

The Donizetti Festival, Bergamo (part 1) Inaugural concerts and Donizetti's *Pietro il Grande*

Charles Jernigan, November 2019

In recent years Bergamo's Donizetti Festival has become a principal offering among Italian music festivals. Efforts to produce a festival dedicated to Bergamo's most famous native son sputtered for years, but now the Festival is going strong, with major singers, conductors and scholars all participating in an ongoing effort to stage Donizetti's 70 plus operas and perform his other music. The formula, under Music Director Riccardo Frizza, has evolved into offering a Gala Inaugural Concert, the production of three of Donizetti operas, assorted other concerts and presentations of scholarly work under the leadership of musicologist Paolo Fabbri. In addition to all of this, the classic Teatro Donizetti in the newer part of town (Città Bassa) has been undergoing a massive restoration and enlargement which will be complete for the 2020 season. During its closure most of the operas have taken place in the smaller Teatro Sociale in the old, medieval part of town (Città Alta) where Donizetti was born in 1797. The Sociale (a theater which Donizetti himself would have known) has been brilliantly restored and offers an intimate venue for staging some of the operas, a function which will continue when the larger Teatro Donizetti reopens next year. For the 2019 edition, one opera was staged in the work site of the Teatro Donizetti, while the other two operas were staged in the Teatro Sociale.

One feature of the Festival, now in its third year, is the performance of a Donizetti opera which is celebrating its two hundredth anniversary. The sequence began two years ago and continued last year with Donizetti's first professionally staged work, *Enrico di Borgogna* (1818); it continues this year with *Pietro il Grande* (1819) and will likely continue next year with another very early work, *Le nozze in villa* (1820). This year, along with this #Donizetti200 work, we had Donizetti's last staged opera, *L'ange de Nisida*, performed here in a staged version for the first time ever. *Lucrezia Borgia* completed the season on the occasion of the issuance of a critical edition of the opera by Roger Parker and Rosie Ward.

Apropos of *Lucrezia Borgia*, whose tragedy ends when she poisons her own son by mistake, the theme of this year's **Gala Inaugural** was poison/potion. That is, the excerpts (overtures and vocal numbers) were from operas with plots which involve love potions or poisons, or sometimes both. Thus we had overtures from *Luisa Miller*, *Le philtre* (Auber), *Fausta*, *Anna Bolena* and the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*. Vocal excerpts came from *L'elisir d'amore*, *Anna Bolena*, *Imelda de' Lambertazzi*, and *Hamlet* (Thomas). There was also a charming Danish Dance from *Hamlet*, and for some unexplained reason, Figaro's aria from *Il barbiere*. I don't think he speaks of poison or potions, but it's a great aria, and was exceptionally well sung and acted by Florian Sempey. Curiously there was no excerpt from *Lucrezia Borgia* itself. An inspired Riccardo Frizza led the outstanding Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Torino, and the fine list of both veteran and young singers included sopranos Carmela Remigio and Marta Torbidoni, tenor Konu Kim and baritone Sempey. And there was Alessandro Corbelli doing a wonderful turn as Dr. Dulcamara, as

fresh-voiced as he was 46 years ago when he debuted as Monterone in *Rigoletto*. It was a great concert from everyone involved, and there was more dramatic life and musical fizz in these performers dressed in their formal concert attire than there was in the whole somnolent performance of Rossini's *Ermione*, which we had just seen in Naples.

We also attended a lovely concert by eighteen year old wunderkind pianist Ginevra Costantini Negri in the very house where Donizetti was born, which has been turned into a small museum with a performance space. She played works on the theme of "**The Italians in Paris**," by Cherubini, Rossini, Donizetti and Puccini. I don't think Puccini was especially connected to Paris, but Negri liked the piece, which was an early pianistic version of the music which later became famous as Musetta's waltz in *La boheme*. If only Donizetti, who 'was born in the cold, dank basement of that house on Via Borgo Canale could have heard the inspired music coming from what must have been the house's attic!

As for the operas, the first one we heard (on Nov. 15, and then again on Nov. 23) was the #Donizetti200 opera, *Pietro il Grande*. This work, which debuted on December 26, 1819, at the small Teatro San Samuele in Venice, was Donizetti's third staged opera. (The second one, *Una follia* had failed, and is lost). It seems to have been a success and played for awhile in Venice and a few other Italian towns before disappearing from the stage; it was thought to be lost until it resurfaced in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 2003, as part of the city's founding celebrations. The following year it was charmingly staged at the Festival della Valle d'Itria in Martina Franca, Italy, and was recorded. (I saw it there in 2004.). The ur-text for the opera is a French comedy by Alexandre Duval (1805) which was translated into Italian and inspired a libretto by Felice Romani for Giovanni Pacini entitled *Il falegname di Livonia* and by Gherardo Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini for Donizetti. The Romani-Pacini opera debuted at La Scala a few months before Donizetti's work premiered in Venice. Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini was primarily an artist and scenographer, but he dabbled in libretto writing, and wrote the one act *Adina* for his friend Rossini (also drawn from a Romani libretto written for Pacini) and collaborated on Rossini's *Edoardo e Cristina*. Donizetti's opera was originally entitled *Il falegname di Livonia (The Carpenter of Livonia)* like Pacini's work, but the subtitle, *Pietro il Grande, Kzar delle Russie* came to be used to differentiate the two works. Today one sees the opera called by both titles, but it is the same work.

