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**THE NEWSLETTER No. 142**

# A nozze like no other?

**March 2021**



Items in this Newsletter - could anyone ever doubt it - adhere fervently to the operatic norms, being serious, semi-serious or comic as the situation appears to demand.

Such a proviso, warning maybe, is especially important in respect of Newsletter 142 dedicated in large part to *Le nozze in villa* (1820) a low-profile Donizettian antipasto whose unassuming nature never anticipated the destiny it was about to receive.

The wide range of contributions to the debate in this issue have the appreciation they deserve of course, semi-serious or comic with our gratitude and thanks - it is greatly reassuring to hear of the initial circulation of a precocious comedy of this vintage in among a narrow arc of north Italian cities as would clearly be the due of a new and engaging comedy by an author of such fluency from a similar region.

*Le nozze in villa* however, had the accolade of being the first opera by Donizetti to be heard in NewYork City.

And staged too? It seems very likely.

*

Its appearance in the seedling Big Apple was due neither to seductive musical content nor to intimations of a new and engaging musical comet by its inhabitants, this groundbreaking initial encounter with the rising Bergamasc was due to an appetite for cultural (Franco-Italian) parity with the city of Nouvelle Orléans.

In the year 1826 the *Théâtre d'Orléans* under the control of Pierre Davis - as had been the rule for some years, took an imaginative opera or two on tour to a series of host-sites and cities in North America. The performing material supplied by a mixed-bag of international stars engaged for the occasion. In the past the list of operas on such tours had included:

Zémir et Azor (Grétry) in 1791

La serva padrona (Pergolesi) 1800
Le Caliphe de Bagdad (Boieldieu) 1810
La scuola dei gelosi (Salieri) 1811
Il barbiere di Siviglia (Paisiello)1813
Il matrimonio segreto (Cimarosa) 1813
Didon (Piccini)1815
L'italiana in Algeri (Rossini)1817
La clemenza di Tito (Mozart)1821
La vestale (Spontini)1821
Agnes de Fitz Henri (Paër)1821
Il barbiere di Siviglia (Rossini)1823
Euphrosine et Coradin (Méhul)1824
Il crociato in Egitto (Meyerbeer)1830

In 1826 the opera taken on tour was *Le nozze in villa* by Donizetti. The company had called at Philadelphia, Baltimore probably, visited New York city, after which the tour took to the seas and gloried in a culminating spectacle at Havana[1] – tragically alas - and almost terminally - as here the conductor died of yellow fever so the artists and musicians were obliged to return sadly to base or took sail to Europe. It was a tragedy that – except for one tardy recurrence - put paid to an innovative adventure worthy of every kind of praise with a whole series of operatic *prime* on transatlantic shores.

What happened to the score? Is this the music now surviving in the Bibliothèque Nationale? And who sang? Who decided upon *Le nozze in villa* - someone who had sung in it earlier and apropriated the performance material?

The late and hugely regretted Tom Kaufman almost certainly had all the answers but we shall have to wait for a detailed examination of his papers to find out for ourselves!

Alexander Weatherson

**Envoi: What a shame no one has come up with a suitable repertoire for Covid 19? Who could have resisted Carlo Pedrotti's *Tutti in maschere* at the ETO in place of the trendy current listing (there is a performing edition of the Pedrotti) or as a sign of sympathy the riotous *Il sarcofago scozzese* - a *farse* much applauded at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples which could be dedicated to the SNP!**

[1] Cfr Enrique Rio Prado *La musica italiana a Cuba* (Galatina 1996), 120



# WEDDING VENUES: DONIZETTI'S *LE NOZZE IN VILLA*

**Charles Jernigan**

*Le nozze in villa*, Donizetti's third professionally produced opera, is one the least known of his prodigious output. Until November, 2020, it was one of the few Donizetti operas which had not been performed in modern times nor recorded. Only one excerpt, a trio, exists on disc, on Opera Rara's "A Hundred Years of Italian Opera, 1820-1830," and reissued on their CD "The Young Donizetti." Both Ashbrook (*Donizetti and His Operas*,1982) and Jeremy Commons, writing in the booklet for the Opera Rara recording, give the place and the date of the prima as Mantua in 1820, with one subsequent mounting known, in Genoa in 1822. There is no autograph score and only one copyist's manuscript survives, which is housed in the Bibliotèque National in Paris. It is complete except for a crucial quintet in Act Two, the whereabouts of which are unknown. Nor is there a libretto for the first performances in Mantua, but a libretto exists for the Genoa performances, which however uses words for five of the six arias in the opera which differ from the words in the score. No reviews have been found of any of the performances and there are no specific references in letters by Donizetti or others involved with the production. We are not sure who the singers were in the prima, but the singers in the Genoa revival are listed in the surviving libretto. There are a few brief comments on the prima in the librettist's (Bartolomeo Merelli) memoirs, the *Cenni biografici,* written many years after the fact and in a conversation with Donizetti reported by his childhood friend Marco Bonesi in his *Note biografiche su Donizetti.* From them we knew that the prima was probably not successful, perhaps because of tension among the female singers.

Now we know more. In November, *Le nozze in villa* was staged at Bergamo's Teatro Donizetti without an audience and streamed on the internet for those willing to purchase a "ticket," and scholarly articles were issued in the *Quaderno*or publication of the Fondazione Teatro Donizetti, *QF 60, "Le nozze in villa."* A critical edition of the score was produced by Maria Chiara Bertieri and Eduardo Cavalli, the missing quintet was newly composed by well known denizens of the Italian pop music scene, and scholarly work was presented to help fill in the gaps in our knowledge about the circumstances of composition and the first performances. The Bergamo production was the latest offering of the Festival's #200 Project, a plan to revive all of Donizetti's operas on the two-hundredth anniversary of their premiere. So far that project has born fruit with *Pigmalione, Enrico di Borgogna* and *Pietro il Grande, Czar Delle Russie* (also known as *Il falagname di Livonia*). *QF 60* contains the libretto taken from the copyist's score, the 1805 Italian translation of the the 1802 source play by August von Kotzebue, a detailed breakdown of opera's structure, an interview of the conductor and stage director—and two pivotal essays by Paolo Fabbri and Maria Chiara Bertieri which help to expand what we know about the work.

In some ways the history of *Le nozze in villa* begins in 1818 when Donizetti and his Bergamo friend and fellow student Bartolomeo Merelli were invited by the impresario Paolo Zancla to write a new work for Zancla's itinerant opera troupe, then performing at the San Luca theater in Venice. The result was Donizetti's first commissioned work, *Enrico di Borgogna,* which almost came to disaster because an inexperienced singer, Adelina Catalani, fainted from stage fright at the prima and her part had to be omitted from the rest of the performance. Among other singers, the very young Fanny Eckerlin, who would go

on to have a major career, sang the mezzo-soprano *musico* role of Enrico and the bass Andrea Verni sang the buffo role of Gilberto; the libretto was based on a play by Kotzebue. At the end of the Venice season that fall, the company moved on to other towns in the Venice region, including Mantua where they intended to stage *Clotilde* by Carlo Coccia. Thanks to the work of Professor Fabbri, we now know that the performance was a disaster and that a prima donna (probably Eckerlin or perhaps Catalani) was pelted with cooked pears and someone threw a firebrand on stage which caught the hem of her costume on fire, fortunately without igniting the lady or the theater. *Clotilde* was withdrawn. *L'Italiana in Algeri* was quickly mounted and Zancla called on Donizetti and Merelli to hasten to town to produce something new and save the day. That was *Le nozze in villa.*

*Nineteenth Century Performances*

Traditionally it has been thought that the new opera was staged in the carnival season of 1820-21 (although written in 1819) at the Teatro Vecchio. Now we know that Donizetti and Merelli put together the libretto and the score in a few weeks at the end of 1818 and that the premiere took place in the carnival season (or perhaps lent) of 1818-19, and not at the Teatro Vecchio, but at the Teatro Imperial-Regio. (Curiously, the libretto printed in *QF 60* still states that the Teatro Vecchio was the venue, but the "foglio di Sala" issued with the online stream states that it was the Imperial-Regio. In fact, the Teatro Vecchio, built in the 1600s, had been torn down and "turned into firewood" by the Austrians in 1797 when the city, which they had controlled, was besieged by the French, and thus it had not existed for more than twenty years when the premiere took place. The Teatro Sociale, today's venue for opera in Mantua, was under construction in 1819, and the Regio (to which the Austrians had added "Imperial") was evidently the one possible venue for the premiere. The carnival (or lent) 1818-19 date makes sense too because an aria from the opera was used in the pasticcio *I piccoli virtuosi ambulenti* which Mayr put together to showcase his students (and impress donors) in September, 1819, and the program acknowledges it as coming from Donizetti's opera *Le nozze in villa.*

Not previously known was that there was a revival at the Teatro Dolfin in Treviso in the spring season of 1820. This fact, reported by Bertieri (*QF 60,* 24) comes from the *Indice o Sia Catalogo Dei teatrali spettacoli musicali italiani di tutta l'Europe incominciando dalla quaresima 1820 a tutto il carnevale 1821,* which purports to list all Italian operas performed over the year all over Europe, with salient details. The item on *Le nozze in villa* clearly indicates that this opera is the one by Donizetti and Merelli, and because it says that it was composed "di nuovo" and lists the opera in a summary section under "newly written" works, Fabbri speculates that the Treviso performances, in fact, constitute a "second version." That is, perhaps, after the failure of the opera in Mantua in 1819, Donizetti recomposed it, or part of it, for Treviso in 1820.

There is also new information about the Genoa performances of 1822, which took place under the title *I provinciali ossia Le nozze in villa* at the Teatro S. Agostino and the Teatro del Falcone (for the last two of five performances) and which included a four act ballet between the acts. Two of the singers had already sung in Donizetti operas. The tenor, Giovanni Battista Verger (Claudio), who was 26 in 1822, had begun his career in Malta, but had returned to Italy, making his Italian debut in Donizetti's second professional opera, *Pietro il Grande,* in Venice in 1819. He would have a very distinguished career, appearing in many premieres, including leading roles in the primas of Donizetti's *Olivio e Pasquale* and *Alina, regina di Golconda.* The buffo bass Andrea Verni (Don Petronio) had



already had a substantial career, notably as the first Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola*, but more to the point, he had sung Gilberto, the buffo role, in the premiere of Donizetti's *Enrico di Borgogna.* It seems likely that he had also sung in the prima of *Le nozze* in Mantua. Perhaps their presence inspired the Genoa production.

