

Synopsis of *Rappaccini's Daughter* by Thomas H. Schleis

Act One

As the opera begins, we discover Doctors Rappaccini and Baglioni discussing medicine and its relationship to the mysteries of life and death. Rappaccini's comments upset Baglioni, and the two debate the subject. After they leave, Giovanni, a student from Naples, arrives on the scene and is greeted by Isabela. He misses Naples, and Isabela, leading him to his rented room, extols the merits of the gardens of Padua. Indeed, one of the most beautiful belongs to Dr. Rappaccini, and it can be seen from Giovanni's room.

Giovanni has never heard of Rappaccini, and Isabela informs the young student of Rappaccini's mysterious ways, his garden and his beautiful daughter, Beatriz. After her departure, Dr. Baglioni, who knows Giovanni's father, drops by to visit Giovanni. He warns him about Rappaccini and tells him to stay away from the garden. He, too, praises the beauty of Beatriz, though he has never seen her. Giovanni looks over toward the beautiful garden, and he sees Rappaccini tending his plants. As he approaches the large plant in the center of the garden, he becomes weak and calls to Beatriz to aid him.

As Beatriz aids him, he speaks of the world he wishes to create: "a world of perfect beauty, a garden of living treasures, a garden of fire where life and death embrace and exchange each other's secrets." She does not comprehend her father's vision of the future, but, rather, she contemplates her own destiny among the beloved plants. She addresses a tree, imagining it to be a young man, and she dances around it. Giovanni, who has been watching her from his room, takes a rose and tosses it to her. She picks it up, but it withers at her touch. Giovanni calls her name, but Beatriz, frightened, runs away.

Giovanni is confused by what he has seen and falls asleep. In his dream, Isabela encourages Giovanni to descend into the garden; there all his dreams will come true. As his dream continues, he hears Beatriz calling to him, and he goes to meet her in the garden. The night colors everything, and he observes Rappaccini tending his plants. The doctor becomes aware of his presence, and he realizes that the dreams of Giovanni and Beatriz are joined in the garden, in this world of his creation. Again, Giovanni hears the voice of Beatriz. She invites him to join her and pick fruit from a tree in the garden. He approaches the tree, but, as he is about to touch it, he hears the voice of Isabela calling to him. She awakens him from his slumber by knocking on the door of his room.

Act Two

Giovanni wanders aimlessly through the streets of Padua. He meets Baglioni, who notices that he is somehow changed. As they talk, Rappaccini, silent, passes by, staring at Giovanni. Baglioni questions Giovanni about his acquaintance with Rappaccini, causing the young student to leave quickly. Baglioni fears the worst and decides to take matters into his own hands.

Giovanni has returned to his room, and Isabela takes him to Rappaccini's garden. He finally meets Beatriz for the first time. Even though they have never spoken, they sense that they have known each other in their dreams. Beatriz longs to leave her father's garden and see the world beyond its walls. Giovanni promises to take her out of the garden, but she is afraid the open air would harm her. Their ardor increases, and, to seal their love, Giovanni approaches the tree to cut a blossom for his beloved. Beatriz stops him and runs away. Giovanni turns and sees Rappaccini; he apologizes to him and departs. Rappaccini thinks about his experiment, and how it blends opposites.

Giovanni has returned to his room, and he nurses the wound Beatriz has inflicted on his wrist when she touched him. Isabela brings him some flowers, eager to hear of his encounter with Beatriz. At this point Baglioni comes on the scene to once again warn Giovanni of the garden and relates a story of a slave girl presented to Alexander the Great. The girl had been fed poison since her birth, and, thus, a kiss would have resulted in Alexander's death. Giovanni understands Baglioni's concern, especially when Baglioni tells him that Giovanni might be a part of Rappaccini's experiment. He gives Giovanni a powerful antidote to save Beatriz from her father's poison.

For the last time, Giovanni enters the garden. He plucks a rose for Beatriz, but, to his chagrin, it wilts in his hand. He, too, is now a victim of Rappaccini's experiment. Beatriz is delighted that Giovanni has come to her, but he rejects her, accusing her of poisoning him. Rappaccini enters filled with joy. He has succeeded in his experiment - Beatriz and her lover can be united and procreate new and unconquerable life. Beatriz admonishes her father for condemning her to a life she never chose. She shows him the antidote, but he warns her not to take it, since it could kill her.

Beatriz takes the antidote, and turns to Giovanni, whose words have so upset her. She accuses him of having more poison in him than she. Delirious, she sings: "I have reached the other side. Garden of my childhood, poisoned paradise. My tree, my brother, my only lover. Cover me, turn me to ashes, dissolve my bones and my memory. I'm falling within, and yet I cannot touch the depth of my soul." Collapsing at the foot of the tree, she dies.