

Lament for a dead Nightingale

or

the cantata

«In morte di M.F.Malibran De Bériot»

Alexander Weatherson

The death of the twenty-eight year old Maria Malibran gave rise to an odd kind of memorial, one of the oddest any defunct prima donna could have been expected to receive. This was the 'pasticcio' cantata "In morte di M. F. Malibran De Bériot", given at La Scala - on the stage she had captured so brilliantly - on 17th March, 1837. It was sung once and never again.

The nineteenth century in fact proposed a few such composite works, the most celebrated of which being the abortive "Requiem" for Rossini, masterminded by Verdi, whose various fragments - duly composed by a roster of ill-assorted contemporaries - now are deposited in the stronghold of the "Archivio Storico Ricordi", unperformed except for those parts by Verdi himself which were later incorporated in his own (and wholly own) "Requiem per Manzoni" which has never left the repertory.

For Malibran the roster too was capricious, Gaetano Donizetti, Giovanni Pacini, Saverio Mercadante, Pier-Antonio Coppola, and Nicola Vaccai, a quintet of maestri not altogether happily associated with the supreme artist. How were they brought together? Donizetti, whose MARIA STUARDA had been ruined in 1835, primarily because the great singer was hoarse and sang only for her fee, the opera being subsequently banned; Pacini, whose IRENE O L'ASSEDIO DI MESSINA, written especially for her, (San Carlo, Naples 30th November 1833) was contemptuously dismissed in a barrage of hissing and whistling, the music itself upstaged by the egocentric virtuosity of a singer who too could have been described as "Ma Femme et Cinq Poupées" (1); Mercadante, far too canny to write anything expressly for this 'sacred monster' (2) had chosen to admire her from a distance, she had sung once it appears in a revival of his CARITEA REGINA DI SPAGNA in London some seven years earlier; Coppola - who seems never to have come into contact with Malibran at all; and finally the unhappy Vaccai, whose heartfelt GIOVANNA GRAY composed lovingly for her voice and staged lavishly at La Scala on 23rd February 1836 failed simply because Malibran had scarcely bothered to learn her part, a factor which the diva herself tried desperately to hide by denigrating the opera to all and sundry. Malibran married the violinist Charles de Bériot almost one month later and was dead on 23rd September at Manchester shortly after singing a duet from

Opposite
Malibran as Romeo in a print of c.1834 (collection of F. Lo Presti, Brussels).

Clearly the cantata was assembled at speed. Its various sections were very unequally distributed. "Cav. G. Donizetti" was allotted the 'sinfonia' (an excellent choice for such a busy person as he did not have to hang around waiting for a text): "Cav. G. Pacini" was given the introductory 'coro', 'recitativo' and 'stretta' for vocal quintet 'Il cippo di Manchester' - a substantial portion of the whole, romantically and even ecstatically conceived. "S. Mercadante" followed with 'L'inaugurazione', set for 'trio con coro' in a graceful cantilena: the recitative and aria of "P. A. Coppola" came next, 'La Corona', the recitative dramatically sonorous for a bass voice, the aria for soprano and chorus with a high flying 'slancio' that made excellent use of a remarkably uninspired text. Finally came "N. Vaccai" with his sober 'Il monumento di Milano' which not only represented half of the whole but was almost a cantata in itself - with a very large chorus, two sopranos, a mezzo-soprano, tenor and two basses; its first section in quasi unison, then an intervening solo recitative sung by 'un pellegrino', lastly a 'stretta' and 'finale' 'Salve o donna' for combined forces which, despite its triumphal nature clashed noticeably with the more secular strains which had preceded it. Indeed "In morte di M. F. Malibran De Bériot" betrayed all the weaknesses of its collective genre, there being neither musical continuity nor textual logic to hold it together, the thoroughly theatrical Pacini/Mercadante/Coppola holding out against the more pious intentions of Vaccai.

