DONIZETTI AND THE VICTORIAN MUSICAL MACHINE

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'Mechanical Music'! you cry. Hands raised in horror - so used are we nowadays to dehumanised computerised sounds battering our ears from all angles that we long for the return of that legendary 'Golden Age' of the last century when all operas were a success and all opera singers were 'Stars'. But to the music lover of that bygone era the 'Golden Age' was their present day and operatic successes were to be talked about, enjoyed, and recreated in the salon or front parlour in much the same way as today's top 20 tunes. For those enthusiasts with the inclination favourite operatic tunes were preserved, arranged and 'varied' by pianistic giants of the calibre of Thalberg, Liszt and Sidney Smith and thus achieved wider circulation than the original scores.

However, not everyone had the skill or stamina to perform these difficult, but rewarding pieces, and in that industrial and mechanically inclined age the machine which could produce music to demand came into its own - But that is the end of the story.

Even before Henry VIII and his spinet of yellow varnished wood with its music "That goeth with a whele without playinge uppon" the ingenuity of mankind had been occupied with ways of producing musical sounds by mechanical means. But it was not until the discovery of the tuned metal comb in the early 18th century that the musical box was able to achieve its true stature. Starting at first with 'Gentleman's Toys', that is watches - fobs and snuff boxes, which played one or two short airs. Sometimes a song or a snatch from a popular opera. The Swiss and French watch makers developed in the early 19th century a musical box which had no other purpose than to provide music. Consequently the repertoire of the clockmaker, with his few popular airs, had of necessity to be expanded to include not only classical airs and operatic melodies but also the popular tunes of the day and sacred melodies. So it is not surprising to find a box whose programme includes such undying favourites as 'Shall I be an Angel Daddy' or 'Break the news to Mother' rubbing proletarian shoulders with

'Casta Diva' and the Overture to La fille du régiment. As time passed, however, musical box programmes became less bizarre and we may find boxes which play programmes of hymns, oratorio arias, overtures and even a complete selection from an opera, Balfe (Bohemian Girl) and Flotow (Martha) particularly. Many a familiar piece may be heard either shorn of repeats or with extra flourishes to fit the tune onto one revolution of the cylinder.

It is interesting to note that this golden age of mechanical music coincided with that of the operatic stage. Was one dependent upon the other? Whatever the cause, the proliferation of melodies came heaven sent to the music box maker, always in need of new music to fill the ever increasing demand for his boxes. Operas and Ballets, with their shorter melodic themes were suitable plunder for the musical box and Lucia di Lammermoor (1835) and La fille du régiment (1840) were full of arias ideally suited for this purpose.

It comes as no surprise to find that after 'La donna è mobile' one of the most popular operatic airs should be from Lucrezia Borgia (1833), indeed this most used of Donizetti's melodies, almost rivalling Rossini's 'Di tanti palpiti' (Tancredi - 1813) in popularity, is the brindisi 'Il segreto' and it is this stirring tune, so well suited to the bright ringing tones of the musical box, which turns up repeatedly on boxes right up to the end of the century. Particularly those made by the firm of Nicole Frères.

Many Swiss and French manufacturers had a fondness for 'revolutionary' airs - and La fille provided both 'Salut à la France' and 'Chacun le sait' (Ciascun lo dice) - a Paillard box of mine plays the 'Salute' and the 'Chanson Politique' from Lecoq's La fille de Madame Angot.

Undoubtedly there was no more popular tune in the last century than 'Home Sweet Home' from Benedict's Clari, the Maid of Milan (1823). This tune, whether taken from a Sicilian folk tune, as reputed, or not, was certainly in Donizetti's mind when he wrote 'Cielo a miei lunghi spasimi' for the finale of Anna Bolena (1830) when the demented Queen prays for release from her suffering. This tune was to be

found in more musical boxes of all types, and over a longer period than any other. A catalogue of 1887 shows no less than twentyone different boxes which played 'Home Sweet Home' including a Nicole Frères 'Extra grand Musical Box' which played Thalberg's variations upon the tune, in two revolutions of the cylinder.