The story concerns an episode in the legends surrounding Peter the Great, when he and his wife Catherine (Caterina), come incognito to a village in Livonia (present day Estonia/Lithuania) in search of Caterina's long lost brother. Most of the opera takes place in front of an inn run by Madame Fritz, who is the real female protagonist in Donizetti's work. A sort of fairy godmother in this adult fairy tale, she wants to help Carlo, a carpenter (*falegname*) with mysterious origins and his beloved Annetta get married. They are opposed by an officious magistrate in the buffo tradition, Ser Cuccupis. In the end, it turns out that Carlo is Caterina's long-lost brother and Annetta is the daughter of the famous rebel Mazeppa, but the wise and generous Peter accepts Annetta as his own daughter and blesses the marriage, raising Carlo to noble status. The pompous Ser Cuccupis loses his position as the royal entourage leaves for St. Petersburg.

The music of this youthful piece (Donizetti had just turned 22 when the opera premiered) is first of all very Rossinian, as critics of the day recognized, with touches of Donizetti's teacher Mayr. Donizetti's principal model seems to be Rossini's *La gazza ladra*, since both works share the semiseria genre, the village setting, the comic but overbearing Magistrate and a big trial scene. Even the pleasant overture has a military character like the famous overture to *Gazza ladra* (which was two years old in 1819), and like the Rossini piece it begins with drum rolls. Like Pacini, who famously admitted that he "...followed the great man from Pesaro" because there was no other choice if you wanted operatic success in those days, Donizetti carefully modeled his early work on Rossini. The smooth cantilenas, the ear worm melodies—they were in the future, but the careful construction of the music shows that Mayr had trained his pupil well.

The 2019 production of the opera didn't have much to do with the story or the music, however. The production company of Marco Paciotti and Lorenzo Pasquali, called Ondadurto Teatro, was responsible for direction, sets and "machines." Costumes were by K.B. Project. This production was Ondadurto's first attempt at opera, which did not seem to matter since "their shows always involve the combined use of large moving objects, machinery, water and fire games, video projections and music...capable of communication with all types of audiences." The "set" consisted of mobile carts, similar to cinema trolleys, which the singers rolled around and sometimes stood on while singing—while being rolled around themselves. There were a lot of in-your-face bright lights, projections and strobes. The lights brought a sort of a rock music concert format to opera. I, for one, found it very distracting.



Caterina, Peter the Great



Madame Fritz, Caterina, Peter, Cuccupis

The sets and costumes were plastered with colorful geometric shapes and metallic slashes, and the singers were reduced to wearing wild clothes and outrageous wigs. Caterina—Catherine I of Russia—wore a bride of Frankenstein wig right out of the 1935 horror film, Carlo got a blue wig and Madame Fritz a red fright wig. The costumes, in fact the whole production, was very colorful and bright—a nice contrast to the gloom which pervades so many contemporary opera productions. A piece in the Program Book tried to argue that the concept was based on a philosophical point of view that looked back to the Russian Avant-Garde at the time of the 1918 Revolution, but I found that it partook more of the circus. During poor Annetta's plaintive Act I cavatina, a hoop was lowered and a trapeze artist came on stage to hang, spin and pose directly next to soprano Nina Solodovnikova, who must have hated the distraction. Such diversions made no sense at all in terms of the opera,

although visually they were sometimes amusing to watch. The Martina Franca production of 2004, which respected the libretto's demands was much preferable to me. It was as if the production team did not trust Donizetti's score to carry the evening and as if music was only a minor part of the "show." There were more than scattered boos interjected into the polite applause when the production team came out for bows.

The singing on the other hand, was solid, with Roberto DeCandia in the title role and Paola Gardina as Madama Fritz. Others included Loriana Castellano (Caterina), Nina Solodovnikova (Annetta Mazeppa), Francisco Brito (Carlo Scavronski), Marco Filippo Romano (Ser Cuccupis) Tommaso Barea (Firman), Marcello Nardis (Hondedisky) and Stefano Gentili as a Notary. The best of the cast was Romano's funny Cuccupis, and the best vocal music for my money came in two duets—the first a buffo duet between the two basses which prefigures many choice Donizetti moments to come, and the second a duet between Cuccupis and Fritz, when she successfully tries to seduce him in order to get him to free the imprisoned Carlo. "Addio, virtù," as he says. Madame Fritz also gets a fine rondo finale in the Rossini vein.



Annetta, Ensemble

The 32 player orchestra Gli Originali was conducted by Rinaldo Allesandrini and the Coro Donizetti Opera had 25 men. (Comic operas—and small theaters—at the time did not often use women in the chorus.). All performed with appropriate brio and drive.