Whatever the weaknesses of its musical composition, however, its failure (8) on 17th March 1837 - given the commemorative nature of the event - was almost certainly due, not to these maestri but to the random collection of tired artists to whom the work was confided. These consisted of the sopranos and mezzo-sopranos Sofia Dall'Oca Schoberlechner (9), Benedetta Colleoni-Corti, Marietta Brambilla, Teresa Brambilla, and Carolina Lusignani, the tenors Francesco Pedrazzi and Pietro Milesi, and the basses and baritones Carlo Marcolini, Luciano Mariani, Orazio Cartagenova and Ignazio Marini , all of whom, with the exception of Teresa Brambilla, were artists who had been engaged for a season at La Scala which had been far from brilliant. At the very end of the carnevale , rather out of sorts (despite the plum IL GIURAMENTO) they were painfully incapable of commemmorating a star whose success had been infinitely greater than their own. Probably rehearsals were scamped, the composite nature of the music must have made endless complications and there is little doubt that, whatever its good intentions, the cantata was rushed on the stage and then rushed off.

One factor alone prompts its re-examination; this was the effect upon Donizetti of Maria Malibran - the link between them being the music of Nicola Vaccai.

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Nothing remains of the superb voice of Maria Malibran. Nor was she a creative singer, of the less-than-ten operas written especially for her (10) none remained long in the repertory and scarcely two passed - even at the time - as a great success. This was in vivid contrast with her rivals. Pasta created ANNA

BOLENA, LA SONNAMBULA and NORMA, Méric-Lalande created IL PIRATA (Imogene), LA STRANIERA and LUCREZIA BORGIA. Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle, Giulia Grisi, Giuseppina Ronzi-De Begnis, Adelaide Tosi and 'Carolina Ungher' (who was really Karoline Unger) all had important operas to their credit. Instead Malibran was a competitive performer, she specialised in outsinging her vocal peers in the roles in which they excelled. She was consistent in this - she began her early fame by matching the celebrated 'castrato' Giovanni-Battista Velluti note-for-note, trill-for-trill (to his astonishment, in a concert intended to be a triumph for him) and she ended her career in a duet-to-the-death - which killed her - with Rosalbina Caradori-Allan: after a trumpeted final 'acuto' (a prolonged trill on a high B) she was carried out on a stretcher (11). Much of her Paris career consisted of vocal sparring with Henriette Sontag; and her London stage appearances were devoted, more often than not, to an attempt to 'efface Grisi'. In general her art was modelled on Giuditta Pasta, an early idol who perhaps she outsang but did not efface. Certainly her most remarkable achievement, and one which has earned her the prolonged odium of musicologists, came from a desire to match the great Pasta in one of her more vulgar feats.

At Verona in 1830, Pasta contrived a GIULIETTA E ROMEO by 'Zingarelli' (12) which was as much a 'pasticcio' as the Malibran memorial cantata: in its first act it included a cavatina by Pacini, another by Rossini and the famous quartet from BIANCA E FALLIERO, in the second act she interpolated a duet from AURELIANO IN PALMIRA (and probably a sizeable morcel of Vaccai's music); the third act, rather surprisingly, managed to remain as its composer intended. Pasta made a 'furore' with this confection.

It was in emulation of this feat that Malibran perpetrated her most audacious 'coup', this was the marrying of Bellini's I CAPULETI E I MONTECCHI (prima: Teatro La Fenice, Venice 11th March 1830) with Vaccai's then equally famous GIULIETTA E ROMEO (prima: Teatro Canobbiana, Milan, 31st October 1825) - two operas with almost the same libretto by Felice Romani. On October 27th 1832 she delighted the audience at the Teatro Communale, Bologna by discarding Bellini's unpopular 'tomb scene' and replacing it with that of Vaccai (13). Not to be outdone by Pasta she also included music by Mercadante, Filippo Celli and others.

This 'jeu d'esprit' would not have mattered at all (there were many such at the time) except that the mixture caught on and that the Bellini/Vaccai adaptation became the norm and was sung on and off for the rest of the century. Recent scores of I CAPULETI E I MONTECCHI have included Vaccai's final scene as a matter of course; the current (1979) libretto of Bellini's opera as published by Messrs Ricordi includes Vaccai's tomb scene in an appendix. The music by Mercadante et al appears to have been quietly dropped.