More than likely, the singers Carolina Contini (Sabina), Adelaide Rinaldi (Anastasia) and Verger as Claudio were responsible for substituting *arie di baule* in Genoa for five of the six solo pieces in Donizetti's score. The first cavatina for Sabina ("Sospiri del mio cor") became "Deh! a me vieni, o caro amante,/fa che cessi il mio tormento" A certain source for this aria has not been identified, but *Amleto* by Luigi Caruso with words by Giuseppe Foppa, which premiered in Florence in 1790, has an aria with very similar words which could have been adapted to new circumstances ("Deh! ti placa, o padre amato/fa che cessi il mio tormento"). Claudio's entrance cavatina "Grazie del cor vi rendo" becomes "Crede ognun ch'io sia felice"..."Di bella ignobile" in Genoa. This aria is from the libretto for *La gioventù di Enrico Quinto* by Filippo Tarducci which was set to music in Naples by Luigi Carlini in 1819 and in 1820 in Rome by Giovanni Pacini. Professor Bertieri feels that the Pacini version was the likely source for the substitute aria since Verger had sung in it in Florence. Anastasia's *aria di sorbetto*"Se la donna non ci fosse" becomes "Mie ragazze, in ogni evento," but so far the source has not been identified. Claudio's second act aria "Da suoi bei lumi il core" was substituted with Narciso's cantabile from *Il turco in Italia*, "Tu seconda il mio disegno"; while the cabaletta "Ah quando d'un anima" comes from Donizetti's own *Pietro il Grande, Czar delle Russie.* As mentioned, Verger had sung in the premiere of *Pietro il Grande* in Venice. Finally, Sabina's final aria, which is really the opera's climax, is substituted with a cantabile "Il genitor sdegnato" and cabaletta "Deh torni a splendere." The text of the cabaletta appeared in a libretto for an 1828 performance of Rossini's *Eduardo e Cristina* at La Scala; it seems to be an inserted aria here too since it does not appear in the libretto of the premiere. We do not yet know where the aria originally came from, but the incipit is the same as an aria in the opera *I pretendenti delusi* by Giuseppe Mosca.

A copy of the libretto of the Genoa performances is in the Library of Congress and is available on line.

*Merelli's Libretto, Sources and Adaptation*

Merelli based his libretto on a play by August von Kotzebue, *Die deutschen Kleinstädter,* just as the previous year he had based the libretto of *Enrico di Borgogna* on another Kotzebue play, *Der Graf von Burgund.* Kotzebue was an enormously prolific and popular writer, who wrote over 200 plays, many of which were translated into other European languages, influencing Jane Austen and inspiring incidental music by Beethoven for *The Ruins of Athens. Die deutschen Kleinstädter* was translated into Italian by Teodoro De Lellis as *I provinciali* three years after the original was published in 1802. (Kotzebue was assassinated in March, 1819, around the time of Merelli/Donizetti's adaption of his work.)

The original play is a comedy of small town life in a German village; the title can be translated as "The German Villagers," people who live in what the Germans call a *kräwinkel*, or what in America is called "Podunk." (Canadians and those with access to Netflix will think of the current hit television series "Schitt's Creek" which uses the same satire of small towns; some things never change.) The "in villa" of the opera's title probably has the antique meaning of a country place rather than a building, so the title of Merelli's

libretto can be translated as "The Country Wedding" or "The Village Wedding." The play satirizes the gossip and interrelations in small German villages where everyone is related and the town is more or less a family business. The burgomaster Starr wants his daughter Sabine to marry his friend Sperling, a public works minister (the Vice Inspector of Quarries and Roads), but she has spent some time away from the family in the city and has fallen in love with a young man named Olmers. The Italian translation sets the story in an Italian village and the names and positions of the characters become Italian.

The libretto is reasonably faithful to the play, but it simplifies the plot and eliminates some of the characters. Although it is obviously still satirical of small towns and mocks "country" manners, it uses traditional stereotypes dear to Italian comedy running through *commedia dell'arte* all the way back to Roman comedy and even Menander. Don Petronio is "Podestà" (mayor) of the tiny, unnamed country village or *borgo,* who wants to marry off his daughter Sabina; the intended husband has morphed from a local government functionary to the local schoolmaster, Trifoglio. Both of these men are foolish and pompous, the first in the manner of the local official who revels in his self-perceived importance like so many antiquated "Dons" in opera buffa (Magnifico, Bartolo, et. al.), and the schoolmaster in the manner of the pedant who tosses Latin phrases into the conversation to impress and imagines himself to be both a great scholar and a poet. These are standard prototypes of *commedia,* and probably satirizing such blowhards would appeal to two young men recently out of school themselves—Merelli was 24 in 1818 and Donizetti turned 21 in November of that year.

Sabina, of course, does not want to marry the pompous buffoon Trifoglio, who is described by her grandmother Anastasia as "anziano," (a senior citizen), but especially because she is already in love with Claudio, whom she has met in the city. According to the libretto, Claudio is the "feudatario" of the village, and the scene is set in the "feudo di Claudio"; that is, he is the principal landholder of the village, the descendant of what was once a feudal lord, and the "feudo" is his landholding. It turns out that Claudio owns this particular Podunk, although no one knows it.

Claudio and Sabina are the lovers of the plot, in *commedia* terms, the *innamorati.* Anastasia is an unusual figure in this context, Don Petronio's mother and Sabina's grandmother, but she acts as the nosy village buttinsky. Rosaura, Petronio's niece and Anselmo, his servant, are *comprimari* who round out the cast. Like most such comedies, the older characters are foolish and are set up against the young people, who ultimately triumph. The "drama" of this "dramma buffo" is in how they get to that triumphant finale, and that is where Merelli's libretto falls flat.

*Plot*

In Act One, the comedy revolves around the traditional device of mistaken identity when Anastasia demands to see the portrait of Claudio which Sabina is carrying ("Oh Dio! Oh Dio! il ritratto d'un uomo?"). Not wanting to tell her nosy grandmother that it is the man she has fallen in love with, she tells Anastasia that it is the king, whom she revers. Anastasia, a social climber, is impressed and wants to hold onto the portrait. When Claudio appears, everyone believes that he is the king and they bow and scrape in his presence. It is certainly odd that Claudio, as the "feudatario" of the village would not be known to villagers, but various moments of confusion ensue until he simply tells everyone that he is not the king and the act ends with an ensemble of consternation. That leaves Act Two with really nowhere to go. The plot could have revolved around another case of mistaken identity in that no one knows that Claudio is the rich landowner in the area, but



Merelli does not exploit the idea. Claudio tries to ease Petronio, who thinks Claudio is a Nobody, into the idea of a match between himself and Sabina, but Petronio thinks he is speaking up for Trifoglio. In a nocturnal scene so common towards the end of this sort of farce, Claudio and Sabina meet for a moonlit duet; Trifoglio enters to serenade her and soon Petronio and Anastasia arrive. A quintet develops which must have been the focal point of the act, but unfortunately it is the one part of the score which is lost. A buffo duet follows in which Trifoglio comes to discover that Sabina has no worthwhile dowry and decides that maybe she would be better off with Claudio. Petronio is adamantly opposed until he discovers that Claudio is rich and demands no dowry for himself. Suddenly everyone is happy and reconciled. Apparently no one, not even Sabina, has been aware that Claudio is the "feudatario."

*Structure of the Opera*

The opera consists of a sinfonia and thirteen musical numbers separated by secco recitativo.

***Le nozze in villa***
Dramma buffo by Bartolomeo Merelli
Music by Gaetano Donizetti

**Sinfonia**
The overture is about seven minutes long. It is pleasant and competently developed, typically opening with an andante which quickly changes to an allegro which already has the character of early Donizetti. It is also obviously based on Rossinian models.

**Act One**
**Scene: A classroom**
**1. Introduzione: "Scrisse Socrate in un tomo" Trifoglio, Petronio, Chorus**
*Trifoglio is "teaching" his students using the repeat-after-me method when Don Petronio bursts in and pompously complains that he is frazzled by the great weight of his mayoral duties—and by his intention to marry off his daughter. Trifoglio is not suitably impressed, but he plays along because he wants the daughter. Petronio complains about all the village disputes between peasants with crazy names which he must adjudicate. In the stretta* "Staremo tutti amici" *Petronio invites everyone to a wedding banquet for his daughter although he has not yet told her about the wedding. Musically, the number is lively and one might notice how well the music follows the sense of the text. Often the orchestra burbles along carrying much of the sprightliness against a parlando vocal line from the characters and chorus. This becomes a favorite technique for Donizetti, and will be highly developed in later operas.*

*In the recitative following the Introduction, we learn that Petronio intends to introduce Trifoglio to his daughter Sabina. He anticipates no problem with her because, after all, he is "podestà and anziano."*

**Scene: A Room on the ground floor of the Podestà's house.**
**2. Cavatina, Sabina: "Sospiri del mio sen"; cabaletta "Ristoro amabile."**
*Sabina worries that she has not heard from Claudio and that he will be unfaithful like so many men, especially with the distractions of the city, like the theater.*
The music is very Rossinian, with an andante followed by the catchy cabaletta. The line is heavily embroidered, and the fact that Sabina is a mezzo-soprano makes her role

particularly reminiscent of early Rossini. Fabbri points out that it follows the pattern of Tancredi's cavatina and cabaletta.

*In the recitative which follows, Anastasia enters and sees Sabina holding a portrait. When she sees that it is a man, she demands to know who it is. This is the result of her trip to the wicked city! Sabina tells her that it is a portrait of the king, beloved by all. Anastasia is mollified and wants to keep the portrait for herself until "the wedding day." Sabina is upset to hear about a wedding!*

**3. Trio, Petronio, Trifoglio, Sabina: "Questo, che a te presento".** *Petronio presents the groom Trifoglio to Sabina, calling him a "superhuman genius"; Trifoglio uses inflated language to woo her ("Proserpina mia bella/Ecclittica d'amore...") and Sabina is horrified.* Musically, the trio shows what Donizetti had learned from Mayr. In the first part each character has a different vocal line befitting the differing sentiments, and in the second, fast, part ("Quante grazie, intensi Dei!") all sing the same melody.

*In recitative, Trifoglio improvises a ridiculous poem for Sabina. They are interrupted by Rosaura, who brings a letter from someone whose carriage has broken a wheel in a ditch. The letter, purportedly from a nobleman, announces his friend and school companion Claudio, "who wishes to spend several weeks in the village taking the waters." Everyone is immediately impressed, imagining that he will be someone important, "a knight...a count...a writer!"*

**4. Cavatina, Claudio: "Grazie di cor vi rendo" Cabaletta, "Affetti teneri, sembianze amabile".** *Claudio's words are general, all-purpose opera-ese, as he expresses his thanks for the welcome and feels his heart beating near his beloved.* Musically there is a lyrical andante introduced by a lovely woodwind solo; the andante is followed by a more dramatic 'aside', in the form of a *tempo di mezzo* with chorus, "In sì crudel tormento," which leads to the tuneful cabaletta in which the clarinet picks up again, playing with and against the voice. The aria is more complex than Sabina's cavatina, but has less fioritura.

Recitative: *Claudio is welcomed effusively, and is led off to the "best foreigner's bedroom" by Sabina. Anastasia looks at the portrait she has taken from Sabina and is dumbstruck by the fact that it is Claudio—and that he is the king! Petronio is immediately taken by the great honor that this does to his family.*

**5. Aria, Petronio: "Ombre degli avi miei."** *Petronio thinks that even the shades of his ancestors will be impressed by the great honor that the king will bring to his family. He orders clean linen, his party hat, an honorific sonnet; he imagines that his niece will become a Minister's wife; he will be the envy of all his posterity.*
This buffo aria seems clearly modeled on similar pieces in Rossini such as "Miei rampolli femminini" in *Cenerentola.* The music is fun in that manner too and the aria's sonic development is similar to Rossini. It is worth noting that this is the one aria which was not changed in the Genoa libretto, and that the singer, Andrea Verni, had premiered the role of Don Magnifico only five years earlier. He must have thought it worthy in its own right.

