RITA

ou le MARI Battu.

Opéra comique en 1 Acte.

Représenté

pour la première fois sur le Théâtre de l'Opéra Comique

le 7 Mai 1860.

Poésie

de M. Gustave Vaez

Musique Posthume

DE

G. DONIZETTI

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"L'Enfant du miracle" *Rita* and Donizetti

A posthumous daughter, a "wild oat" - may be the right term - of his fervent last decade, Donizetti's *Rita* was conceived on the Grand Boulevards somewhere between 1839 and 1841. We know no more than this, nothing now pinpoints the precise moment when pen was put to paper on her behalf. Practically all the historical sources repeat the same tales how and when *Rita* began but they are all fantasies - as improbable as the celebrated tall-story of Donizetti writing the final scene of *La Favorite* in one stint surrounded by dirty dishes on the vacated dining table of a friend. Nice to read but nonsense. No one knows when *Rita* was composed all we can be sure is that the autograph score in Naples bears the last of these dates on its frontespiece. And then factually, Donizetti's "farsetta" (as he called it) *Rita ou le mari battu* was first staged on 7 May 1860, twelve years after the composer's death, at the Théâtre Impérial de l'Opéra-Comique de Paris.

One of the the legends put about was that this was his very last composition: *"il a improvisé ce petit ouvrage dans les derniers instans lucides qui ont précédés la chute de son beau génie"* the story went, perfectly incorrectly. She could have been smuggled into the theatre in a warming-pan as far as some credulous critics were concerned.

Not really surprisingly, in view of the huge appetite for the music of Donizetti at that time, in 1860 there were discussions about *Rita's* authenticity, her miraculous posthumous appearance. How was it possible that a complete work by a popular composer could have been lost? Boxed-up and sealed, together with other unperformed music following the maestro's tragic collapse and only coming blinking into the light of day when division of his property was made for his heirs, both astonishment and speculation accompanied her arrival - much of it absurd. And as a result she did not emerge unscathed - the circumstances of her return were no more unclouded than those of her disappearance. Once a staging was decided-upon all sorts of adjustments were made, some of them radical. Even the title was subject to amendment: it was his poet, Gustave Vaëz, it would seem, who called the orphaned work *Rita;* Donizetti by all surviving evidence preferred *Deux hommes et une femme* (" *Due uomini e*

una donna") as the libretto used by the composer makes clear (on the first page of which "*Rita*" is crossed out, and there is no sign whatsoever of *"le mari battu"*).

The most persuasive legend of all insists that composer and poet met by chance in the street; the plot was agreed on and the opera written in eight days *Rita* has eight numbers - one number-a-day was far from excessive for the Bergamasc maestro - so why should it not be true? The engaging Vaëz (Jean-Nicolas-Gustave van Nieuvenhuysen 1812-1862) was one of those adept foreign poets who found a niche in Paris writing farces and vaudevilles. Literary chameleons all, this young Belgian had an idiomatic turn of phrase others could envy and could write quickly enough to keep in step with the maestro, no uncommon feat. He had helped to translate *Lucia di Lammermoor* into French in 1839; collaborated with *La Favorite* in 1840; and later made the French version of *Don Pasquale* (not staged until 1864). Eager to assist, it has always been supposed that it was Vaëz who suggested the plot of *Rita*. Again, why should it not be true? But its troubled-knot - two men desperate to lose a wife - was familar stuff on the Paris stage as well as omnipresent in Naples where a *commedia dell'arte* legacy of hilarious marital acrimony flourished in the backstreet theatres, for this reason a doubt remains as to the real origins of *Rita* - the *exact literary source* of the tale of the open-palmed shrew, untamed and akimbo between two unwilling spouses has never been properly established. In the final analysis it is very probable that the real source of the plot is nothing other than the famous play by the Danish-Norvegian author Ludwig Holberg (1684-1754) 'Jeppe on the mountain' (perhaps also the real source for the *Sly* of Wolf-Ferrari) with the lazy Jeppe (not Peppe) the battered husband of an arm-swinging innkeeper-wife Nille.