Not everyone was pleased of course. Bellini seems to have kept silent but Romani seethed with annoyance at Malibran's outrage. At the time he restrained himself, but after Bellini's death

published (in the Gazzetta Piemontese of 18th January 1836) the most extraordinary stream of invective, almost insane in its outburst of hysterically wounded vanity. Of course by then the sanctification of Bellini had already begun, and it was, he claimed: '... infedele a Bellini, si diede a cantare, a gorgheggiare, a modulare: 'Ah! se tu dormi, svegliati' - these last words being those of the central section of Vaccai's celebrated tomb scene which Malibran had preferred to sing and which Romani had changed in his version of the text set by Bellini (the joke being of course, that, whatever their setting, Romani had written them himself). His 'piemontese' diatribe concluded: "Ah! se tu dormi svegliati una volta, o buon senso italiano, e non permettere più d'essere raggirato in tal guisa dalle bizzarrie dei virtuosi! Svegliati, se tu dormi, o giustizia del pubblico, e non soffrire che vengano così travisate, mutilate, guastate le più belle opere dei nostri ingegni! Svegliati, se dormi, o verecondia, e grida a'cantanti essere ormai tempo che il teatro musicale non sia deturpato dalle loro stranezze, da' loro capricci, dalle ridicole loro convenienze! Svegliati, o ragione, svegliati, o criterio, svegliati o gusto, amor del vero, desiderio del bello, risvegliati!"

As far as audiences were concerned the results were sensational. The comtesse Merlin (14) has described Malibran's appearance in this final scene of Vaccai's, an extraordinarily effective 'coup-de-théâtre': "Lorsqu'elle s'approchait du lit de mort de Giulietta, elle se tournait du côté opposé au devant du théâtre pour donner le temps à celle-ci d'en sortir, et lorsqu'elle se baissait vers le lit pour la chercher et qu'elle ne la trouvait plus, avec une expression de terreur indicible, elle levait les yeux et l'apercevait en face d'elle ...Alors, au lieu de venir précipitamment à elle, en s'écriant: 'Giulietta!', elle s'approchait d'elle en silence, lui palpait la tête, touchait ses bras, ses épaules, son cou, ses yeux, puis, tout à coup, d'une voix étouffée, saccadée, qui partait du fond de l'âme, elle prononcait: 'Giulietta'...'Ce mot avait un effet magique sur les spectateurs; un frisson glacé saisissait chacun d'entre eux avant même qu'elle ne le prononcât, et, plusieurs fois, à Bologne, on fut obligé d'emporter du théâtre des femmes qui ne pouvaient l'entendre sans se trouver mal' (15).

The simpler, less artful vocal line of Vaccai's exquisitely paced music, tremulous, catching the breath of the audience, picking up a shred of melody, sometimes gently throbbing like a failing pulse, ultimately heartrending as Giuletta realises that Romeo is dead, was the perfect vehicle for an actress whose vocal command was beyond compare.

Vaccai's music, as was Bellini's for so many years, is often thought feeble by those whose imagination is not easily stirred by what seems to be too unemphatic for the shattering human situations it proposes to sustain, but like much that is written for the popular theatre today, it works because it is familiar, because the emotions can be anticipated in advance and thus it works doubly and trebly on a houseful of spectators already palpitating to the tragedy on the stage. Malibran was supreme