**Scene: The Village Piazza**
**6. Act One Finale, "Non paventare, o caro."** *The finale begins with a duettino between Sabina and Claudio, who reaffirm their love. They draw aside as Trifoglio enters, followed soon by the others. He is trying to improvise a poem which begins bombastically ("Auricrinito Apolline—Aureate-maned Mini- Apollo"); he struggles to find a rhyme with "petto." When Claudio is seen, the villagers try to outdo each other with obsequiousness; Claudio, confused, asks what is going on. He is no king! His simple admission dashes the villager's sense of self importance and sets off the* concertato finale. The "equivoco" is cleared up so simply and undramatically ("I'm no king"), that to some degree the finale falls flat, but the musical structure reveals Donizetti's skill at this early stage. The attractive little duet for Claudio and Sabina yields to the standard "confusion" finale à la Rossini, introduced by Trifoglio's abortive attempt at poetry and then the revelation that Claudio is no king; that brings a moment of quiet, astonished stasis with "Oppresso e stupido," a barely accompanied sextet in restrained tempo showing off Donizetti's contrapuntal skill. The moment breaks ("Figlia indegna e menzognera") and the short *tempo di mezzo* leads to the *stretta*, "Che strano accidente," which ends the act in an appropriately frenzied manner. The similarity of the finale to ones by Rossini is striking.



**Act Two**
**Scene: Rooms in the Palazzo**
*Recitative: Petronio upbraids Sabina, who can't get a word in. Claudio comes in.*

**7. Trio, Claudio, Petronio, Sabina: "In lei vegg'io l'oggetto."** *Claudio intends to convince Petronio of his worthiness to marry Sabina, but Petronio mistakes his intentions and thinks he is confirming that Trifoglio and Sabina would make a good match. She, thinking her father is accepting Claudio, happily agrees, and for a moment all seems well. When the lovers realize that Petronio still intends Trifoglio to be the husband, they are dismayed.* Ashbrook, who thought most of the score was "routine and uninspired," believed that this trio was the one stand out. Probably because of that, it is the one excerpt which had been recorded, first on Opera Rara's "A Hundred Years of Italian Opera, 1820-1830" (ORCH 104), reissued on "The Young Donizetti" (ORR 229). Jeremy Commons, writing in the booklet for the former set, finds the music "rhythmically alert, melodically attractive, tasteful if simple in its orchestration, the voices of the lovers...nicely contrasted with that of the irascible and blustering Petronio." The trio is structured in typical Rossinian fashion—a sprightly allegro opening, a slow second section as the lovers, misunderstanding, can scarcely believe their good fortune and a fast *stretta* when they all realize that Petronio thinks they are referring to Trifoglio as good husband material.

*Recitative: Petronio, Sabina and Claudio leave; Anastasia and Rosaura enter. Rosaura would like to marry too and fears she will wind up an old maid. Anastasia assures her otherwise, which sets up the next aria.*

**8. Aria, Anastasia: "Se la donna non ci fosse."** '*A man without money is like a dinner without wine.' If you find someone handsome, so much the better.* This little arietta or *aria di sorbetto* is quite charming and will inevitably remind us of Berta's "Il vecchioto cerca moglie" from *Il barbiere*, but it is less complex though just as lively.

**Scene: The Village**
*Recitative: Trifoglio tells Claudio that he is sure that Sabina loves him and leaves. Claudio is left alone with his doubts.*

**9. Aria, Claudio: "Dai suoi bei lumi, il core/che cosa è amore apprese."** *Claudio expresses his love.* The aria is introduced by more dramatic recitative than usual and by a lovely solo for the English horn, which will play obbligato with the vocal line along with

the flute. The andante is an attractive, almost languorous melody as Claudio dreamily thinks of his beloved. There is a dramatic *tempo di mezzo* as Claudio moves from dreaminess to torment and doubt. The cabaletta, "Di fiamme tenere arde quest'anima," reaffirms his love. The whole is the most developed solo piece in the opera and even has bravura moments. Donizetti moves confidently from one section to the next one and the melodies are even memorable.

**Scene: Rooms in the palazzo.**
*Recitative: Petronio, Anselmo and Anastasia look forward to the wedding.*

**Scene: Village at Night.**
**10. Quintet, Sabina, Anastasia, Claudio, Petronio, Trifoglio: "Aura gentil, che mormori."** *Sabina and Claudio meet for a tryst at night. Their idyll of love is interrupted by Trifoglio, who arrives to serenade Sabina ("Sembianze amabile") with a guitar; Petronio and Anastasia, hearing noise, enter in the dark; Sabina can't find the exit. When Petronio and Anastasia "suddenly uncover their lanterns" everyone is revealed to everyone else. Astonishment ensues: "Da mille affetti e mille," as Petronio orders Sabina inside. Claudio, Anastasia and Sabina leave.* This is the quintet for which the music is missing from the copyist's score. Obviously, it is a key moment, and was newly composed for the Bergamo performances. Commons feels that it was probably excised from the score and used, perhaps with new words, in another opera. Perhaps it will turn up one day.

**11. Buffo duet, Petronio, Trifoglio: "Per sì bel nodo, amico."** *Left alone Trifoglio and Petronio decide to discuss Sabina's dowry. When it comes down to it, Petronio offers a bunch of nothing—a title on parchment, the entrance hall to a building, fifty-eight wigs, a globe, dozens of pairs of glasses...,—and Trifoglio is not impressed. He wants money! They end in anger.* The musical setting is amusing and predictive of Donizetti's work in this genre, stretching all the way to *Don Pasquale.* This one is not at that level, but it is fun and nicely developed.

**Scene: Rooms in the Palazzo.**
*Recitative: Anastasia tells Sabina to buck up, but she laments her destiny.*

**12. Aria, Sabina: "Non mostrarmi in tal istante."** *Sabina tells Claudio not to lament her cruel fate; she will be faithful and will always adore him.* Musically, this is an important piece, in the traditional Rossinian place towards the end of the opera. It has a lovely English horn introduction. Donizetti would use the piece as one of his contributions in Mayr's *I Piccoli virtuosi ambulenti* seven or eight months later, and the cabaletta "Amare il tenero bramato oggetto" (the music and all the words save for the first line) would become Madame Fritz' cabaletta in *Pietro il Grande* in December, 1819. He obviously thought a lot of the scena. Ashbrook writes that the cabaletta was "later, at some unknown date, inserted into *La Lettera Anonima*" (285).

*Recitative after Sabina's aria: everyone is moved by Sabina's sorrow and vows of constancy, and one after another they ask Petronio to relent, even Trifoglio, who doesn't want her without a dowry. Petronio is completely won over when he discovers that Claudio will not need a dowry. He gives her hand to Claudio.*

**13. Act Two Finale: "Dunque andiamo, festeggiamo."** *In the brief finale everyone celebrates.*



*The Bergamo Production*

I will point to Alan Jackson's fine review of the on-line production of the opera, and not offer one of my own. *QF 60* contains a "Conversation" between Conductor Stefano Montanari and Stage Director Davide Maranchelli conducted by Alberto Mattioli. The discussion makes it clear that the music making was historically informed, using period instruments and a pitch of A=430 Hz, as it would have been in Donizetti's time. In contrast to the musical fidelity, the production was planned to update everything and try to put it into a context of contemporary kitsch which today's audience would understand. This means that the setting was not a small eighteenth century village, but a wedding venue—perhaps a country club or a spa which makes its income on hosting weddings. Italy has many such places, but so do many countries. Thus the Covid-necessitated production with social distancing and masks takes place on overly green artificial turf, which is rolled up at one point. There are balloon "sculptures" of swans and columns, etc. The costumes are also manifestations of kitsch. Somewhat lost in the production is Merelli's reliance on the Italian stereotypes of *commedia dell'arte.* Don Petronio and Trifoglio the Schoolmaster are both youngish in the production, and not the stuffy old men of *commedia.* Sabina is a wedding photographer; Claudio looks like he has wandered in on holiday at a cheap beach resort. No one would mistake him for a *feudatorio.* Additionally, Director Maranchelli is clearly cynical about happy endings (he says as much in the interview), particularly when it comes to marriage. Perhaps that is the reason why, after the little finale with everyone happily celebrating, the lights go out and everyone falls down in place.

It would be nice if a Festival production of an opera which has gone unseen and unheard for 200 years and which is so true to historical musical values would also be true to the theatrical values in the libretto, but that is too much to ask of today's directors. Even with the updating and the Covid restrictions, the production was fun and the music making solid. When the Covid pandemic finally subsides, *Le nozze in villa* deserves another look and listen.



# PODUNK HOLLOW
# *OSSIA*
# DONIZETTI MEETS "SCHITT'S CREEK"



Lovers in *Le Nozze in Villa*

Last September, the Canadian television comedy "Schitt's Creek" won seven Emmys at the annual awards ceremony in L.A. Over six seasons and 80 episodes, it has become a worldwide phenomenon, available through Netflix and other sources in the US, UK, Australia, Japan and many other countries. The show tells the story of the wealthy Rose family who have lost all their money because of tax fraud perpetrated by a crooked accountant. The family (Johnny Rose, his wife Moira and their two grown children, David and Alexis) are forced to move to a tiny town called Schitt's Creek, which Johnny had bought as a joke in their monied days. Along with a wild and extensive wardrobe for Moira and David, the woebegone town is all they have left. The series satirizes the Rose family's quirks and foibles and the small town they move to.

Johnny (Eugene Levy), the paterfamilias, is optimistic, straightforward and clueless; his wife Moira (Catherine O'Hara), a onetime television soap opera queen, uses inflated language with many big and unusual words and thinks a lot of herself as a famous actress who used to hob nob with the rich and famous. David (Dan Levy), who wears wild and crazy clothes, thinks of himself as having exquisite taste—and is flamboyantly gay, while Alexis (Annie Murphy) is a pretty, preening ditz with long legs. The comic episodes chronicle their interactions with the small town folk, but the overarching plot involves a few continuing themes—Johnny's ongoing struggle to build a new business, the children's romances and Moira's attempt at a comeback by taking a starring role in an awful horror film about attack crows.

While "Schitt's Creek" romped on television, the four or five of us who search the world for rare operas were intrigued by an early and unknown Donizetti work with libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli which had not been seen in 200 years when it was staged and streamed from Bergamo, the composer's home town, in late

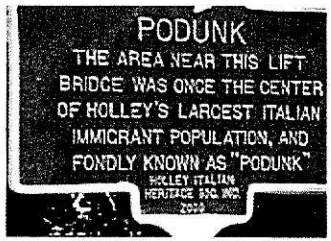


November. *Le nozze in villa* is a "dramma buffo" set in a small town where the mayor Don Petronio wants to marry his daughter Sabina to the local schoolmaster Trifoglio. Both are comic basses, which means foolish characters descended from the Pantalones and Dottores of *commedia dell'arte;* Petronio is a self-important blowhard while Trifoglio tries to impress by throwing Latin words into the conversation and using inflated language. Petronio's daughter Sabina, of course, does not want to marry the old fogy school teacher, especially because she has fallen for Claudio, a young man she has met in the city. Petronio's mother Anastasia is a conservative traditionalist and a niece, Rosaura, rounds out the comic crew.

