlo Coppi, Angelo Cuccoli

**Synopsis**

Part I:  
*Obscurantism*: in Spain of the Inquisition the Spirit of Darkness holds enchained a beautiful woman, Light, Progress, Civilization. But the links of the chain break, Light triumphs, the personification of human genius appears, and Obscurantism retires defeated, cursing at so much radiance.

*Light*: surrounded by riches and brilliance, the grandeurs of antiquity can be seen. Then the discoveries of the new era, the fruits of science, make their appearance: Steam Power, Telegraphy, the Suez Canal, the Mont Cenis tunnel. A new age enters in triumph and a happy future illuminates the path of humanity.
Part II:  
*The First Steamboat*: a village on the River Weser. In the village inn the success of young Valentino, winner of the boat race, is being celebrated. He is challenged by his defeated rival. Obscurantism warns the contestants of the arrival of a steamboat, piloted by its inventor, Papin. "It is a work of the devil," he tells them. The boatmen destroy the vessel. Papin dies in the struggle, but Light proclaims his glory to the crowd.

New York: over a stormy sea ploughs a great steamship. It is the development of Papin's invention. Obscurantism falls, overpowered.

Part III:  
*Electricity*: we are in Alessandro Volta's laboratory in Como. He stands deep in thought beside his ‘pile’. Though threatened by the Spirit of Darkness, Light protects him. At last a spark flashes out. It is victory.

Washington: Obscurantism finds himself in Telegraph Square, dazzled by the light. A crowd of telegraph boys come out, guided by Civilization. The malevolent being steals away, cursing.

Part IV:  
*The Simoon*: a caravan is crossing the desert when it is overtaken by the simoon, a terrible sandstorm. The unfortunate travellers are robbed by desert marauders and prepare to die in the darkness. The Spirit of Evil rejoices, but Light points to the horizon where a new route has opened, *The Suez Canal*. In place of the desert is a wide canal and the town of Ismailia where all European civilization is foregathered, brought together by Science. There are ships, tents, and people of every race dancing with joy.

Part V:  
*The Ultimate Mining Operation*: the great work of the Mont Cenis tunnel is almost completed, and Evil lurks, seeking revenge. The engineers install the last charge, which will demolish the remaining rock dividing Italy from France. The detonation is awaited in an atmosphere of suspense. Then at last the barrier falls and workers and engineers of the two nations embrace one another. Now Obscurantism is truly defeated and Light condemns him to see the peoples united in universal happiness. The ground then opens up and the dark spirit is swallowed into its depths.

Part VI:  
*The Apotheosis of Human Genius*: all the nations gather together and dance joyfully to the glory of the present and the greater glory to come, in the guise of Science.

*Excelsior*, performed 103 times during the year 1881, was one of the greatest successes of Italian ballet. It was a stupendous affair, crowded, colourful, full of ideas that would please and stimulate the general public. With its unlimited faith in scientific progress, it interpreted the optimism of the new classes who saw industry and fresh discoveries as the way to save humanity from its age-old ills. It had, moreover, a positive feeling of world brotherhood and internationalism, and, in its confrontation of light and darkness, pointed towards a new morality nourished with hope. Not at all a romantic ballet, but practical and secular, *Excelsior* was the perfect product of the great reformist illusion, and a monument to human intelligence finally successful in bending the forces of nature to its will. In those years scientific discoveries still seemed miracles destined to change the course of events. Manzotti and Marenco, well aware of these tendencies, gave free rein to their imaginations in a grand display of stage effects and spectacle. Thus *Excelsior* is an entertainment closely related to its epoch, and though it may be accused of naïveté, it would be unjust not to consider it as an important document of late 19th-century Italian culture. It was admittedly the expression of an unsophisticated taste, the reflection of a certain decadence in regard to choreography; but its impact on the public was and remains extraordinary, as can be seen from the recent revivals after so many years of oblivion. Marenco's music is simple and suitable for dancing, sometimes inspired by folk dances such as the famous mazurka of the Weser, grown famous as the accompaniment to 'Bella se vuoi venire sull'omnibus'. *Excelsior* is a little masterpiece of fusion between various kinds of entertainment; choreographically Manzotti combined 19th-century tradition with the most lively elements of modernism. Perhaps the ballet could best be described as an agile elephant, highly decorated and very cinematographic (even though the cinema was not yet in existence).

*Excelsior* was revived at La Scala in 1883, 1888, 1894, 1909 (always with the same choreography), and in 1916 in a new version by Renato Simoni. On 22 May 1885, Carlo Ceppi staged it at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London. Between 1895 and 1956 it could be seen adapted for the marionettes of the Teatro dei Piccoli, with a revival at the Piccola Scala in 1969. In 1931 a ‘reproduction’ by Giovanni Pratesi was first put on at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in an atmosphere heavy with Fascism, with updatings, such as Marconi in place of Volta, and S.O.S. (Morse Code) instead of Suez.