in using her voice to illuminate both music and text imaginatively, making the utmost of each dramatic focus as it came to her. This in fact she did in a perfectly cavalier fashion. All she demanded was a music-in-outline: it is true that the prime donne of those days played havoc with the scores of even the greatest masters but the liberties taken by Malibran were phenomenal. She would change keys, harmonies, phrasing, themes even at will, imposing subtleties, shadings and interpolating extemporaneous 'cadenze' ad libitum - she liked music she could tamper with and scarcely ever enjoyed singing the more evolved scores of her day and age; when they were specially prepared for her (like MARIA STUARDA, or Coccia's LA FIGLIA DELL'ARCIERE) they invariably failed. She made no attempt to sing the version of I PURITANI that Bellini created for her despite the opportunity it presented of 'effacing Grisi' (who had created the heroine Elvira). With the music of Vaccai's GIULIETTA E ROMEO, selected by her and transformed by her, for her art and for hers alone, she was certainly the greatest phenomenum on the Italian stage. As Romeo she conquered Italy. With her death came the end of such wilful traditions.

But did Donizetti ever hear Malibran in this great showpiece of hers? It scarcely seems possible. When she was in Bologna in 1832 he was in Naples and Rome. Between 14th November 1833 and 12th March 1834 she sang Romeo at the San Carlo of Naples six times (16) but Donizetti was then in Genoa, Turin and Florence (these particular stagings provoked Giuseppina Ronzi-De Begnis - then a buxom rival - to retaliation, ostentatiously singing I CAPULETI E I MONTECCHI in Florence in Bellini's unadulterated original; 'La Ronzi' wrote an ingratiating letter to Francesco Florimo hoping to put herself in Bellini's good graces '... the third act should have flopped but did not. Here it was said that Vaccai's was better and it was hoped that 'La Ronzi' would sing the 'pasticcio alla Malibran'. But, she proudly boasted, through her initiative, Bellini's final scene won the day! It is improbable that Bellini was quite as impressed as she hoped). When Malibran sang her version of I CAPULETI in Sinigaglia and Lucca, Donizetti was in Naples, as he was when she repeated the 'pasticcio' at Milan in October 1834. On the night of the single performance she gave at La Scala of Vaccai's opera complete - without Bellinian preliminaries (17) - he again was in Naples, and on the occasions in January and February 1836 when she sang the Bellini/Vaccai 'pasticcio' there for the very last time, he was in Venice (for the 'prima' of BELISARIO). But he left Venice on 8th February and was in Milan four days later. It is just possible that here in Milan, at the very end of her Italian career and on the stage of La Scala, that he saw and heard the splendid artist in arguably her greatest role, before she left it - and that stage - for ever.

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Donizetti's 'sinfonia' to "In morte di M. F. Malibran De Bériot" was written very quickly. He was hard-pressed as usual, PIA DE'TOLOMEI had just appeared (prima: Teatro Apollo, Venice 18th February 1837) and the overture was probably written and scored

shortly after his return to Naples a few days later. (His speed in writing commemorative music was indeed prodigious - two months later still he would compose a Requiem Mass for Zingarelli in just three days (18)). The music for this occasional piece was both fluent and confident, in this post-LUCIA apogee his invention and imagination were at a peak, there is no padding and no hesitation now. A greater drive and sweep will be apparent - especially in ROBERTO DEVEREUX (prima: San Carlo, Naples, 28th October 1837) which will bring this year of deaths (19) to a perversely triumphant conclusion.