*Le nozze in villa*, which might be translated "The Country Wedding" or "The Village Wedding," is like "Schitt's Creek" in that it mocks small towns and the interrelatedness of those who live there. The opera, which premiered in 1819, is based on an Italian translation of an 1802 German play by August von Kotzebue called *Die deutschen kleinstädters*, or "The German Villagers." It has endured as one of the most popular of Kotzebue's 200+ plays. The play's plot is like the opera's, but the characters have German names and positions in the small town of Krähwinkel and a lot of the satire is of bourgeois bureaucracy. Staar is the town burgomaster who wants to marry his daughter Sabine to his friend Sperling, the town's Minister of Quarries and Roads. It seems that everyone in the Staar family has a government job in the small town: his mother is Sub-Collector of Taxes, his brother is Ecclesiastical Vice-Prior, his two aunts are Superintendent of Navigation and Fishing and Scribe of the Municipal Excise Fund, respectively. The man whom Sabine really wants to marry, Olmers, turns out to be the Cabinet Secretary of the national government, and thus rich and better connected than any of the local yokels.

The Starr family members run the town of Krähwinkel like a family business, the Trumps gone smalltime. Starr's mother (Sabine's grandmother) is an arch conservative. She not only is enthralled when she thinks that the king is coming to town, she is an anti-vaxxer! Never, she opines, will she consent to having her grandchildren vaccinated—against the smallpox. (Smallpox vaccination began in the late eighteenth century.)

"Krähwinkel," the fictional town name, had been around for a year or two when Kotzebue used it in his play. It was a Noplace mocked in a book by Jean Paul (pen name of Johann Paul Richter), and after Kotzebue and numerous other German authors adopted Paul's town name, "krähwinkel" became the standard German word for a small, insular town, a term of deprecation, and it remains so today. In the US the term for such a place is "podunk" or sometimes "Podunk Hollow." (That word comes from an Algonquin Indian word for what was once a real place somewhere near Hartford, Connecticut, and it originally meant "swampy backwater.") In Italy small towns with provincial people who think of themselves as quite important are sometimes called roccacannuccias. A town of this name really exists in Puglia, but Roccacannuccia became the butt of jokes thanks to the comic actor Totò, who made the most of its funny sounding syllabification.




"Shit's Creek" is a related, but more recent term, usually used as part of the phrase "up shit's creek without a paddle," meaning that someone has got into a lot of trouble with no way out. The title of the television series plays and puns on this particular Nowhere since the town is named after the Schitt family. The Rose family, having lost their money, is actually *in* Schitt's Creek as well as up Shit's Creek. Roland Schitt, a descendant of the town founder, is the mayor and various other quirky and repeating characters (Bob, Ronnie, Ray) are members of the town council, which Moira also joins. The principal contemporary twist is that David is gay. As in so many comic operas and traditional comedies, marriage is the goal, but here it is David and his boyfriend Patrick who are planning to marry. The tics and exaggerations of several of the characters are closely akin to the *lazzi* or shtick that propelled *commedia* characters, and do so with the *personaggi* in *Le nozze in villa.*

Musicologist Paolo Fabbri points out that around the time of *Le nozze in villa* several authors mocked small town mannerisms. Jane Austen did it in her novels, and it is noteworthy that she admired Kotzebue, some of whose plays had been translated into English. Actually, making fun of small towns and small town people who have an exaggerated sense of self importance goes back to the beginnings of comedy. Aristophanes did it in the fifth century BCE with his *Lysistrata*: the women who gather in the big city (Athens) come from towns the sophisticated Athenians considered backwaters with quirky characteristics. Lampito, the Spartan, speaks with an accent that the ancient Greeks would have found hickish; modern British translations usually make her sound Scottish while American ones give her a Southern Appalachian accent. (In the 1960s the popular television show "The Beverly Hillbillies" reversed the trope by having Appalachian hillbillies get rich and move to the big city.)





In "Schitt's Creek" the overt theme of gay love, which is taken quite seriously, may be a new twist, but the plot ultimately hinges on a wedding and getting the lovers together—only it is a same-sex wedding. In Kotzebue/Merelli/Donizetti, the plot hinges on young people who want to thwart the plans of fathers, tutors, and other old people so that they can marry for love. Same sex marriage may be a progressive cause today, but marrying for love instead of societal expectations is not a new subject for comedy at all. The job of comedy is to ease audiences into acceptance of the new norm.



The Finale of Schitt's Creek

In other words, things have not changed much. *Le nozze in villa* has Petronio, the buffoonish mayor of the village; in "Schitt's Creek" he morphs into the buffoonish Roland, the mayor of Schitt's Creek with nary a wink and a nod. Trifoglio the puffed up Schoolmaster is in some ways like Moira Rose, the has-been but self-important soap opera actress. The lovers of the opera are not much different from the lovers in the sitcom.

The 2020 Bergamo production of *Le nozze in villa* updated the opera's setting to wedding preparations at a kitschy wedding venue complete with Sabina as a wedding photographer who snaps photos of the (un)happy couple against a phony backdrop of Venice; the whole production emphasizes artificiality, and in fact it all takes place on artificial turf. Many such places exist in Italy, and in the US there is an entire city made of phony backdrops, which is a wedding destination for untold thousands: Las Vegas. In an episode of "Schitt's Creek" Ray, the local jack of all trades and town council member, tries to take wedding pictures of David and Patrick against exotic backdrops; in the Bergamo production of *Nozze in villa*, Sabina takes photos of an anonymous wedding couple against picturesque backgrounds.

Kitsch is kitsch, whether in the bourgeois eighteenth century setting of Kotzebue's *Krähwinkel*, the *roccacannuccia* setting of Merelli and Donizetti or the twenty-first century setting of "Schitt's Creek," a podunk hollow if there ever was one.

So far as I know, England has no word one equivalent of *krähwinkel* or podunk or *roccacannunccia*. All of their rural villages are cozy and quaint places full of an inordinate number of murders and amateur detectives. Mockery of small towns seems to be most prevalent when cities are valued as the vital center of life. In nineteenth century Romanticism there was a revolt against urban centers and therefore the extolling of rural landscapes and small towns as representing escape from the clutter and wickedness of city life. In our time, cities are once again the engines of progress and the denizens of rural parts are ripe for satire. In "Schitt's Creek" the big city Roses move to the country and mayhem ensues. In *Le nozze in villa* the lovers have met in the big city, but they come to the country and buffoonery quickly takes control.

"Schitt's Creek" is funny series and includes some serious underlying themes.

*Die deutschen kleinstädter* has a lot of satire on bourgeois bureaucracy which is still ripe, and not just in Germany.

It's the music which enhances Donizetti's youthful piece, and makes it brim with joy.

**Charles Jernigan**

# Bergamo 2020 on TV

Alan Jackson

As most readers will be aware, the 2020 Donizetti Festival went ahead though without any audiences. This year the Festival set up its Donizetti WebTV and for 59 euros I took out a subscription that enabled me to watch all three of the operas online. Each was streamed live and subscribers could then watch the operas on demand for a period of several weeks. And there was much more than that on offer, some of which I describe below.

The three operas in the festival programme were staged performances of *Marino Faliero* and *Le nozze in villa* and a concert performance of *Belisario*. The previously announced *La fille du régiment* is now scheduled for the 2021 Festival and Placido Domingo pulled out of Belisario at fairly short notice for health reasons – he was replaced by Roberto Frontali.

Safety of the performers was clearly a top priority, so only the wind and brass players of the Orchestra Donizetti Opera were without masks, though they were behind Perspex screens. Conductors Riccardo Frizza and Stefano Montanari also wore masks as did the members of the Coro Donizetti Opera and the extras in the two staged operas. The stalls became the acting area for the principals, with the conductor and orchestra onstage.

That the festival went ahead at all must count as a triumph; that such an ambitious programme was undertaken adds to the wonder. The Festival was dedicated to those who lost their lives in the Covid pandemic and to those still alive who lost friends and family. Bergamo has suffered greatly and the music was offered as part of the healing process. Alas, writing this in December 2020, it is clear that the pandemic is far from over. But watching these operas during the pandemic obviously adds an extra layer of meaning. The performers were clearly very moved at the end of each opera and I can only salute their commitment. With no audiences there was no applause after arias or acts and when at the end the singers, conductors, directors and design teams came out for "curtain calls" the



silence was moving, unnerving even. When applause eventually broke out with everyone clapping each other I still found it a very sad and strange experience. It is tempting to leave it at that, acknowledge all the hard work, dedication and inspiration and give everyone ten out of ten for effort. But readers deserve some idea of what the performances were like, so here are my thoughts and opinions.

Presumably the chorus was kept out of the acting areas to enable social distancing to take place. But extra actors and movement artists were drafted in, and therein lies the main problem I had with the two staged operas. Too often the extras became the focus of the camera's attention; too often I was bewildered as to what they represented. It is the curse of regieteater today. Instead of clarifying the action and getting the singers to act convincingly, directors cause distractions and concentrate on adding their own layers of "meaning" - to the detriment of the music and the drama created by the composer and librettist.

*Marino Faliero*

The set consisted of a series of metal walkways and platforms, connected by staircases. There was no suggestion of Venice as far as I could tell, though the complexity of the set did evoke intrigue. The principals were bizarrely costumed. Israele, Fernando, Steno and Leoni wore embroidered frock coats with modern jackets and trousers underneath, trainers and workers' caps. Faliero wore a grey pin-striped suit, adorned with some rather camp costume jewellery, and a woollen hat. So he was marked out from the others but not in a way that gave any sense of his position as Doge of Venice. Colours were gaudy and clashing. The troupe of extras wore similar outfits to most of the male principals. They clambered up and down the set, sometimes performing slow acrobatics, sometimes they were puppeteers controlling the principals, sometimes they were just puppets, sometimes they wore fish-like headpieces. At times the camera focussed on them while the singers were singing; always they were a distraction.

The pity of it all is that there was much to admire in the musical performance. I saw Michele Pertusi as Faliero in Venice (at the Teatro Malibran) in 2003. Seventeen years on and his tone is still beautiful, the voice is steady and he has the dignity and presence needed for the role which was created by Luigi Lablache. I liked the Israele of Bogdan Baciu, firm of voice and contrasted with Pertusi. His role was written for the great Antonio Tamburini, though it doesn't exploit all his gifts and accomplishments. There is little fioritura and his second aria is embedded in the trial scene in the Sala del Consiglio and so somehow submerged under the pertichini from others. But it does show off his gifts as an actor and confirms Donizetti's intention of placing his illustrious soloists in the service of the drama. Earlier, in their Act 1 duet, Pertusi and Baciu blended beautifully in their cantabile. This duet echoes the one for Lablache and Tamburini in Bellini's *I puritani*, performed in Paris just a few weeks before *Marino Faliero*. This lyrical cantabile, however, contrasts with its more conversational counterpart in the Bellini. The final martial cabaletta is similar in effect to "Suoni la tromba" even if not quite so instantly memorable.

There are two tenor parts of note. The small part of the Gondolier, originally sung by the very young Nicola Ivanoff, and whose barcarolle turned out to be the opera's hit number in Paris (its melody is also heard in the orchestral Prelude), needs something more mellifluous than Giorgio Misseri provided. The major tenor part of Fernando, written for Giovanni Battista Rubini, presents us today with a problem, as do all the other parts written for him. It isn't just the high notes and the coloratura, but the whole way of coping with music written for the falsetto extension to Rubini's voice. I am convinced the word falsetto must have meant something different in 1835 from the high F shriek that Pavarotti provides in his recording of *I puritani*. Michele Angelini took the part in Bergamo and I can't think

of anyone I would sooner hear in these Rubini roles. He has a voice of sufficient sweetness, uncommon flexibility and exciting high notes (up to a high D here)[1]. Even more impressive, he was a late replacement for Javier Camarena who withdrew in early November citing "reasons of health".

