DONIZETTI FOREVER

Charles Jernigan

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We ended our Italian sojourn in Bergamo, the lovely small city about 45 miles northeast of Milan. The old city (Città Alta) sits on a hill; it is full of narrow, cobblestone streets and medieval buildings--in the center is the Piazza Vecchia, the Cathedral and the Colleoni Chapel, a marble wonder, the tomb of Renaissance Soldier of Fortune Bartolomeo Colleoni. Below Città Alta, on the Lombard plain lies lower Bergamo, the new(er) city spread out around the bristling battlements of Bergamo Alta. At the center of the new town is the Teatro Donizetti, the town's major opera house. Donizetti was born here, in a "dark, dank basement room" to poor parents in 1797; he grew up in Bergamo and had his first music lessons at the Charitable School funded by the city and run by his mentor Simone Mayr, himself a major opera composer of the time. And some 51 years later, Donizetti died here, laid waste by the last stages of syphilis. His tomb is in the Cathedral just behind the Piazza Vecchia. In the lower town, a huge marble monument shows him listening to his Muse, who is playing a harp. Donizetti is everywhere in Bergamo these days, and when we went up to the Old City one night for an opera, excerpts of his music were playing throughout the town on loudspeakers. These days Donizetti's popularity and renown are greater than ever and Bergamo is truly Donizetti's town.

I lived there for almost a year in the late 1970's, and my children had some of their earliest experiences there. We came to love the city, with its spectacular views of the Alpine foothills to the north, and the food--casoncelli, the local meat-stuffed pasta, polenta and sausage, porcini mushrooms, and Valcalepio, the local red wine. Coming back here is always a revival of memory for me, and a great risotto, red from beets and redolent of gorgonzola cheese brings back those memories as surely as Proust's madeleine cookies. When I lived here, I walked past the theater in the old town almost every day without knowing it was there. This was the Teatro Sociale, which was the center of operatic activity when Donizetti was young (it was built in 1805), but when I lived there it was closed up. Today it has been lovingly restored to all its splendor. In the ceiling you can see the ancient timbers which still hold the roof in place. Once again its boards resound to Donizetti's melodies. Next year the main opera house in the lower town will undergo a restoration and all the operas will be in the Teatro Sociale: opera is alive and well in the city of Donizetti's birth. In November each year, the Donizetti Foundation caps its scholarly work with a Festival, usually including some of the composer's lesser known works.

This year's titles included one comic work, *Olivo e Pasquale*, in the Teatro Sociale, and a serious melodrama, *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* in the Teatro Donizetti in the lower town. I had never seen either before. Basically, Donizetti's career can be divided into three parts after his student work: the operas of the 1820's when Rossini dominated his compositional style; the Italian works of the 1830's, when his melodic style flowered; and his international career of the 1840's, with operas composed for Paris and Vienna.

OLIVO E PASQUALE

Donizetti: ***Olivo e Pasquale***
Opera buffa by Jacopo Ferretti
Conductor: Federico Maria Sardelli
Director: operAlchemica

Isabella: Laura Giordano
Mathilde: Silvia Beltrami
Olivo: Bruno Taddia
Pasquale: Filippo Morace
Camillo: Pietro Adaini
Le Bross: Matteo Macchioni
Columella: Edoardo Milletti
Diego: Giovanni Romeo

Olivo e Pasquale dates from 1827, thus Donizetti's "early" period. It was written for Rome to a libretto by Jacopo Ferretti (author of Rossini's *Cenerentola* libretto), but a few months later, Donizetti adapted it for performance in Naples, and that was the version performed in Bergamo this year. A comic opera in Naples meant that the *buffo* role would be sung in Neapolitan, and often that spoken dialogue instead of recitative would be used between the musical numbers. In Rome, the romantic male lead, Camillo, was sung by a mezzo-soprano *in travesti*, but Naples found that an old-fashioned tradition, so Donizetti adapted the role for a tenor and gave him a showy new aria. Otherwise, he cut several numbers from the Rome score.



The story is based on a play by Antonio Sografi, which itself is ultimately based on the ancient Roman comedy *The Brothers*, by Terence. Olivo and Pasquale are brothers who are in business together in Lisbon. Olivo is gruff, choleric, domineering, angry all the time, and basically a bear; he has, however a sweet, pretty daughter, Isabella, whom he wants to marry to a merchant from Cadiz,

Monsieur Le Bross. Pasquale (the Neapolitan-speaking *buffo* role) is as sweet and kind and gentle as his brother is acid and angry. Isabella, of course, has fallen for Camillo, a clerk who works for the brothers, and in no way wants to marry a man she has never met, chosen by her father for his business connections. Columella is an extremely vain and silly merchant who also wants Isabella. The plot concerns the way Pasquale, the servant Matilda, and ultimately Le Bross himself outwit Olivo so that Isabella and Camillo can marry. It is ripe for foolery and slapstick comedy, which is exactly what the Bergamo production gave it.