The opening of the 'sinfonia' is appropriately grave - a solemn 'maestoso' notable for its dynamic contrasts, soon switching to a compelling and curiously jaunty little tune. Then follows an 'allegro agitato' over a nervous bass which climaxes sharply before subsiding to a threadlike drumbeat pulse with a slow melody above and which in turn leads to a reprise of the hectic main theme of this middle section which builds up inexorably to a major climax arrested by two chords: at which point, sustained by a rustling tremolando, a chorus whispers the opening words of Romeo's tomb-scene invocation to the lost Juliet "Ah! se tu dormi, svegliati", the music of which, taken up in dreamlike suspense by the orchestra dies away in a handful of softly broken phrases, a ghost-like 'flattened' echo of Vaccai's famous tune, poignant and unbearably sad; and which a moment later is scattered abruptly as, fit to wake all the operatic dead, the hectic theme returns to carry the overture to an overwhelming conclusion (20).
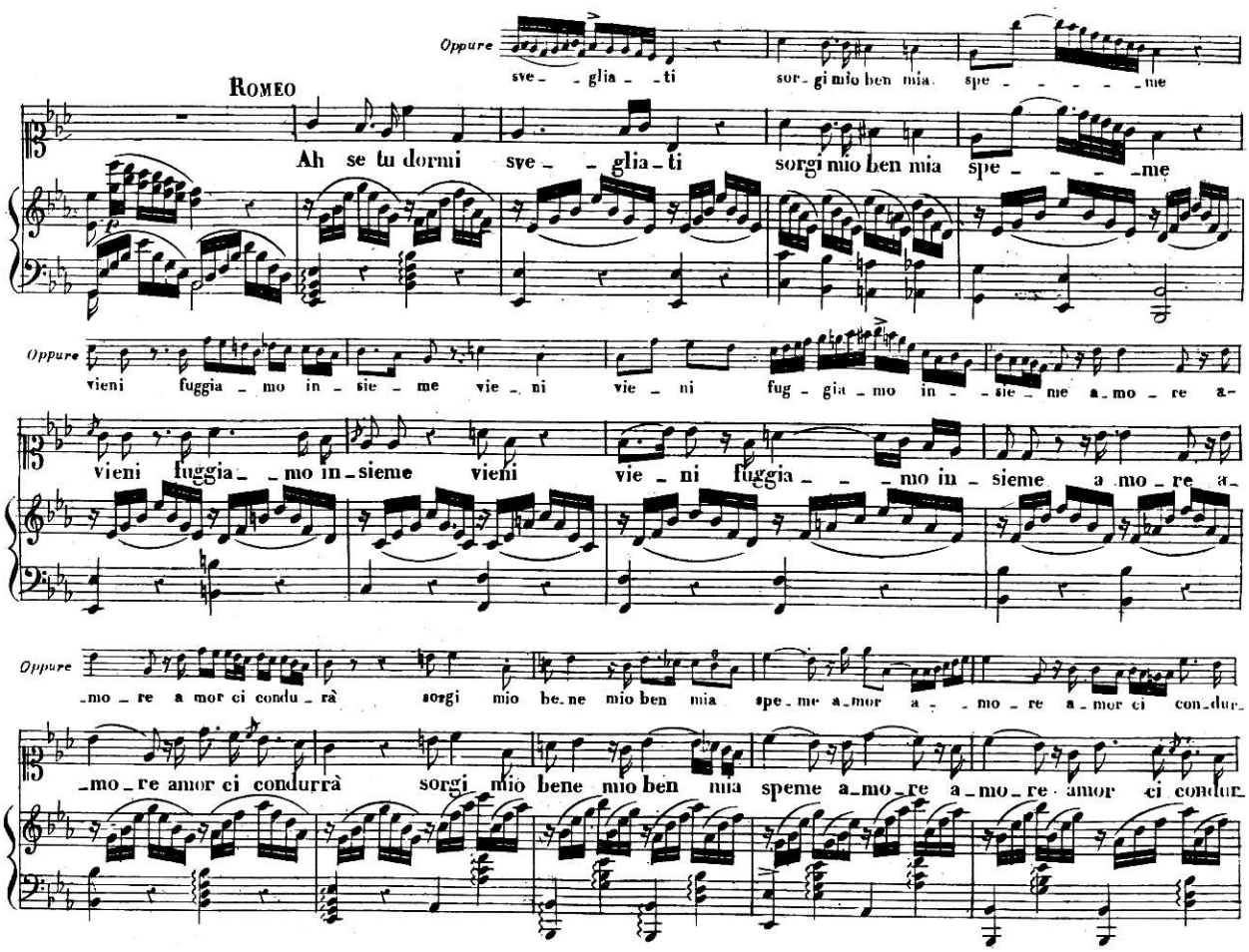