I'm not as enthusiastic about the Elena of Francesca Dotto, a role written for Giulia Grisi. The voice is too strident and she uses too much vibrato for my taste. Perhaps some will disagree. But she sang with commitment, fulfilling the dramatic requirements of the part. The smaller parts were well taken by Christian Federici (Steno), Dave Monaco (Leoni), and Anaïs Mejiar (Irene).

Riccardo Frizza paced the opera extremely well and obtained fine orchestral playing and choral singing. The director was Stefano Ricci, the designer was Marco Rossi, costumes were by Gianluca Sbicca and lighting by Alessandro Carletti. When the performance of an opera without a ballet credits a choreographer I fear there is trouble ahead. Here it was Marta Bevilacqua and sadly, there was. Poor Donizetti, and with this cast too. If only the artistic team had paid attention to the words of soprano Jessica Pratt who in the little alphabetical vignette of D for Diva (one of the extras on the website) said "Instead of changing a Bohème into something it isn't, let us take out an opera you have never heard and let's do it as it should be done".

*Marino Faliero* is an opera with unusual features for 1835. The title role is a bass, the soprano gets neither an entrance aria or an aria finale and the star tenor is killed off at the end of Act II and so doesn't appear thereafter. These innovations were made in the interests of the drama and indeed the political content of the plot marked something new in Italian opera: Mazzini praised it as showing a way forward for Italian opera in the fight for Italian independence and unity. As it happened, Donizetti didn't follow this path.

*Le nozze in villa*

Unnecessary extras featured in the second of Bergamo's two staged operas, the early *dramma buffo*, *Le nozze in villa*. The heroine, Sabina, becomes a wedding photographer. We see her at work during the overture in a dumb show that establishes the setting as a hotel that puts on kitschy wedding ceremonies and receptions – apparently these are quite common in Italy and as most weddings take place at the weekend, they can be a source of cheap mid-week hotel rooms. My thanks go to Charles Jernigan for this detail. I had understood the wedding reception bit, but not the precise nature of the satire. My problem was that it focussed attention on a wedding couple, not Sabina or the other principals. Sometimes a dumb show can tell us about the characters, sometimes it can explain a relevant back story. Here it did neither for me. It established that we were about to see a comedy but confused me as to who was important in the opera to follow and made me think that the director didn't trust an audience to listen to a few minutes of music without something moving to look at. Perhaps this was a consequence of it being a TV opera, but I bet it would have been included if the opera were being performed on a conventional stage. These extras were less in evidence thereafter and when present didn't distract as much from the principals so we could concentrate on Donizetti and librettist Bartolomeo Merelli's opera.

The plot concerns Sabina's wish to marry Claudio, a wealthy landlord, against the wishes of her father Don Petronio who has earmarked for her the local schoolteacher

[1] This opera presents considerable editorial problems. Donizetti re-wrote parts of it following suggestions from Rossini once he arrived in Paris in 1835, for which he employed a second librettist. I understand that the aim in Bergamo was to present the music of the opera as closely as possible to what was heard in Paris at its premiere. However, the programme for the 2003 Venice production mentioned above has musical examples that suggest the Paris premiere used higher keys for both Fernando's arias than we heard here.



Trifoglio. Act 1 involves Claudio being mistaken for the king, a misunderstanding sorted by the end of the act. Act II hinges on the dowry, or lack of, that the two suitors will receive. The defect is that we have almost two separate plots. However, the music is attractive and the major characters each have their aria. Rossini is obviously a big influence, I also caught passages of Mozartian balance and there are intimations of Donizetti's mature comedies.

Sabina is the only virtuoso role – created originally by Fanny Eckerlin – and Gaia Petrone was excellent. She has a lovely warm mezzo soprano voice that encompassed the coloratura with ease. She would make a fine Cenerentola. The other roles are less demanding vocally. Sabina's tenor was Giorgi Misseri, who sang with good musical intentions though he lacks a really fine voice. He included a couple of rather explosive high notes in his aria, presumably interpolations. The basses Omar Montanari and Fabio Capitanucci as Petronio and Trifoglio were very good and there was an entertaining Anastasia (Sabina's grandmother) from Manuela Custer. Claudia Urru and Daniele Lettieri completed the cast. Stefano Montanari conducted and played the fortepiano for the recitatives, Davide Marranchelli directed, sets were by Anna Bonomelli and costumes by Linda Ricciardi. All contributed to an enjoyable show (once past that overture). The opera was played on period instruments and at 1820's pitch.

For much more information about the musical numbers, the libretto and its source and the early performance history of *Le nozze in villa*, please see Charles Jernigan's detailed article in this newsletter. It updates previous knowledge as recorded in William Ashbrook's "Donizetti and his Operas" and Jeremy Common's essay accompanying the Opera Rara CDs "A Hundred Years of Italian Opera 1820 – 1830". Up till now, the main obstacle to the revival of *Le nozze in villa* has been a quintet missing from Act II which has been removed from the only known score, a copyist's manuscript held in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This has been provided by Elio and Rocco Tanica, with the "realizzazione di" Enrico Melozzi. It is unclear to me what exactly this means. However, these three seem to have careers in popular music and film music rather than anything I would describe as classical or operatic. Tiny motifs from Rossini and Mozart appear and immediately disappear but the whole doesn't sound remotely like Donizetti – that of course may have been the intention.

So we now have a "new" Donizetti opera. I don't think it is a masterpiece, but despite the rather incoherent plot, it has some attractive music. Given the not too taxing male parts the opera could be considered by music colleges wanting a suitable vehicle for a promising mezzo. I noticed that "Produzione Dynamic" appeared in the credits, so maybe a recording has been made, preferably for issue as a CD as well as DVD.

*Belisario*

I imagine our readers are already familiar with plot of *Belisario*, so I will confine my remarks to the cast and one or two points about the presentation. All the singers were excellent. The title role was taken baritone Roberto Frontali replacing Placido Domingo at fairly short notice. I haven't been convinced by Domingo's London forays into baritone territory (Simon Boccanegra and Germont père) and so Frontali was a definite plus, mature enough to be a Byzantine general with a grown-up daughter, yet young enough to have kept a warm steady voice. Carmelo Remigio was equally warm and steady as the coldly calculating Antonina, Annalisa Stroppa was very sympathetic as their daughter Irene, Celso Albelo was both lyrical and trumpet-toned as necessary, Simon Lim was sonorous as Emperor Giustiniano and Klodjan Kacani made his mark as Eutropio, Antonina's would-be paramour. The admirable conductor was again Riccardo Frizza.

Given the horrors of the *Marino Faliero* production, it was relief to have a concert performance, even if this was very much a heads-in-score effort with very little interaction

between the singers. There was an oddity I found disturbing. The singers' exits from the "stage" seemed to be produced, staggered to keep distances between them. This sometimes led to singers remaining at their music stands longer than prescribed by the score. In particular, after her opening scene Irene stayed alongside Antonina and Eutropio for the whole of Antonina's aria and cabaletta. This led to the absurdity of her being party to the conspiracy between Antonina and Eutropio in the tempo di mezzo. What is wrong with keeping to the usual conventions of concert performances? Bring on all the singers needed during an act at its start, have them sit down when they are "off-stage", stand them up when they are "on-stage". It is simple and we understand the convention. What we had was novelty for the sake of novelty, which I fear was a theme of the whole festival.

Two general points. With one or two exceptions, in all three operas the singers avoided interpolated high notes at the end of their arias. Bravo. All too often these aren't the best notes in the singer's range and high final tonics often produce bad musical grammar when held over alternating tonic-dominant harmony. Secondly, and again in all three operas, there were lots of missing appoggiaturas.

The Extra Online Material

In terms of minutes per euro, the 59 euros subscription was the bargain of the century. In addition to the three operas, which for three months one could watch as many times as one liked, there were lots of extras. I have mentioned the A to Z of Donizetti clips: A for Accademia Carrara, B for Borgo Canale, C for Capitals (i.e. the cities where Donizetti's operas were premiered), G for Gavazzeni etc. Most of these were enjoyable and even informative – I didn't know that when Donizetti's body was exhumed in 1875 for autopsy and burial in Santa Maria Maggiore it was found that his head had been removed. Investigations led to the skull being found in a delicatessen owned by the nephew of one of the autopsy doctors where it was being used as a holder for coins. It was then impounded, spent some time in the Angelo Mai library and later in the Donizetti Museum, and only in 1951 did it return to the rest of him in the tomb. P for Pascià (Pasha) was about Donizetti's elder brother Giuseppe who was Head of Music in the service of Sultan Mohammed II in Istanbul. These vignettes lasted about seven minutes each and had English subtitles.

"Donizetti ON" took us on a virtual tour of the newly refurbished Teatro Donizetti, voiced by an actress but "narrated" by the theatre itself. It sounds like a gimmick, but it was lovely. There was also a series of mini one-sided conversations "Parla con Gaetano" between artists and the bust of Donizetti in the theatre's foyer. These too had charm, even the 74 seconds of Artistic Director of the Festival, Francesco Micheli, wishing on himself all Donizetti's attributes except syphilis and planting a kiss on the bust's lips as he comes out as a lover of the composer. These too had English subtitles.

Alas some of the other features didn't. There was a Zoom interview entitled "Comporre è una cosa seria" between Micheli and the three musicians who composed the quintet for *Le nozze in villa*. My Italian isn't quite up to following it, so I didn't obtain any insight into their work other than that they all thought a lot of each other – "seria" isn't quite the adjective that comes to mind to describe this conversation. Some of Signor Micheli's other contributions on the website were just too much for me. I know Italians speak with their hands, but his nervous energy and continuous hand waving right in front of the camera I found very wearing. Amongst other offerings were talks lasting about 15 minutes on the three operas by Alberto Mattioli, the festival's Drammaturg, in which rehearsals could be seen and heard behind him and extended features called "Citofonare Gaetano", one on each of the festival's operas, lasting between two and three-quarter hours and nearly four hours each. These didn't have English subtitles and the length of these latter ones was more than I could face.



Lastly, there was the concert "GaetAMO Bergamo". This seemed to have been put on at short notice to celebrate Donizetti's birthday on the 29th November 2020. Introduced by Francesco Micheli and Cristina Parodi, it consisted of arias, duets, songs and instrumental music all with piano rather than orchestral accompaniment and performed on the artificial grass that served for *Le nozze in villa*. These show-cased many of the leading singers from the festival. The final item, the brindisi "Mesci, mesci" from *Il campanello*, was led by Simon Lim with a chorus made up of all, or at least very many of, the soloists. This was highly enjoyable, a suitable tribute to Donizetti and a celebration of the huge efforts made to bring the festival into existence.

## *Maria Stuarda* in South Korea

Russell Burdekin, January 2021

Rooting around online during the Covid crisis, I came across a South Korean production of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. Of particular interest was that it was a totally Korean production without any apparent Western involvement. It was the South Korean premiere and followed on from a 2015 performance of *Anna Bolena*. Lee Changeun (Romanized names are used throughout), the artistic director of La Bella Opera who staged the performances, was kind enough to send me some background articles. These also led me to a brief, superficial, but hopefully not too inaccurate, look at the current state of opera in Korea. Where necessary, I've relied on Google for translation.