But as a result of its impromptu conception, the spoken dialogue of the tiny opéra comique (not the sung text which remains more-or-less immutable) went through three stages - of which the first was more immediate, spontaneous and brutal, reflecting the scribbled eight-day genesis and of which only a few shreds - scarcely more than a hint - remains; a second of which there survives a fair-copy in a scribal hand found recently at Bergamo (with *Rita* crossed-out by the composer); and a third - a printed libretto used for the Parisian première in 1860, more concise, comparatively sophisticated and boldly retouched.

Accordingly, most of the question marks associated with this opera

result from its belated appearance - from the first-performed version of *Rita* - because it was this last text that was used in 1860 and not quite identical with that we know Donizetti had under his hand. It would seem that a pacifying spirit had somehow imposed a measure of sweetness-and-light upon this sparkling score that was not there in the first place: *Rita* - as we have come to know - irrespective of a series of numbers that glitter engagingly was originally a bitter little drama, sarcastic, verbally abrasive and thoroughly misogynist. We have to reflect upon Donizetti's title of choice: "Due uomini e una donna", "two men and a woman" not, indeed "two husbands and a wife". In the 1860 edition of *Rita*, Peppe cries joyfully (after losing Rita in a game of *morra* followed by pulling straws): *"plus de femme!!!"* in the (apparently un-expurgated) printed full-score he exclaims *"Plus de querelles! plus de soufflets!! plus de femmes!!!"* which is not the same thing at all.

A semi-posthumous daughter then ? Is this the right description? But why not, one of her progenitors was still alive. The two scores published in Paris by Henry Lemoine offer more than one clue to these changes: the beautifully engraved orchestral full-score which was the first to appear in the wake of the première contains vestiges of a text that was under the eyes of the composer, while the vocal score - for *piano et chant* - of slightly later - contains a more suave version. This last is described as*"arrangée par A.Bazille"* on its title page and here it would seem we might have one of the culprits, particularly to the subtle re-moulding of the mise-en-scène. Auguste-Ernest Bazille (1828-1891) co-existed on the fringes of comedy in the Second Empire, he himself appears fleetingly as the co-author with like-minded colleagues: François-August Gevaert, Antoine Clapisson, Eugène Gautier, Emile Jonas. Sylvain Mangeant and Ferdinand Poise as the joint authors of a modish *operette en un acte* called *La Poularde de Caux* given at the Palais-Royal on 17 May 1861 with a text by Adolphe de Leuven and Prilleux. *Someone*, arguably, appointed Bazille - a musically adept person, otherwise unengaged - not simply to make a piano reduction but to help to mould *Rita* to the moeurs of the day - her inn now transferred from Piedmont to near Naples, far more"politically correct"at the time of Napoleon III.

The myths do not help. The printed libretto for the première leads off : *"Cet ouvrage fut écrit par le célèbre maestro dans la dernière année de sa vie. Il se promenait un soir sur le boulevard des Italiens, il était triste; depuis huit jours il n'avait rien à mettre en musique, et composer était un*

véritable besoin pour Donizetti. Rencontrant M.Gustave Vaëz, son ami, son collaborateur pour La Favorite*: "Sauvez-moi la vie, lui dit-il, en me donnant tout de suite le moindre petit acte, pour que je puisse travailler". Un sujet bouffe fut convenu, et Donizetti se hâta de rentrer avec les paroles du premier air, dont la musique se trouvait faite le lendemain quand M.Gustave Vaëz apporta les paroles du second morceau. La besogne continua ainsi, et, au bout d'une semaine, tout fut terminé" livret, chant et orchestration".* A sweet story, worthy of the sentimentally-adjusted tale that would be mounted that evening, alas, poor Donizetti had been paralysed and almost mute for two terrible years before his death. In fact the date of *Rita*, sometime around 1839-40, pre-supposes some interesting reflections: if the *Lucie de Lammermoor* of Donizetti and Vaëz represents *"a woman bereft of any power in the face of a gang of brutes"* as we have recently read, then their *Rita* of the same date is her revenge, the calculating embattled aubergiste is the other side of the coin, as uncomfortable and challenging a proposition as any in the disconcerting annals of the composer.