With the words of the dead prima donna on her former stage, herself now the heroine whose tragic sleep is to be broken, the music recalling the fading emotion aroused there only one year before, this overture - played once, as fleeting an appearance as the whole lifetime of one singer, however great, when measured against the entire history of music - presents Donizetti's own personal wry portrait of the inimitable Maribran as well as a last souvenir of the potent magic that a great artist could bring to the opera of his day.
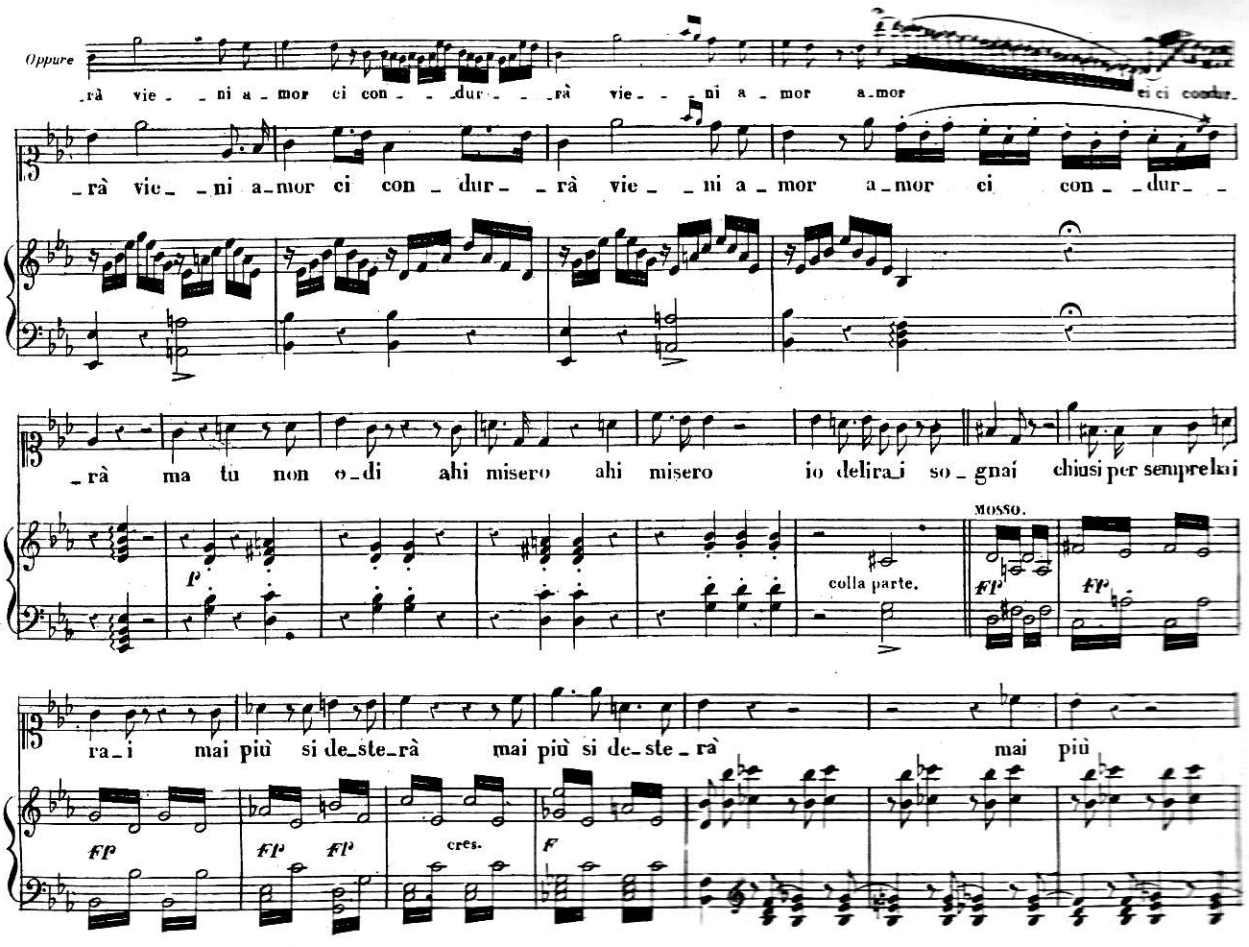
It was an overture that provided much of the form (including the integral chorus (21)) and the content (the main theme) to his later overture to LES MARTYRS (1840) - surely the most enigmatic use to which it could have been put (suggested, I put it mischievously, by his own 'martyrdom' at her hands?). The dreamy phrasing of Vaccai's "Ah! se tu dormi, svegliati" used in this latter to herald the 'angelic harps' which both his POLIUTO and its 'rimpastato' LES MARTYRS, feature so nobly. Alas there were no angelic harps for Malibran.