Donizetti's own fob-seal containing a miniature musical box was once in the museum of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. But what tune it played we do not know - and cannot, as this priceless object is now lost.

If we are to believe all travellers' tales, in mid 19th century Naples the streets were crowded with itinerent organ grinders and others playing their instruments to the detriment of peace of mind and public order. The street organ had developed over a much longer period of time, having in its ancestry the mediaeval portative organ and the Hurdy Gurdy. But being more directly derived from the full scale mechanical organs - such as that at Salzburg, with its motive power supplied by water. In the 18th century many churches in England were equipped with small barrel organs to play hymn tunes in the absence of skilled musicians, or perhaps as dictated by fashion. (See Thomas Hardy's 'Under the Greenwood Tree'). And many wealthy houses had organs to play dance music - some manufactured by the astute Clementi.

However, it is to the assiduity of the Neapolitan Organ Grinder that we owe the popularity in their time of many operatic favourties by the giants of the romantic movement, Rossini - Bellini - Meyerbeer and Verdi. Donizetti most certainly was familiar with these fellows who had the knack of pirating any new operatic melody and playing it in the streets within an incredibly short time of the premier. This practice was a source of irritation to composers who were unable to profit from such performances. But nevertheless some benefit must have been had, as many tunes must have been heard more frequently in the street than in the Opera House. The classic example is Rossini's 'Di tanti palpiti' from Tancredi, whose adoption by the organists is reputed to have confirmed that opera's success.

In the 18th century the mechanical organ had achieved some measure of respectability, notable composers such as Haydn, J.C. Bach, Handel and the two Mozarts provided tunes for water organs and musical clocks. Most famous however was Beethoven who wrote his Battle Symphony for the biggest of all known mechanical organs, the Panharmonikon of Maelzel, which survived until around 1940. Unlike Mozart and Haydn, who were specially commissioned, the great composers of the mid 1800's had little say in the matter. One would suppose that Donizetti and Rossini might object to their 'hit' tunes being pirated by neapolitan street organists - not to speak of the reputedly horrible noise of this 'Hurdy Gurdy' with its ingenuous and sometimes barely recognisable renditions. Indeed it was suggested that Verdi held back 'La donna è mobile' until the first performance of Rigoletto in order to ensure exclusive use of the music, thus foiling the musical pirates, whose habit it was to have the music copied in shorthand during rehearsals.

In the late 19th century many of these street musicians emigrated to England, to London in particular, bringing with them their organetti and causing a considerable nuisance, giving rise to many newspaper cartoons, notably of the 'Here's a Sixpence - Go play in the next street' variety. 'Organ grinder' became such a derogatory expression that it is not surprising to find caricatures of Verdi and Wagner in this occupation - a comment on the conservative musical taste of their times. In England legislation dubbed street organs and their successors as public nuisances and severely limited their activities. With the recall to Italy, around 1930, of many Italian musicians the street organ declined to a mere curiosity. Their heyday was in the previous century - they had outstayed their welcome. Their music however, preserved and restored is again there for those who seek it. Curiously, in a Buckinghamshire field this summer I heard airs from Lucia and Lucrezia Borgia together with excerpts from Bellini and Rossini played on an 1850's Imhof street organ later modified for home use.

At the end of the century mechanical music moved indoors. First invented in France round about 1850

was a device which stood upon the keyboard of the piano, and by passing a strip of perforated cardboard through it, small hammers depressed the piano's keys. Thus was born the Pianola, a machine operated pneumatically whose 'fingers' when the whole thing was pushed up to the keyboard, would play whatever music was 'programmed' on the paper roll. As an added attraction for the musically inept a certain Herr Welte devised a system of 'recording' great pianists' performances on this paper roll. Too late for the composers of the mid-century, but the performances of Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Saint-Saëns can still be heard playing their own music. The next step was to put the mechanism into the piano - where it remains to enable us to recreate all those difficult pieces by Thalberg, Liszt and Smith which gave worldwide popularity to the melodies of, especially, Donizetti. So that many people who still have never been near an Opera House can whistle or hum the strains of 'Chi mi frena' or 'O luce di quest' anima'.