The performed version has real merits, has an improved flow, makes its points swiftly and surely. The Lemoine full score is superb, musically impeccable, that reference to Donizetti's holograph has been made is confirmed for the transparent reason that - perfectly unusually - it contains the role of Peppe in alternative versions - Peppe as a *ténor* and Peppe as a *baryton* - each in the appropriate clef, one printed above the other as in the composer's autograph and thus endorsing Donizetti's "two men" in the simplest way possible - neither Peppe nor Gasparo need be diferenciated by timbre, *both* could be baritones - two brothers-in-arms to outface the same woman.

The comedy indeed is wholly in the collusion/confrontation of these two men with at its heart the game of *morra* by means of which each hopes to lose *Rita*. Proposed by Peppe, and highly popular in Italy, the game asks that a number is shouted out in turn - a number not more than ten - at the same time both men putting out a right hand with as many fingers extended as chance dictates; if the total number of fingers equals the number called-out then he who calls the number is the winner. A provocative game, fast and furious and wonderfully exposed to cheating. The comedy is also in their manly confidences: Peppe explains his reddened cheek; Gasparo is outraged: *"Une femme battre son..."* (appalled) *"Mais, c'est impardonnable, ça! Dans un bon ménage, bien tendre, bien uni, c'est le*

mari qui bat sa femme." Peppe: *"Le mari?"*

The première in 1860 had its ups and downs as regards distribution with Constance-Caroline Faure-Lefebvre (1828-1905) as Rita - high-priestess of opéra bouffe and wife of the Opéra star Jean-Baptiste Faure, with the tenor Victor Warot as Peppe, and a certain Barielle as Gasparo (presumably the husband of the dancer Pauline Barielle) a cast fully demonstrative of two helpless men face-to-face with an indomitable example of the monstrous regiment of *primedonne*. The structure of *Rita*, however, in contrast to the aggression of the plot, is perfectly neat and tidy, almost eighteenth-century in its precision. Each protagonist has a solo; each sings two duos and the score is capped by two trios. These solos present a deliberately wry picture of the protagonist: Rita's aria shows her as happy and content; Gasparo's as urbane (smug in his self-possession); and Peppe's as liberated, optimistic and as free as the air. Only their exchanges reveal the true state of affairs in a sequence - if not actually Metastasian - one whose imprint the latter would have recognised as his own. He might also have recognised the wonderful expansiveness of the orchestral variety, the small scale of *Rita* does not extend to its component pieces: the three duos are major constructions in miniature, the word-setting fleet and accomplished, the allusive fragments of melody, the elaborate compositional resource and its ample deployment indicate a maestro of great experience and range. One can sense that this diminutive opéra comique was hemmed-in by very large scores - by *Les Martyrs*, by *Le Duc d'Albe*, by *La Favorite* and *Adelia* - as if a companionable team of whales had been offering a helpful nudge to a minnow swimming at their side.

But then, we come to the changes. Who was the most likely author? Who but Vaëz himself. Maybe the text *was* written in eight days as legend proposes, but in this case he took advantage of the delayed début to rewrite it. Authenticity is always relative, the *music* of *Rita* has never been in doubt but the text of this opera has always remained subject to manipulation.