Vincenzo Bellini

Overleaf
Vaccai's music for the aria 'Ah! se tu dormi, svegliati'. On the small stave above is printed the music that Malibran sang, as opposed to the music which Vaccai actually wrote.


Oppure
sve_ _glia_ti sor_gi mio ben mia spe_ _ _ _me
ROMEO
Ah se tu dormi sve_ _glia_ti sorgi mio ben mia spe_ _ _ _me
Oppure
vieni fuggia_ _mo in_sie_me vie_ni vie_ni fug_gia_mo in_ _sie_me a_mo_re a_
vieni fuggia_ _mo in_sieme vieni vie_ni fuggia_ _ _mo in_sieme a_mo_re a_
Oppure
_mo_re a_mor ci condu_rà sorgi mio be_ne mio ben mia spe_me a_mor a_ _mo_re a_mor ci con_dur_
_mo_re amor ci condurrà sorgi mio bene mio ben mia speme a_mo_re a_mo_re amor ci condur_


Oppure
rà vie _ni a_mor ci con_ _dur_ _rà vie_ _ni a_mor a_mor ci condur_
rà vie _ni a_mor ci con_ _dur_ _rà vie_ _ni a_mor a_mor ci con_ _dur_ _
_rà ma tu non o_di ahi misero ahi misero io delira_i so_gnai chiusi per sempre lai
p
colla parte.
MOSSO.
fp
fp
ra_i mai più si de_ste_rà mai più si de_ste_rà mai più
fp
fp
fp
cres.
f

NOTES

1. This formula for operatic success was proposed by M. de Valabrègue (the husband of Angelica Catalani). It could well have applied to La Malibran in view of her charismatic audience appeal.

2. She herself claimed "My voice is 'stentorian', my body 'falstaffian', my appetite 'cannibalesque'".

3. At the Teatro dei Fiorentini, Naples. Not, it must be added, as the heroine, even Malibran was not that precocious, but as the child of the latter.

4. This was at least partly because she considered he had been 'protecting' Giuseppina Ronzi-De Begnis, a substantial rival.

5. Giovanni Pacini LE MIE MEMORIE ARTISTICHE: AUTOBIOGRAFIA DI GIOVANNI PACINI Firenze 1865 p 68.

6. Nonetheless these rumours of drunkenness persisted to the end of her life.

7. Frank Walker THE MAN VERDI London J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1962 pp 28-29.

8. Pompeo Cambiasi RAPPRESENTAZIONI DATE NEI REALI TEATRI DI MILANO 1778-1872 Milan 1872 gives it an implacable "Cattivo", which is his worst category.

9. Sofia Schoberlechner has had a bad press - largely because she refused to sing Elisabetta to Malibran's Stuarda (as she thought the role too insignificant), but in fact she and Malibran were on friendly terms; she was the Giulietta to her Romeo at Bologna and in many of the Scala revivals of that 'pasticcio'. Her appearance in the cantata was perhaps in the nature of a valedictory gesture, as too was that of Ignazio Marini who had sung with the great star on many momentous occasions.