To tell the truth, I haven't had so much fun at a comic opera in years. The singers were all young (except Pasquale) and full of life and wit. Unlike most European productions these days, there was no attempt to teach a lesson about the evils of capitalism or the tragedies of terrorism or the refugee crisis. There was no lesson beyond which the ancient comedy taught--that youth will have its way and that kindness is better than ire. Instead the production was filled with slapstick and shtick (what in *commedia dell'arte*was called *lazzi*). There was even a "mirror scene," probably as old as mirrors themselves, used to great effect by Groucho and Harpo Marx in "Duck Soup" and later by Lucille Ball in one of the famous episodes of "I Love Lucy." This kind of comedy never grows old, and I found myself laughing a lot. The directors got the actors to use the athleticism of youth and perfect timing, which farce demands. And the singing was completely true to Donizetti's demands and sometimes strikingly good. Olivo and Pasquale are both bass roles, Isabella and Matilde are sopranos, and Le Bross, Columella and Camillo are all tenors. Pietro Adaini as Camillo was particularly good among the young men; his aria, "Che pensar, che far degg'io," was a knockout. But Le Bross was very good too. Laura Giordano as Isabella was a knockout too, pretty, a nice soubrette voice, and a wonderful actress. Slim bass Bruno Taddia looked like the devil as Olivo, in his red suit and curling mustache--he was the very caricature of the angry man, ready to boil over at any minute, and Filippo Morace's Neapolitan-singing Pasquale was great.

I even loved the scenery--crazy cut out designs hanging from the flies, a big boat which arrives with Le Bross on the prow, and the wild and silly costumes, both by Sara Sarzi Sartori, Daniela Bertuzzi, and Arianna Delgado: it all went along with fast-paced slapstick. The wonderful production was by a production company called operAlchemica, which consists of Ugo Giacomazzi and Luigi Di

Gangi. Donizetti's music, unknown to most opera lovers, lent itself very well to this madcap style of stage action, and in fact the production was successful *because* the action was so well keyed to the music. There are typical Donizetti melodies here and there (in his early style), but this opera is at its best when Rossinian Donizetti takes over: the long, wonderful, rhythmic finale to the first act is so Rossinian that most would ask, 'is this from *The Barber of Seville* or *Cenerentola*?' and the soprano's rondo finale to Act II is cut from the same cloth as Cenerentola's "Non più mesta."



Federico Maria Sardelli did a great job with the Orchestra dell'Accademia Teatro alla Scala and the Coro Donizetti Opera in keeping the pace whipped to a frenetic frenzy. I have had a recording of *Olivo e Pasquale* for a long time, but I had never thought much of the music until I heard it in context on the stage, supported by a great production. It just goes to show that Donizetti always knew what he was doing and that he thought like a stage director. A man who wrote over 70 operas in a little over 20 years knew his stagecraft as well as his music.

ROSMONDA D'INGHILTERRA

Donizetti: ***Rosmonda d'Inghilterra***
Melodramma serio by Felice Romani
Conductor: Sebastiano Rolli
Stage Director: Paola Rota
Sets and Lighting: Nicolas Bovey
Costumes: Massimo Cantini Parrini

Rosmonda: Jessica Pratt
Leonora: Eva Mei
Enrico: Dario Schmunck
Clifford: Nicola Ulivieri
Arturo: Raffaella Lupinacci

The other Donizetti opera at this year's Festival was equally unknown: *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* on a libretto by Felice Romani, the greatest Italian librettist of the first half of the nineteenth century. This opera, a real representative of Donizetti's second, melodic, period comes from 1834, a year before the triumph of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, perhaps Donizetti's best known work. It was premiered in

Florence, with a superb cast which included Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani and Gilbert Duprez; both would sing principle roles in the premiere of *Lucia* the following year. It tells the tale of the "Fair Rosamund," mistress of Henry II, a ruler of England in the twelfth century and husband of the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine.

The opera was a thorough flop at its premiere for several reasons, none of them having to do with the quality of the music. The story revolves around the triangle love affair of Enrico (Henry), Rosamunda and Leonora (Eleanor of Aquitaine), and ends with Leonora stabbing Rosamunda to death. The audience did not like an ending when one woman kills another; the only other Donizetti opera where this happens is *Maria de Rudenz* (which started off my November trip), and this murder happens onstage. Then there was the sudden ending where Leonora, her deed completed, declares "I still rule." No big finale, no final aria to send the audience off. Donizetti started working on a revision of the opera for Naples, and he composed a final aria for Leonora to end things musically with a show-stopper, and he made a number of other changes, but the revision was never performed. *Rosmonda* dropped from the scene and was not heard after the mid-nineteenth century until Opera Rara recorded it with the young Renee Fleming. Oddly, Donizetti did not raid the score for future operas, as he often did, but Rosmonda's entrance aria, "Perchè non ho del vento" ('Why do I not have winds to sail away') enjoyed a future life because Tacchinardi-Persiani liked the aria better than "Regnava nel silenzio," which Donizetti had written for her in *Lucia*, so she started substituting it a year after the premiere of that opera. When Donizetti refashioned the score to fit it to a French text for the Paris premiere, he used the *Rosmonda* aria instead of the original *Lucia* one. Several singers, including Joan Sutherland, have recorded it as a curiosity.