Traditional types of opera have a long history in Korea but public, theatre-based, performances only started in the early 20th century. Western opera had its first performances in 1948; apparently the organiser ended up having to sell his house to pay for it. It is now very much alive in South Korea although still a minority interest. There is the Korean National Opera, which stages an opera over about 3 days or so each month at the modern, multi auditorium, Seoul Arts Centre and occasionally tours smaller venues. There are also a small number of other companies, like La Bella Opera, most of which are based in Seoul. La Bella Opera produces 5 or 6 shows a year, but not all opera. Despite this Seoul focus, Deagu sees itself as the heart of opera in Korea with its opera house, which opened in 2003 (*L'elisir d'amore* is scheduled this year), an opera school and an annual opera festival. A spectacular opera house is also nearing completion at Busan. The repertoire is essentially mainstream 19th century but with occasional forays into more unfamiliar territory with works like Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. There are also a number of new Korean works, possibly partly to help overcome audience resistance to opera as a purely Western entertainment.

Opera in South Korea faces the same funding challenge as opera everywhere, but they start from a much more disadvantageous position than most. A recent report stated that average ticket prices were around £25, which is apparently nearly a third higher than those for musicals and three times higher than traditional Korean music concerts. In fact, looking at current shows, the ticket price disparity did not seem so marked. There is also some sponsorship and some restricted state support. Whether or not ticket prices are a dampener, ticket sales are sluggish leaving companies to distribute many complimentary tickets, in 2016 only 36.5% of tickets were purchased. Perhaps a more satisfactory trade-off between ticket prices and ticket take-up could be found but getting people to give opera a try is the heart of

the problem. It is claimed that Koreans believe "that opera is awkward" (difficult to understand?). One answer to this has been to reinterpret works "to be more familiar to modern Koreans", whatever that might imply. Operas are sometimes deemed too long, but it is not clear whether this is because of past theatre going experience or, as has been cited for younger audiences' disinterest in the West, due to shorter attention spans resulting from online culture.

Thankfully, the *Maria Stuarda* was not reinterpreted and was complete except for a few, not unusual, omissions, such as the repeat of Maria's opening cabaletta (their *Anna Bolena* had been shortened by 30 minutes). The opera was staged in Seoul on November 22-24, 2019, four performances, double cast. The performance streamed had Kang Hye-myung as Maria, Ko Hyun-a as Elizabeth, Shin Sang-geun as Leicester and Lim Hee-sung as Talbot. Of the four, Kang and Ko have sung in European houses and Sing at the Met. One notable aspect of all the singing was the clarity of the Italian.

The direction by Lee Hee-soo was straightforward and well thought out and contrasted favourably with David Alden's rather diffuse and gimmicky production from Zurich streamed in September. Some of the show's advertising talked of the production expressing "the gorgeous and magnificent English and Scottish royal backgrounds of the 16th century. The visual splendor and dynamic stage that will perfectly recreate the appearance of European royalty". This was rather overselling it, but suggests that opera in Korea needs to claim the visual experience in opera as something different and unique. In fact, the staging was fairly minimal. The opening scene just had a series of vertical galleries on each side for the chorus. The central stage lights were part of a tangle of bars representing a crown of thorns and this idea was carried over in the branches of the stylised tree, which represented the forest in the next scene. The martyr theme was repeated in the final scene where a huge cross was placed against the back wall of the stage. There was some imaginative use of lighting; I particularly liked Elizabeth stalking out of the gloom to demand Mary's letter from Leicester.

The chorus, the male soloists and Anna were all dressed soberly in what seemed to have as much a touch of the Far East as of the Tudor about their clothing. Where clearly much effort and expense had been lavished was in the two queens' dresses. These were gorgeously rich and colourful and ensured that the focus was almost exclusively on the two queens. Rather oddly, they came out in a different dress for each of their appearances, which I suspect was a way of ensuring that the audience felt that they had had their expected fill of spectacle, a sentiment reflected in website comments.

I very much enjoyed the Elizabeth of Ko Hyun-a. It was a lively and insightful performance that made the most of her opportunities with nimble switches between the imperious and the hesitant. I was less convinced by Kang Hye-myung's *Maria*. There could be no question about her singing and the quality of her voice, she had covered for Renée Fleming at one point in her career, but it seemed a rather one-dimensional portrayal. This might partly have been down to the contrast with Ko's vivid Elizabeth or perhaps an overemphasis on Maria as martyr but it seemed more that Kang was intent on the musical line at the expense of her acting. The result, to a Western eye, was sometimes a little "stagey" with overemphatic gestures and singing at the audience rather than to the person being addressed, both occasionally also found with the other singers. Given their experience on Western stages, it would be interesting to know whether these differences were influenced by the wider movement to meld Western



acting styles with more traditional Korean artforms, which include puppetry, masques, mime and Pansori (a type of formalized singing) and by audiences' expectations of stage action.

The male roles in the opera are a bit thankless but the principals certainly did not let the production down, particularly Lim's sonorous Talbot. The chorus was fine vocally but their inexperience or lack of rehearsal showed in self-conscious stage movement. The New Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor, Yang Jin-mo, gave a good account of the score but perhaps he could occasionally have taken a firmer lead.

The final scene summed up the care and thought behind the production. Rather than an executioner's block or hooded axemen, Lee had Maria stand on one side of the revolving stage with Elizabeth leading the heir, James, on the other. As the stage revolved and Maria moved into the shadows, James moved into the light.

Overall, this was a distinctive and refreshing production that measured up well against those from Western companies while also reflecting some of the constraints that Korean opera has to work within. One can only hope that their efforts will find an increasingly appreciative audience.

The video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJt5NvuYW76P9uXOR4RoYrvunvSbuVJM (note that you do need the space at the end). Unfortunately, the video had been split it into 27 parts, perhaps because Korean audiences were thought more likely to sample a few of them than to tackle the full opera, harking back to the problem of opera length. To make matters worse the playlist is in the wrong order so to get the full performance one has to download all of them and then rearrange.

## *Report of the International Scientific Conference "Gaetano Donizetti Known and Unknown: a Belcanto Style on the Basis of the Research of the Composer's early Works. Warsaw 9th March 2020*[2]

**Przemysław Krzywoszyński**

The International Scientific Conference *Gaetano Donizetti Known and Unknown: a Belcanto Style on the Basis of the Research of the Composer's Early Works* (in Polish *Gaetano Donizetti znany i nieznany: stylistyka belcanto na podstawie badań nad wczesnymi dziełami kompozytora*) took place at the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music (UMFC) on the 9th March 2020 in the Senate Room. It is worth emphasizing that this was the first scientific conference in Poland entirely devoted to Gaetano Donizetti. The event was organized by Professor Agnieszka Muszyńska-Andrejczyk from the Libretto and Opera Studies Laboratory of the

[2] The author expresses his profound gratitude to Mr. Alan Jackson for his always precious remarks and brilliant suggestions.

UMFC and Professor Małgorzata Kubala from the Departament of Vocal and Acting Studies of UMFC.
The conference presented twelve speakers from nine universities, research centres and artistic institutions in Italy and Poland and was divided in two parts, the first with contributions by Italian guests and the second with talks by Polish researchers.
Professor PierAngelo Pelucchi (Conservatorio Luca Marenzio, Brescia) opened the conference with the talk *I melodrammi "minori" di Donizetti e la riutilizzazione di temi musicali nell'oper* (*Donizetti's "minor" Melodramas and the Reuse of Musical Themes in the Opera*). He emphasized that Donizetti, as one of the most prolific composers of his era, in addition to 67 original operas, made 14 major revisions of his own melodramas. These modifications were so major that in fact, according to Pelucchi, they could be considered as separate, i.e. new, works. Therefore, he brought up the complexity of definition of the canon of Donizetti's operas. In his opinion, the problem consists in which criteria we want to apply. For instance, if one takes into consideration the popularity of some valuable stage works, obviously it depends on the historical moment. Instead, Pelucchi proposed the following criteria: melodies, harmony, instrumentation, form structure and libretto. He recalled that even many of the best operas from the period 1830-1843 were revised a few times. Donizetti regularly reused fragments and structures from earlier operas (from the years 1816-29) in later works, sometimes in the form of simple analogies, self-quotations and homages to his teacher, Mayr. Pelucchi spoke about the role of singers who inspired substantial changes, for example in coloratura parts: Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis in the role of Gemma (*Gemma di Vergy*) or Sofia Löwe in the role of Maria (*Maria Padilla*). Another reason for Donizetti's revisions was connected with the reception of the operas at the time. Pelucchi analyzed this issue with some examples of operas less popular today which in the XIX century were staged more than *L'elisir d'amore* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, like *Parisina d'Este* or *Gemma di Vergy*.
In his talk he proposed to consider as integral operas with modifications *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (and its French version *Lucie de Lammermoor*) and *Linda di Chamounix*. The first one was staged many times in different versions with modifications introduced between 1834 and 1839, until the final edition from Paris in 1840. It is worth mentioning that the opera had five different titles. Donizetti, in the case of *Linda di Chamounix*, after the performances in Vienna added the famous rondo *O luce di quest'anima* for the Parisian public.
Meanwhile, Pelucchi proposed as examples of major changes resulting in "new" operas, *Marino Faliero* and *Dom Sébastien*. The original version of the first was inspired mainly by Rossini and Donizetti's aim was to please French audiences while conserving Italian style. It was later modified in order to be presented in Milan to its orthodox public at La Scala, where however it was received as a beautiful "French" opera. Similarly, we have two main versions of *Dom Sébastien*, a five-act *grand opéra* and a shorter version written for Vienna.

The last part of Pelucchi's talk was an analysis of many quotations, revised arias and homages to Mayr in Donizetti's operas. Among others he pointed out that a duet from the early opera *Alahor in Granata*, written for performance in Naples (1831), was later inserted in the second version of *Gabriella di Vergy* (1838). In both cases the two male characters are in strong contrast and therefore the duet works perfectly from the dramatic point of view. Moreover, Pelucchi noted that Donizetti had talented singers who could perform these parts with great ease. In addition, the march from *Alahor* is quoted as Belcore's entrance in *L'elisir d'amore*. In that context he mentioned the transformation of the motif from an *opera seria* to a *buffa*. Furthermore, an instrumental section from *Alfredo il grande* became one of the most characteristic parts of *La Fille du régiment* demonstrating how even an unnoticed element of one work can shine in another very famous opera. Pelucchi emphasized that Donizetti composed his later masterpieces without access to his earlier scores, which proves, in his opinion, the composer's great memory.



The next speaker was Professor Federico Fornoni (Conservatorio Gesualdo da Venosa, Potenza). In his talk *Donizetti belcantista?* (*Is Donizetti a Belcanto Composer?*) he claimed that unlike Rossini, Donizetti is not a typical representative composer of the style. He quoted Rodolfo Celletti's book *A History of Bel Canto* where the author excludes Donizetti from the circle of founders of *bel canto*, mostly from a historical point of view. Fornoni focused on artistic and aesthetic features of Donizetti's work. From this perspective he discussed the most famous soprano arias of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He analyzed both poetic and musical lyric forms in order to find the regular poetical periods and symmetry characteristic of *bel canto*. In the cavatina "Regnava nel silenzio", there are no regular symmetric poetical periods. Moreover, the construction of phrases and periods (two lyric forms), both in the first presentation and the following variant (when *arpeggios* blur the melody line), represents the rapture of Lucy's narration. The *cabaletta* with its coda cut he describes as a "limping lyric form". The second example was the Mad Scene. Fornoni pointed out that at the entrance of Lucia, where she recites while the orchestra develops a melody, the asymmetrical form of that scene and the means of artistic expression – both in singing and instrumentation – were more to emphasize naturalism than just beauty of singing. The coloratura serves a dramatic function, as does the instrumentation especially with the use of a glass harmonica.