10. These were:

Garcia	L'AMANTE ASTUTO	New York	17th December 1825
Garcia	LA FIGLIA DELL'ARIA	New York	25th April 1826
Halevy	CLARY	Paris	9th December 1828
Pacini	IRENE O L'ASSEDIO DI MESSINA	Naples	30th November 1833
Coccia	LA FIGLIA DELL' ARCIERE	Naples	19th January 1834
Rossi	AMELIA OSSIA OTTO ANNI DI COSTANZA	Naples	31st December 1834
Persiani	INES DE CASTRO	Naples	28th January 1835
Vaccai	GIOVANNA GRAY	Milan	23rd February 1836
Balfe	THE MAID OF ARTOIS	London	27th May 1836

Bertin (FAUSTO) and the Ricci brothers (IL COLONELLO) also wrote operas with the diva in mind but not performed by her: Bellini wrote a special version of his I PURITANI for her which she never sang. MARIA STUARDA was written, not for Malibran, but for Ronzi-De Begnis in 1834.

11. In memory perhaps of Malibran, Pasta and Giulia Grisi repeated this duet - it was the 'recitativo e duetto' "Augusta! Oh Dio!"/"Vanne se alberghi in petto" and a thoroughly tumultuous affair "by General Desire" at a concert for the benefit of Julius Benedict in the Great Concert Room at the King's Theatre, London, on 9th June 1837 some eight months after her death.

12. GIULIETTA E ROMEO by Niccolò Zingarelli had been given its prima at La Scala in 1796, by 1830 it was on its last legs.

13. Giulio Vaccai VITA DE NICOLA VACCAI Bologna 1882 makes the outrageous but by no means improbable proposal that Rossini had suggested this substitution - "...la suggerì alla Malibran, ma bensì lo stesso Rossini" (p 143).

14. Maria Mercedes Jaruco comtesse Merlin MADAME MALIBRAN Bruxelles Wahlen 1838.

15. This dramatic episode is not easily placed in the score or the libretto. It must have taken place shortly after Romeo had finished 'his' long recitative and aria "È questo il loco": Giulietta perhaps having been encouraged to rise from her tomb and even to wander off stage to whisper her "Ah!" from the wings. Probably Schoberlechner - a large lady - did not fancy singing the greater part of the scene 'in situ' and preferred either to clamber out of her coffin while Romeo was singing his aria - or was never actually in the coffin in the first place.

The scene must in fact have consisted of something like this:

Giulietta	(di dentro)	Ah!
Romeo	(sorpreso)	Qual sospiro!
Giulietta	(con voce fioca)	Romeo! Romeo!
	(coming back on stage)	Romeo!!
	(a long silence)	
Romeo		Giulietta

Whereas the original should have consisted of:

Giulietta	(dalla tomba)	Ah!
Romeo	(sorpreso)	Qual sospiro!
Giulietta	(con voce fioca)	Romeo!... Romeo!...
Romeo		La voce sua!... mi chiama!... Già m'invita al suo sen Ciel! che vegg'io?.
Giulietta	(sorgendo dalla tomba)	Romeo!!
Romeo		Giulietta!! Oh Dio!..

16. On 25th December and 30th December 1833; 9th January 1834 (2nd and 4th acts only - each of Bellini's two acts had been divided into two so that Vaccai's tomb scene became 'Act 4'); 29th January, 1st February, and 6th March (3rd and 4th acts only) 1834. (Dates kindly supplied by Dr. John Black).

17. 17th November 1835 - Vaccai having written some new music for the occasion.

18. Guido Zavadini DONIZETTI VITA - MUSICHE - EPISTOLARIO Bergamo 1948 p 67.

19. Zingarelli was not the only casualty this year, Virginia Vasselli-Donizetti died on 30th July 1837. On 7th November 1837 Donizetti composed another Requiem Mass, this time for the Abate Fazzini. The year itself is summed-up by his tremendous MISERERE in G minor later dedicated to Pope Gregory XVI.

20. The autograph score of the cantata is preserved in the Archivio Ricordo, Milan. A vocal score was published by Ricordi c1837 (Pl. Nos 10037 - 10044).

21. The choral intervention in an overture, rare in the primo Ottocento, probably hails back to Rossini's overture to ERMIONE (1819) where the 'coro' contributes from behind the closed curtains.