Spoken dialogue was never sacrosanct, if an opéra comique was successful enough to be sent travelling abroad, or was restaged at the Opéra, the spoken text would be transformed into recitative and in any case all dialogue was invariably tailored to specific performance. Donizetti took a relaxed view of versification, comic or tragic, most of his comedies opt for a punch-line rather than for the kind of rhetoric that causes a joke

to fall flat. The texts for the solos, duos, trios of *Rita* remain more-or- less as they were originally conceived in the "eight-day" genesis - that is certain - but *someone* - and Vaëz only can have been responsible - took a bold pen to the spoken dialogue of "Due uomini e una donna" in 1860: monologues were dramatically pruned - they became sharper and taughter while the conversational to-and-fro became almost laconic, *dead-pan*, its humour more pointed. The crude dialogue of Donizetti's manuscript libretto was discarded. The text shows signs of a literary polishing. No one can be sure that the composer did not initiate this process himself - nothing is detrimental or unworthy, very much the reverse, but as a result *Rita* took a unexpected step into the Second Empire on her Impérial début: she is now more circumspect; her eyes are a little less focussed upon parsimony and husband-beating, a covert *douceur* is the order of the day. She is still a bitch, but if she begins to value poor Peppe it is because she realises she possesses something of worth.

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Did Vaëz add "*le mari battu*" to the title? It must have been added at his instigation. After all, Rita the anti-heroine, had grown-up as far as he was concerned. Such a monster was rare in the Donizetti canon, he cherished a more sympathetic model: the flighty Adina melts before the endearing frailty of Nemorino; "*Sofronia*" (ie Norina) though husband-slapping is also on her agenda, only *pretends* to terrorise Don Pasquale and is a "nice girl" really; even Donna Lucrezia Borgia, Antonina (*Belisario*) and Maria de Rudenz have their tender moments when tested to the limits. Donizetti unmistakably warmed to their plight. But not so Rita. Her opening aria is capped by a refrain worthy of the Duchess in 'Alice in Wonderland'

Mon mari, qu'on dit bête,
L'est un peu, j'en fais cas;
Il n'agit qu'à ma tête,
S'il dit non, je le bats,
Je le bats, je le bats.

(a kind of malignant chant which should have brought the aria to a halt in the original libretto but has been given a scribbled codicil, written in a different hand, endowing it with a more pacific envoi

Pour maris, les niais,

Croyez-moi, sont parfaits.
Suivez bien mes recettes,
Épouser un niais.

- clearly an afterthought which Donizetti has set as a reprise of the main section so that even though still combative this *entrata* reveals that *some* muzzling of Rita had begun well before 1860). The following duet with Peppe is scarcely more reassuring

Va! grand inutile.
Bélitre, vaurien,
Vaurien, vaurien, vaurien, vaurien...
Tu n'est bon à rien,
A rien. à rien, à rien, à rien...
Combien je regrette
Mon autre mari (at which point she slaps Peppe)

Peppe (holding his cheek)

oh! oh! la la

which she mimics

oh! oh! la la
Va grand inutile

No retouching can ever make Rita aimiable. Peppe's misogynistic response in the wake of the slapping may well reflect some of Donizetti's own bitterness in these years - pessimistic, alone following the death of his wife in 1837 and never reconciled to despair and solitude: Peppe's monologue (severely edited in 1860) is a real cri-de-cœur

"Au diable! celui qui a imaginé de faire durer le mariage éternellement..pour que ça ressemblât complètement à l'enfer...non il n'y a que l'homme pour avoir de ces idées là...il est le seul dans toute la création - je dois avoir une joue plus rouge que l'autre!" (slapping his face on the other side)

The nastiness of the argument (and both Rita and Gasparo are inescapably deplorable) may well explain Donizetti's failure to stage *Rita*. The humour, the brilliant music, the accomplishment, the gaiety and flair with which he packages his irreconcilable trio never completely pastes-over a yawning gap of credibility. Never conceals the lack of humanity upon which he pinned his faith. Especially the creaking conclusion with nothing resolved. Vaëz must certainly have been conscious of this fact, hence the brave re-editing - only a *soupçon* of sentimentality could divert attention from a lacuna of unbridgeable dimensions.

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