A rough perusal of old catalogues shows the popularity of Donizetti's operatic melodies, many, of later date, in complicated variation form. The most frequent of these, a kind of 1850's Top Pops were, as mentioned before, the Lucrezia 'Brindisi', Com'è bello' and 'Di pescastor': followed by the sextet from Lucia and various extracts from the mad scene. From La fille du régiment 'Salut à la France', 'Ciascun lo dice' and the Rataplan Chorus. From Don Pasquale principally 'Com'è gentile' although an item described as 'Rondeau' exists. Two curiosities are the overture to Il Belisario, almost unrecognisable on a Lecoutre music box of 1836, and Il crociato the second song of Nuits d'été à Pausilippe.



'The Italian box of music' was how the great English novelist Charles Dickens described the barrel-organ. It was not an instrument he particularly liked as its ceaseless strains interfered with his writing. He could not bear the least sound whilst studying or writing and waged a constant war against church bells and street musicians. However if no musician himself - his teacher declared him incapable of learning the piano and a later attempt with the violin was equally unsuccessful - he had a great love of music, particularly opera. The streets of the part of London where the young Dickens lived in poverty had not yet received the main flood of Italian organ and piano-grinders and the mechanical instruments of the period would have been the portable barrel-organ, shown above, usually accompanied by caged birds, trained dogs or marmosets.

In the following listing, which cannot hope to be complete, the following symbols identify

C Cylinder Musical Box
D Disc Musical Box
I IMHOF Interchangeable Cylinder Organ
P Pianola and reproducing piano rolls.

Anna Bolena	Ah Dolce	C	Lucia di Lammermoor		
Belisario	Overture	C		Overture	P
	Fantasie du	P		Andante (Thalberg)	P
	Concert op 27			Sextet	C
	(A. Goria)			"	D
Don Pasquale	Fantasia (Dorn)	P		"	I
	Com'è gentile	C		"	P
	Rondeau	C		Fra poco	C
	Transcription			Vers toi toujours	C
	(Edouard)	P		Suona di guiblio	C
L'elisird'amore	Potpourri (Cramer)	P		Finale (Ascher)	P
	Una furtiva lagrima	P		Fantasia	P
La favorita	Potpourri (Ascher)	P		Chorus (unspecified)	C
	Vieni ah vieni	C		Potpourri (Cramer)	P
	Pas redouble	C		Des Tombeaux	C
	" "	D		Bentoit L'herbe	C
	Doux Zephirs	C		Ma vedretta	C
	Pour tant d'amour	C		Paraphrase op.72(Ascher)	P
	Moi arrêt	C	Lucrezia Borgia		
La fille du régiment	Overture	C		Fantasia op.19 (Ascher)	P
	"	P		Brindisi	C
	Aria (unspecified)	D		"	D
	Rataplan	C		"	P
	March	C		Com'è bello	C
	Chorus(unspecified)	C		Di pescator	C
	Ciascun lo dice	C		"	D
	" " "	D		Duet – Orsini/Genaro	I
	Salut àla France	C		Un–named excerpts	C
	" " "	D		" "	I
	Cavatina	C	Nuits d'été (Song cycle)		
	Selection for two violins & piano (Barnard)	P		Il crociato	C
Linda di Chamounix					
	O luce di quest' anima	C			
	Ma vedrette	C			

Bibliography

From Music Box to Street Organ	De Waard – Vestal 1967
Musical Boxes	David Tallis – Muller 1971
Collecting Musical Boxes	A. Ord – Hume.1967
Player Piano	A. Ord – Hume. Allen & Unwin 1970

Museums

Birmingham	Science Museum
Brentford, London	British Piano Museum