Fornoni also mentioned the definition of *belcanto* from the XIX century by Giuseppe Carpani in *Le Rossiniane* where all is about the beauty of melody, and harmony is considered merely as a basis or background. Nevertheless, the art of singing was not only a vehicle for beauty, but also for a moral message. Likewise, Rossini regretted the lack of *castratos* since their virtuosity not only pleased audiences but helped them experience cathartic ectasis. According to Fornoni *Lucia* is not the pure contemplation of pleasure and beauty, because Donizetti wanted to introduce characters with their traumas and pain. He strove for a "romantic distortion" and was in fact criticized for it in a post-première review of *Il castello di Kenilworth*.

The third speaker, Alberto Sonzogni (Fondazione Donizetti and Teatro Donizetti di Bergamo) presented the talk: *Il trascrittore donizettiano, l'artigiano della partitura* (*The Donizetti transcriber, the craftsman of the score*). It was a very detailed and fascinating analysis about making modern performing editions from Donizetti's manuscripts. He described Donizetti's own style of writing a score, with its many abbreviations and marks, using examples of operas which have been staged at the Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo like *Il borgomastro di Saardam*, *Torquato Tasso*, *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* and *Maria de Rudenz*. Using audio and video presentation of excerpts from *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* and *Il borgomastro di Saardam* he explained some issues connected with the transcription of harmony and instrumentation, and the replacing of missing notes and fragments. He pointed out that the Opera Rara edition of *Rosmonda* contains some inaccuracies in the overture regarding repeated bars and notes. In the *a due* section with Arturo in Rosmonda's aria from the first act, there is an ambiguity concerning orchestration, we still cannot decide if Donizetti wanted to use flute or piccolo. One of the most interesting examples assayed by Sonzogni was the transcription process of the *terzetto* from the first act of *Il borgomastro* which has many composer's indications referring to instruments and singers.

Dr Leonardo Masi (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw) presented his *Karol Kurpiński e la prima rappresentazione del l'Elisir d'amore a Varsavia* (*Karol Kurpiński and the first performance of "L'elisir of d'amore" in Warsaw*) in perfect Polish which is truly very impressive. He described the historical context of the first performance of this famous Donizetti opera in the capital of Poland. He focused on the role of Karol Kurpiński, a famous Polish composer, meritorious director and conductor of the National Theater, who was even called the "Polish Rossini". He was an admirer of Italian culture, but also critical of Italian opera. *L'elisir d'amore* was the first Donizetti opera staged in Warsaw in 1839 with the libretto

translated into Polish. This fact and the whole performance were very important, because The Grand Theatre (in Polish: Teatr Wielki) after the failure of the November Insurrection in 1831 was the only public place where the Polish language was officially allowed by the occupying Russian authorities. Masi explained the nuances involved when translating the libretto. He stressed that this performance was one of Kurpiński's last projects as director of the opera. The composer introduced Donizetti's operas to Poland. However, we can distinguish two waves of his popularity. The first one was in the years 1843-47 mainly thanks to Rocca's Italian opera company, which managed to stage the higher number of Donizetti's operas. The second wave was in the years 1851-70. Masi pointed out the role of Jan Quattrini, an Italian conductor and later director and co-director of the National Theatre with composer Stanisław Moniuszko.

Professor Przemysław Krzywoszyński (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań and a member of Donizetti Society) presented the talk *"Zoraida di Granata" – Donizetti on the threshold of an individual style* (*„Zoraida di Granata" - Donizetti u progu indywidualnego stylu*). He spoke about *Zoraida di Granata* as the first mature work of the composer in the sense of him finding his own style. He compared some aspects of both versions of the opera with Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* and *Demetrio, Re di Siria* and Rossini's *Semiramide*. Krzywoszyński claimed that the first version from 1822 with two opposing tenors, was especially preferred by Rome's audiences and was more popular than the second *Zoraida* (1824), which was more influenced by the spirit of Rossini's opera. He indicated that in both versions one can observe the characteristics of Donizetti's signature style and commented in detail about some of the elements such as overtures, finales and arias. Krzywoszyński in his analyses compared these aspects with features from Mayr's and Rossini's operas.

Professor Krystyna Jaźwińska-Dobosz (The Fryderyk Chopin University of Music, Warsaw) in her talk *Paris Operas by Gaetano Donizetti* (*Paryskie opery Gaetano Donizettiego*) discussed Donizetti's operas composed especially for Paris. She focused on examples both from *grand opéra* and *opéra comique* in the context of the rivalry between Paris theatres after the success of *Marino Faliero*. Jaźwińska-Dobosz presented the historical circumstances of performances of *Don Pasquale* and *La Fille du régiment* to illustrate the complex relation between Donizetti and the audiences of the French capital.

Professor Robert Cieśla (The Fryderyk Chopin University of Music, Warsaw) spoke about *Classification of Voices in Donizetti's Operas on Selected Examples* (*Klasyfikacja głosów w operach Donizettiego na wybranych przykładach*). He used examples from *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* and showed how important is the selection of voices in the light of the classification from the *Handbuch der Oper* by Rudolf Kloiber. Among the most important problems, such as the harmony of the vocal part with the orchestra and the balance between the dramatic and visual aspects of a role, is the proper selection of voice types. Cieśla stressed the significance of subsidiary parts for the overall sound of an opera – for instance Arturo in *Lucia of Lammermoor*. Miscasting of this part can completely destroy the performance, especially the sextet, if his voice does not resonate and so undermines the climax. Likewise, the part of Raimondo, the chaplain, apart from strength of sound, should have a voice that is mature, even a little "tired". Cieśla also spoke about the specificity of voice type in the *opera buffa Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* where a baritone with a particular type of declamation and characteristic sound is essential for the success of the whole performance. He also noticed in this context the importance of singer's comedic acting skills.

Professor Joanna Pietrzak-Thébault (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw) presented *"Daughter of the Regiment" in Two Scenes - What is Behind the Change of Language of the Libretto* (*„Córka pułku" w dwóch odsłonach - co kryje się za zmianą języka libretta*) and analyzed differences between the two librettos of *La fille du régiment*. She described the background of the French and Italian texts. In her opinion, the main dramatic conflict in the French version of the libretto is purely political, full of allusions to the Napoleonic era with a



very clear patriotic message. While *La figlia del reggimento*, shorter by a third although it also depicts some historical events, focusses on more abstract human relations, can be more open to different interpretations and is closer to *opera buffa*. Pietrzak-Thébault with her detailed analysis presented Donizetti's talent and skills in adapting for distinct audiences.

Professor Jolanta Skorek-Münch (University of Rzeszów) in her talk *Dark Ways of Madness* (*Ciemne drogi szaleństwa*) examined the phenomenon of madness in philosophical, historical and literary contexts. She started with examples of madness from ancient art, especially theatre. Then Skorek-Münch examined the comic aspect in cases of lunacy in opera since Cavalli. In her opinion, insanity as a serious motif became popular in the romantic period and was used in stories concerning either tragic love or the rebellion of a heroic character. She pointed out that Donizetti operas encompass both types of madness - those with a romantic tragic end (*Anna Bolena* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*) and those with a happy end (*I pazzi per progetto, Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo, Linda di Chamounix*) - and that most examples of stage madness affected women.

Dr. Stefan Münch (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin) spoke on the topic of *Donizetti's Elizabethan trilogy* (*Trylogia elżbietańska Gaetana Donizettiego*). He proposed to call the following operas a trilogy: *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth, Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux*, although he admitted that they are not a result of a deliberate artistic project. Created in the period 1829-1837 for the Teatro San Carlo, Naples, and under the usual pressure of time, according to Münch they are very diverse in terms of inspiration, main characters and historical accuracy. He observed that the libretto of *Elisabetta al castello* di *Kenilworth* is based on Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth*, as was an earlier 1823 opera by Auber, and was a reflection of the huge popularity of English stories both in Italy and France at the time. The most obvious display of this phenomenon he considered to be the overture to *Roberto Devereux* with its quotation of the English National Anthem.

Monika Kolenda, a PhD candidate at the University of Warsaw) delivered her paper *On the Other Side of the Mirror: "Anna Bolena" by Gaetano Donizetti (Milan, 1830) and "Simone Boccanegra" by Giuseppe Verdi (Venice, 1857)* (*Po drugiej stronie lustra: „Anna Bolena" Gaetano Donizettiego (Mediolan, 1830) i „Simone Boccanegra" Giuseppe Verdiego (Wenecja,1857)*). She compared dramatic and historical aspects of the tragic love stories in Donizetti's and Verdi's masterpieces. Kolenda investigated the analogies between the development of two relationships taking into consideration their political consequences. She spoke about the literary and artistic inspirations behind the operas, in Verdi's case the letters of Petrarch and paintings by Francesco Hayez.

Professor Małgorzata Kubala (The Fryderyk Chopin University of Music) discussed the formation of bel canto style using examples from early operas of Donizetti in her talk *The Process of Defining the Belcanto Style on the Basis of Selected Arias from Donizetti's Unknown Operas* (*Proces definiowania stylu belcanto na podstawie wybranych arii z nieznanych oper Donizettiego*). In her very insightful talk, she showed how in early operas the composer experimented both with forms and genres. Through works like *Enrico di Borgogna, La zingara* and *Emilia di Liverpool* Donizetti developed his distinctive style. Her detailed examination of these operas helped a better understanding of the evolution of the composer's developing style - highly expressive yet at same time very demanding for singers and orchestra.

The whole Conference was, in my opinion, a great success and its proceedings will be published in a special issue of *Studia Librettologiczne i Operologiczne* (*Libretto and Opera Studies*) published by the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music in Warsaw with the Honorary Patronage of The Donizetti Society. Let us hope this is just the beginning of continuing Donizetti studies in Poland.



GIOACCHINO ROSSINI.



# Una imprevedibile fonte dell'*Equivoco stravagante*

di Eduardo Rescigno

"Stravagante", qualcosa o qualcuno che si discosta dalla normalità, estraneo alle consuetudini, scrive il *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*. E il libretto dell'opera rossiniana è *stravagante* non soltanto per l'*Equivoco* cui allude il titolo (per allontanare un pretendente ricco ma sciocco si inventa una lettera per dimostrare che la ragazza è un maschio evirato), ma perché in sostanza si tratta di un coacervo di barbarismi, allusioni, doppi sensi quasi sempre osceni, solecismi, perifrasi e citazioni strampalate che, se sono presenti con misura in tutti i libretti delle opere buffe di Rossini, qui nel testo di Gaetano Gasbarri lo sono in quantità abnorme. Si va dalla mitologia alla filosofia, dalla letteratura alla geografia, dalla storia alla sociologia, e non c'è quasi campo dello scibile in cui la giovane Ernestina, "che affetta letteratura", quel "villano nobilitato" di suo padre Gamberotto, il pretendente Buralicchio "giovane ricco e sciocco", e persino i camerieri Rosalia e Frontino contagiati dalla improbabilità dei padroni, non riesca a dire qualche bestialità. Si salva, ma solo in parte, il "giovane povero" Ermanno che si finge filosofo per avvicinarsi alla ragazza e conquistarla sconfiggendo i denari di Buralicchio.

