

Il Destino di Grant Application
A Tragic Opera in Three Acts

by Lloyd Fricker

Cast (in order of vocal appearance)

Alfredo, a professor
Baritone
Wu Li, a postdoc
Tenor
Kathy, another postdoc Alto
Nicolette, Alfredo's secretary
Soprano
Adriana, Alfredo's wife
Soprano
Bubba, Alfredo's sonTenor
Julieta, Alfredo's daughter
Soprano
Stephano, Scientific Review AdministratorBass
Doug, Grants Technical AssistantTenor
Erminio, another professor..... Bass

Act I

Alfredo's Office

The curtain rises on Alfredo in his office; nearby, his postdocs, Wu Li and Kathy, are hard at work on a manuscript that has been rejected by Nature. In a dramatic opening aria, the researchers lament the fact that the journal reviewers found their manuscript unexciting ("Il reviewers sono molto stupidi"). Nicolette, Alfredo's secretary, arrives with a box of grant applications that Alfredo, as an NIH reviewer, must evaluate. Alfredo opens it, and finding only 12 applications, rejoices. He is joined by the two postdocs and the secretary in a quartet extolling the virtues of having but 12 applications to read ("Il lighto loado"). Their happiness soon turns to sorrow, however, as Alfredo discovers a note indicating that he is to be the primary reviewer on an additional 18 applications that will arrive at a later date ("Il grande boxo di granti"). The four lament the twist of fate, Murphy's law, and the Peter Principle. Alfredo, grieved that he will have no time to spend with his lab group or family for the next six weeks, departs sadly homeward bearing the box of applications.

Act II

Scene 1, Alfredo's office (one month later)

Alfredo is still hard at work on the applications, having completed only four. He sings a sad aria Stefano, the Scientific Review Administrator for his study section, wants the triage list of applications that didn't make the cut by the next day ("Il listo di crappo"). At that moment Nicolette enters bearing an envelope from NIH. Believing it contains yet another supplement, Alfredo tosses it onto a pile and searches for his place in the application he was reading. Just then, Wu Li enters with some important data that must be published immediately, before competitors beat them to it. They sing a dramatic duet ("La pubblicazione o il scoop") in which Alfredo regrets that he cannot help write the article as he must read 26 more applications before the study section meeting next week. As Wu Li leaves, Alfredo returns yet again to the grant application, only to be interrupted by Kathy. She is distraught that she hasn't gotten a raise in the two years she has been with Alfredo. He promises her a large raise if his own application is funded, explaining that he is waiting for the summary statement ("Il sheeto pinko"). After their duet, Kathy leaves and Alfredo returns once again to the application. A minute later, he jumps from his seat and snatches the envelope he had tossed hastily onto his desk, as he realizes suddenly that it is actually the long-awaited summary statement ("La posta junko il sheeto pinko"). Trembling, Alfredo tears open the envelope, then lets out a cry upon seeing the score, which is clearly not in the fundable range. He sings a moving aria lamenting the lack of sufficient funding for basic science and his own unfortunate lack of success ("Mio granto es finito"). Unable to concentrate any longer, Alfredo goes home.

Scene 2, Alfredo's home (later that night)

Alfredo arrives home and finds Adriana, Bubba, and Julieta overjoyed that he has returned before they have gone to sleep. Their happiness is short-lived, however, as he confesses the cause of his surprise homecoming. They are not sympathetic to the fact that only a small number of people actually get their grant applications funded, and dismayed that Alfredo's application was considered only "excellent" ("Papa es un nincompopo"). Disheartened, Alfredo sits at his desk and begins to read another application. Just as at work, however, he cannot read for more than a minute before being interrupted - now by his wife and children. After a couple of hours, Alfredo has nearly finished reading an entire page. Unfortunately, he falls asleep before reaching the next one.

Act III,

A Holiday Inn in Valhalla, home of the Gods and Goddesses of NIH

The scene opens to reveal a large table surrounded by serious-looking men and women. Alfredo is among the mortals, who have been invited to Valhalla to decide the fate of 137 grant applications. At the side of the room are the Gods and Goddesses of NIH, the program officers of the various agencies, dressed in white tunics. They are feeding from a large tray of grapes, and drinking decaf coffee. Stephano, the Scientific Review Administrator, begins the meeting with an hour-long aria about the grant review process and the need for confidentiality ("Non asko, non tello"). The first grant application to be reviewed is one for which Alfredo was the primary reviewer. Alfredo likes this application, which describes an imaginative series of experiments concerning an important but little-studied biological question ("Se succede, il Nobel Prizo"). Furthermore, all its key points are presented in a single page the limit of Alfredo's attention span, given all the interruptions he must tolerate. His enthusiasm is countered by the other reviewer in what has come to be the most famous aria of the opera ("Non hypothesiso, non preliminary dato"). Other reviewers join in with comments on the applicant's lack of independence and the absence of feasibility studies, and the general observation that the problem must not be very important or others would already be working on it. Finally, the Grants Technical Assistant rises and joins in the singing ("Giv mi il floppi disco"). Everybody in the room then joins in, except for the Gods and Goddesses - who have moved from the grapes to a large table filled with melon balls, which they eat with toothpicks - and a man in a Holiday Inn uniform restocking the toothpicks. When it becomes clear that no new comments have been made for at least 45 minutes, a vote is finally called for, and in a dramatic moment, Alfredo sings out "1.0," while the other reviewers vote for a worse score ("Il granto non-competitivo"). They arrive at a consensus score of 2.0. During the aria, the man in the Holiday Inn uniform becomes noticeably distressed. He consumes vast quantities of coffee and finally collapses as the application's score is announced. In a surprise twist, one of the NIH Goddesses reveals that the man is in fact Erminio, the applicant of the failed grant. Although fatally poisoned by the bad coffee, Erminio sings a moving aria reflecting on the weaknesses of the current grant review system ("Il reviewers screwed-uppo"). The opera ends with the reviewers placing Erminio's lifeless body in the boxes that held the discarded grant applications, and covering him with glossy photos of his data. As the curtain is lowered, one reviewer comments that it's a good thing the application wasn't given a really bad score, or who knows what the applicant would have done ("Il Unabombo").