On 27 June 1967, *Excelsior* was revived at the Teatro Communale in Florence for the Maggio Musicale, and enjoyed a successful run, including performances at La Scala and Rome. The choreography was by Ugo dell’Ara, and the music re-arranged by Fiorenzo Carpi. The sets and costumes were designed by Giulio Coltellacci. Manzotti's prologue
“To the Reader” was spoken by Alfredo Bianchini. The production was staged under the direction of Filippo Crivelli. There were some departures from the original, such as the character of the freed slave in the Suez Scene. Among the dancers were Ludmilla Tcherina, Ugo Dell’Ara, Carla Fracci, and Attilo Labis. The grand finale with flags and uniforms of the nations aroused immense enthusiasm, as did the sumptuous and ingenious staging.

The Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto presented *Excelsior* in 1990. This was followed by a revival at the Teatro Degli Arcimboldi Milano in 2002, with the Obscurantism of Riccardo Massimi pitted against the Light of Marta Romagna. Other roles were undertaken by Civilisation (Isabel Seabra), the Slave (Roberto Bolle) (demonstrating liberation and upward social mobility), with long dance sequences for Thunderbolt (Raffaella Benaglia) and Indian (Elisabetta Armiato). The resultant DVD shows gorgeous stage settings, with sprightly orchestral playing and superb video quality.

Carlo Colla's famous company of marionettes includes *Excelsior* in its repertory. Despite the limitations of the medium, this version is more likely to be closer to the original than any other realization.
Sport

Ballet in 4 parts and 8 scenes
Scenario and choreography by Luigi Manzotti
Music by Romualdo Marenco
Sets by Magni, Rota, L. Sala, and Songa
Costumes by Alfredo Edel
First performance: Milan, La Scala. 10 February 1897
Principal dancers: Cecilia Cerri (Florence Bernier), Luisa Cristino (Lady Waldeck), Vittorio de Vincenti (the Jockey), Antonio Monti (the Marquis de Franckeville)

An elegant sportsman, the Marquis de Franckeville, has seduced the actress Florence Bernier and also Lady Waldeck, wife of an American millionaire. The two rivals follow their lover all over the world, from his mountain climbing in the Alps (Part I), to the skating championships in Canada (Part II), to the horse races at Longchamps, and the Venetian Regatta (Part III), always with mixed success. Hunting, fishing, target-practice and a futuristic invasion of cyclists are also included. Florence Bernier eventually wins in the competition of love, in time for the final celebration of the triumph of sport (Part IV).

Sport was the last of Manzotti’s grand trilogy which started, and found its apotheosis, in Excelsior. As modern and spectacular as the other two, Sport was intended as a celebration of every kind of athletic activity, especially in the enthusiastic aftermath of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens on 10 April 1896. Although the scenario concerned the eternal triangle, it was only an excuse for displays of skill by soloists and stupendous ensembles for the corps de ballet, whose costumes were very daring for that period. Sport has been seen as the ancestor of the precision manoeuvres of the Hoffmann Girls, and even as an influence on Fokine’s geometric groupings and on the styles of Golejzovsky, Nijinska, Balanchine and Lifar. The popularity of the work was enormous (46 performances in the first season), and was equally successful when revived in 1905 and 1906 under the direction of Achille Copini.

It is not surprising that Manzotti dedicated a ballet to sporting activities in a period when ‘the culture of the body’ and physical formation were developing apace. This subject gave Manzotti the means of best exploiting the capacity of the corps de ballet, engaged in the gymnastic and athletic developments, and to provide space for the movement of groups, an area in which the choreographer succeeded particularly well. Among the principal dancers of Sport were Laura Cerri and Vittorio De Vincenti. The costumes by Edel, rather audacious for the period, are interesting documents of fashion at the end of the 19th century, particularly in the sector dedicated to sportswear and leisure fashions.

Illustrations:

The title page of the score

The German Liebig Cards celebrating the ballet:
1. Masked Ball on ice at Montreal (Canada): the big Snow Ballabile
2. The ‘Grand Prix’ in Longchamps: saluting the victor (Champagne Dance)
3. The Venetian Regatta: the Gondoliers’ Ballabile
4. Hunting Party in Fontainebleau: the Hallali
5. The great Procession of the Sports
6. The Triumph of Sport: the closing Mass Tableau
EXCELSIOR
Azione coreografica, storica, allegorica, fantastica
DI
LUIGI MANZOTTI
MUSICA DI
ROMUALDO MARENCO
PRELUDIO

Maestoso
PPP

8.

8.
PARTE I - QUADRO I

L'OSCURANTISMO

Una città di Spagna ai tempi dell'Inquisizione.
Notte sinistra e funebre. Il Genio delle tenebre tiene ai suoi piedi, avvinto da pesanti catene, il Progresso, e ne gioisce.
Il Progresso, raffigurato dalla

Luce, a poco a poco si rialza e infrange le sue catene, apostrofando l'Oscurointismo.

PIU MOSSO

m.d.

cres.
stent.

1° Tempo

47323
Lotta fra i due e vittoria della Luce.

ALLEGRO

La città sprofonda.
LA FAMA

DANZA

ALLEGRETTO

[Music notation image]
LA CIVILTÀ

POLKETTA

ANDANTE

\[\text{Music notation image}\]