La quale Ernestina, avendo come modello e "maestra di filosofia" l'Affrodisia delle *Virtuose ridicole* di Goldoni, si rende conto che lo studio della filosofia è più importante dell'amore, e si convince che l'amore sarebbe molto meglio eliminarlo, così come ha fatto a Sparta "il gran Licurgo di Strasburgo, / che nacque in Brandeburgo, o Pietroburgo" (I, x). Ma c'è un problema: quando si accorge che il sangue nelle vene "serpeggia celere", per calmarsi chiede aiuto a qualcuno che le legga "Ariosto, il Lasca, il Rosa, ed altri libri / morali, che compongono / la biblioteca mia" (I, v): davvero strani questi "libri morali", poiché si tratta del bernesco e boccaccesco Anton Francesco Grazzini detto il Lasca, autore delle *Cene* sboccate anzi che no; di Lodovico Ariosto, che Salvator Rosa in una delle sue satire definisce "sprone d'impudicizia"; in quanto al medesimo Salvator Rosa, è l'autore della satira dedicata a *La musica*, dove lamenta la triste condizione di quest'arte caduta "in man de' buoi", cioè i castrati: prefigurazione dello stravagante equivoco in cui sta per cadere Buralicchio.

La rinuncia all'amore è solo una decisione passeggera, un breve momento. Malgrado tutto, Ernestina è tanto conscia del proprio fascino che "se Giove mi vedesse quando vado in carrozza in vago arnese, trasformeriasi in un cavallo inglese". Ed ecco la mitologia: Ernestina la padroneggia da maestra, e noi dobbiamo inchinarci alla sua sapienza. Quando Buralicchio viene a sapere che lei è un maschio evirato e cerca di star lontano dal "focoso mercurio" di lei, Ernestina lo insulta chiamandolo "pastor d'Anfriso", e noi tutti siamo autorizzati a non capire. Ma Ernestina sa quello che dice – non per niente "affetta

letteratura", e possiamo pensare che la mitologia ne sia una branca. Infatti "pastor d'Anfriso" è un appellativo di Apollo che allude ai suoi amori omosessuali per Admeto, che hanno avuto luogo presso le rive del fiume Anfriso in Tessaglia. In altre parole, se Buralicchio teme l'ardore mercuriale di Ernestina, vuol dire che si comporta come un omosessuale, e sentirselo dire da un presunto evirato, via, non è insulto da poco (per gli standard di allora, naturalmente).

Liquidato il pavido Buralicchio e il suo patrimonio, resta Ermanno che, secondo il padre Gamberotto, ha le carte (carte di tutt'altro genere) in regola: "Taglia svelta, colore, occhio vivace, / forte in gambe, robusto. / Un filosofo tal le darà gusto" (I, I). E così deve andare a finire, con le annunciate nozze di Ernestina ed Ermanno. Ma non sarebbero loro se, a questo punto, non si mettessero a confronto con i grandi amori della mitologia e della letteratura, avendo a disposizione una ricchissima galleria di indimenticabili amanti: Paolo e Francesca, Romeo e Giulietta, Ero e Leandro, Piramo e Tisbe, Filemone e Bauci, Amore e Psiche, Orfeo ed Euridice, Procne e Filomela, Arianna e Teseo, e molti altri ancora. Ma loro sono stravaganti, ce ne siamo accorti, e scelgono altro; lasciano perdere la mitologia e si addentrano nella storia, quella medievale imprevedibilmente, e vanno a scegliere due amanti veri, reali, di cui possediamo le lettere: Abelardo ed Eloisa. Non ce lo saremmo mai aspettato, perché un abisso li separa. Eppure, se osserviamo con attenzione, fra le due coppie di innamorati, quella del XIX secolo e l'altra del secolo XII, un legame c'è, ed è anche molto evidente.

Cominciamo a riconoscerli, gli amanti medievali. Il filosofo francese Pierre Abélard (1079-1142), dal 1113 è maestro di teologia a Notre-Dame di Parigi, e intorno al 1115 trova il modo di farsi ospitare nella casa di Fulberto, canonico di quella cattedrale. Ha ricevuto l'incarico di occuparsi dell'educazione della nipote Eloisa, che in quel momento ha circa vent'anni o forse qualcuno in più, possiede straordinarie doti di intelligenza, ed è assetata di cultura (*per abundantiam litterarum erat suprema*). I due giovani si frequentano assiduamente e diventano amanti. Quando Eloisa scopre di essere in attesa di un figlio, si rifugia in Bretagna, dove mette al mondo Astrolabio. Intorno al 1117 Eloisa torna a Parigi dove gli amanti si sposano segretamente; ma la notizia si diffonde, Eloisa si rifugia nel monastero di Argenteuil dove si monaca, mentre lo zio Fulberto ritenendosi ingannato assolda alcuni sicari che sorprendono Abelardo nel sonno e lo evirano.

Le *Lettere di Abelardo ed Eloisa*, che i due amanti si scambiarono negli anni successivi fino alla morte di lui (1142, Eloisa muore intorno al 1163), testimoniano quell'intenso e sfortunato amore e, a distanza di sette secoli, assurgono a modello di vita per Ernestina ed Ermanno, i protagonisti dell'*Equivoco stravagante*. Dice infatti Ernestina, che si atteggia a donna letterata, "della vaga Eloisa, il di cui nome / celebre è tanto nella storia gallica... / [...] io seguirò l'esempio / sebben con passo tardo"; ed Ermanno risponde "ed io seguiterò quei d'Abelardo" (I, VII). In tal modo si crea fra i due un rapporto



che riflette quello dei due amanti medievali, con Ernestina in veste di allieva ("I dogmi vostri / m'innaffieranno in guisa tal lo spirto / che degna allor sarò d'alloro, e mirto"), pronta a baciare la mano a Ermanno assurto al rango di precettore ("Degna sarò d'un tanto precettore"). Il tutto, dato il contesto farsesco entro cui si svolge il dialogo, può essere soltanto un pretesto per mettere in luce il carattere di Ernestina, "che affetta letteratura" e per ciò stesso, essendo donna, provoca il riso – come Magdelon e Cathos, le *Précieuses ridicules* (1659) di Molière, l'Affrodisia delle *Virtuose ridicole* (1752) di Goldoni citata anche da Gasbarri, e tante altre *précieuses* che popolano teatro e letteratura.

Ma il riferimento alla storia d'amore di Eloisa e Abelardo non si ferma qui. Il librettista Gasbarri mostra di aver letto con molta attenzione almeno la prima delle lettere dei due amanti, la "Lettera consolatoria di Abelardo a un suo amico", che apre la raccolta con la funzione di dare un'ampia biografia di chi scrive. Il paragrafo 12 inizia così: "*Erat quippe in ipsa civitate Parisensi adolescentula quaedam nomine Heloisa*... Proprio nella città di Parigi viveva ora una giovane donna di nome Eloisa, nipote di un canonico chiamato Fulberto che, quanto più l'amava, tanto più amorevolmente aveva cercato di farla progredire in ogni possibile disciplina letteraria. Ella, se d'aspetto non era certo l'ultima, per ricchezza di cultura letteraria era eccelsa. Quanto più infatti questo bene, il sapere letterario, è raro nelle donne, tanto più dava pregio alla fanciulla e ne faceva la più celebre di tutto il regno. [...] Tutto infiammato d'amore per la giovane cercai un'occasione per frequentare la sua casa quotidianamente e stringere così con lei conoscenza e più facilmente ottenere il suo consenso. Perché ciò accadesse, tramite alcuni suoi amici mi detti da fare con lo zio della fanciulla perché, a qualsiasi prezzo, mi accogliesse nella sua casa [...] Egli era molto avido e sempre preoccupato che la nipote continuasse a progredire nel sapere letterario e proprio per questi due motivi ottenni facilmente il suo assenso [...] e così favorì l'amore, affidandola cioè tutta al nostro magistero affinché, ogni qualvolta ne avessi avuto tempo al ritorno da scuola, di giorno o di notte mi dedicassi ad istruirla [...]. Prima ci unì la stessa casa, poi lo stesso sentimento. Con la scusa delle lezioni ci abbandonavamo all'amore e lo studio offriva il rifugio segreto che chiedeva l'amore" (I, 12/14).

C'è tutto: la fanciulla (Ernestina) esageratamente appassionata di lettere e di cultura, lo zio orgoglioso di lei (il padre Gamberotto) che desidera la sua educazione, il giovane innamorato (Ermanno) che riesce a introdursi nella casa della ragazza tramite l'aiuto di amici (i camerieri Rosalia e Frontino)... e, seppure in tutt'altro contesto, non manca neppure il ricordo del tema dell'evirazione che Gasbarri, con equivoca stravaganza, trasferisce dal maschio alla femmina.

Difficile pensare che il librettista, citando così scopertamente la vicenda di Abelardo ed Eloisa, non abbia tenuto presente quella prima lettera di lui. In tal modo è accaduto che il più stravagante dei libretti rossiniani, quello più ricco di doppi sensi pericolosamente al limite della decenza, è strettamente legato alla più delicata, struggente e sfortunata storia d'amore medievale.

Gaetano Donizetti

## IL PARIA

*Melodramma* in two acts

Libretto by Domenico Gilardoni

Critical edition by Roger Parker and Ian Schofield

AKEBARE, *high priest and leader of the Brahmins, Neala's father* ..... Marko Mimica

NEALA, *priestess in the cult of the sun, Akebare's daughter* ..... Albina Shagimuratova

ZARETE, *Idamore's father* ..... Misha Kiria

IDAMORE, *leader of the army and Zarete's son* ..... René Barbera

EMPSAELE, *Brahmin and Akebare's confidant* ..... Thomas Atkins

ZAIDE, *priestess* ..... Kathryn Rudge

Chorus of Brahmins, Priests, Priestesses, Bayadères, Trumpeters,
Warriors, People, Guardians of the Temple, Fakirs ..... Opera Rara Chorus
Stephen Harris, *chorus director*

Britten Sinfonia
Thomas Gould, *leader*

Sir Mark Elder, *conductor*
Recorded at BBC Maida Vale Studios, London, 1-6 June 2019



# A lockdown library

**(on YouTube)**

A selection of rarities by Donizetti with far-better casts than most of those streamed in today's spaced-out world and readily available

**[beware of appalling verbal introductions and adverts]**



[In order of composition]

**La zingara** **Martina Franca 2001** — **Manuela Custer, Filippo Morace, Piero Terranova**
**(a fragment, but what a fragment, of a truly memorable production)**

**La lettera anonima** **Naples 1972** — **Rolando Panerai, BenedettaPecchioli, Pietro Bottazzo**
**(truly a Neapolitan performance - but audio only - of this early farsa)**

**Alahor in Granata** **Seville 1998** — **Simone Alaimo, Patrizia Pace, Juan Diego Florez, Vivica Genaux**
**(the momentous modern prima, ultra live, from Spain)**

**Alina regina di Golconda** **Ravenna 1987** — **Daniella Dessi, Rockwell Blake, Paolo Coni**
**(Donizetti's most Baroque opera, magic voices and a "Must See" decor)**

**Fausta** **Rome 1981** — **Raina Kabaivanska, Renato Bruson**
**(an unimpressive film of the only revival of an unforgettable opera)**

**Sancia di Castiglia** **Madrid 1992** — **Montserrat Caballé, José Sempere, Boris Martinovitch, Itxaro Mentxaka**
**(sublime singing by a real sovereign almost at the site of the action but audio only)**
**[There is also a RAI fully-staged version with Antonella Bandelli]**

**And to finish on YouTube**

## Covid fan tutte

2020

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**With**
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