The story of *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* is more legend than history. She has given her heart and virtue to Enrico, believing him to be a young, unmarried man named Edegardo (shades of Gilda and the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*). Leonora, however, has learned of the King's mistress, who is being housed in a tower at Woodstock, from Arturo (a mezzo *travesti* role), a young page who owes his

position to Leonora, but who has fallen for Rosmonda. Clifford, the King's mentor, has also heard about the King's mistress, and when he goes to upbraid her, he is shocked to discover that the mistress is his own daughter. Rosmonda is equally shocked to discover that her lover is the King. Almost all of the rest of the opera is a test of wills between the King, who wants to divorce his wife, Leonora, who is a very strong woman, and Rosmonda, who is torn between love and the knowledge that she must give him up. In the end, a plan of Leonora's to send Rosmonda away fails, and the Queen stabs and kills her. At that point, the opera ends, without a grand finale or final aria, and Leonora declares that she still rules.



Donizetti was developing his tragic formula of a sympathetic woman (Rosmonda, Lucia) whose fate is determined by others who hold the power (Enrico II/Enrico, Leonora/Edgardo). In both operas it is the source for some remarkably beautiful music for anyone who loves endless melody. Except for the Act I finale--one of those grand Donizetti ensembles which begin slowly and end rushing towards fury and completion (like the sextet from *Lucia*)--this opera is a series of arias and duets, each one proceeding from slow cantabile to fast or jaunty cabaletta. Particularly noteworthy are the cabaletta of the King "Potessi vivere," Rosmonda's cabaletta, "Senza pace e senza speme," her aforementioned aria "Perchè non ho del vento" with its cabaletta "Torna, o torna, caro oggetto," the fiery duet between the King and Leonora, and Rosmonda's final aria and duet with Leonora. The aria "Perchè non ho del vento" also interweaves the echoing voice of Arturo (mezzo) from offstage in an especially lovely and romantic page. As always in bel canto opera, much is expected of the performers to bring the melodies to life and invest them with a psychology which will characterize them and express their emotions. For the most part, this year's Festival production had great singers who were able to do that.



In the title role we had Jessica Pratt, one of the reigning divas of bel canto, with a voice that recalls Joan Sutherland. She is particularly wonderful with her piano singing, but she can punch out the high notes too--several high E's and F's above high C, I think. The audience went wild. She is not a natural actress on stage, but she can act with her voice, bring nuance to the role. The veteran Italian singer Eva Mei was a passionate and fiery Leonora, much as the historical Eleanor must have been. At the second performance we saw (on Nov. 27), it was announced that she had injured herself and would be singing from the wings while a mime acted her role. She had recovered sufficiently by the second act to fully perform the role, however, and, if anything, her voice was better than it had been at the first performance (Nov. 25). These two singers of the first rank were partnered by Nicola Ulivieri (bass) as Clifford, and he too was very fine in the several duets he sings. In the secondary role of Arturo, Raffaella Lupinacci made a real impression; she gets her own "aria di sorbetto" in Act II, and she made it seem like a major piece. The weak link among the singers was the tenor (Enrico II) Dario Schmunck. He certainly did not look much like a warrior-king (as Henry II was), and his singing was variable. Sometimes he was fine, sometimes he was off; in both performances we saw his voice broke at one point.

The production was adequate and not objectionable, which is often a compliment these days. A bare minimalist set with two black walls with doors were moved back and forth across the stage by the cast. Large light bars onstage illumined the proceedings with moody lighting. Mostly, the actual direction was static (by Paola Rota) and not very interesting. When the opera caught fire, it was because of the singing, not the production. Sets and lighting were by Nicolas Bovey. Costumes by Massimo Cantini Parrini ranged from vaguely medieval to 1920's evening gowns. In Act I, the chorus seemed to enter with rifles; they turned out to be umbrellas when raised. What was that about?? At least it could be said that the production did not get in the way or distract from the performances of the singers.



Sebastiano Rolli led a highly committed Orchestra Donizetti Opera in a vigorous performance which did not treat the music as if it were second rate. The chorus did a fine job too. There are three stand-alone choruses in this opera, and the last one, "Ecco gli antichi platini," is very beautiful and garnered sustained applause.

One final and much appreciated innovation was the use of English surtitles (along with Italian ones) for both of these operas. It helped the sold out, international audiences understand what was going on in these little known works.

Donizetti wrote over 70 operas. Maybe five or six figure normally in opera house repertories today--probably fewer in America. It is absurd to think that so few are worthy of production. Another *Lucia*? Another *Elixir of Love?* Ho-hum. There are many treasures to be found in the other 65-odd operas. It is too bad that timorous administrators keep feeding the public the same-old, same-old. No wonder that audiences are shrinking.