

Agostino Rovere

1804 - 1865

'Harvard Theatre Collection'

A RECENTLY DISCOVERED LETTER OF DONIZETTI TO AGOSTINO ROVERE

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The Journal will present in translation over the years a selection of Donizetti's letters. Important extracts will be also edited and discussed in relation to their subject matter, i.e. Donizetti and his wife, Donizetti and religious music, Donizetti and humour etc. The following letter is printed in Studi Donizettiani II and was first published with notes by Marcello Ballini in L'Eco di Bergamo on the 9th of January 1972. The translation and footnotes are taken from the writer's Donizetti and the Tradition of Romantic Love.

The composer's despair with singers is well-known and it is amplified by the recent discovery of the following letter to Agostino Rovere. The bluntness of the letter may be explained when one realizes that Donizetti is using a convention of the Commedia dell' arte which permitted excessive rudeness in order to give vent to frustration.[1]

The text reads as follows:

'Most estimed Signor Rovere[2],

Advice - ethics to put into practice.

It is with the utmost pleasure that I hear you have been taken ill, or that a certain number of your company have had the misfortune to catch the infection, together with the theatre being forced to close down, which is all to the impressario's great advantage, because for once he has been able to blaspheme in his own comfort without an orchestral accompaniment - If your carnival crown was woven from old fiasco straw, the news has not yet reached me, but since fiascos are like the providence of the Almighty, that is, they never miss the mark. I therefore beseech you to philosophize on recent events, and ease just a little the pain caused by the sight which that poster caused to those who had bought season tickets to see nothing but closed doors, and to enjoy a show which did not even get off the ground - Try by the time of the second performance to render yourselves worthy of the audience's respect, to satisfy the purses of the purchasers of tickets, so

that the bench on which the florins of your quarter salary are duly squashed does not fade or suffer from dry rot - Remember, you are the goodly dew which dampens the company's wallet, enabling the director to pay you an avant-deux rather that a pironetta[3] spinning you right about turn.

Do not sell scales which are out of key for semitoned wails, and above all do not put on those legal and ceremonial wigs which only cover half of your pretentious hair styles - be sure of having decent gloves not ones that are decades old (sodden with sweat and odd ones at that!), used once upon a time for going to the theatre or attending court (that's all now history, my dear fellow) - If you wish to court the public's general sympathy (I am speaking to you personally since I have not had the pleasure of meeting the others), pay up sometimes, should you find yourself next to an applauding friend, treat him to a meal, at least to a coffee, take out that coffin-like purse just for once from your sporran - If you desire to be well-accompanied, keep on the strictest terms with the conductor, so that he gives you your desired beat, also if you ever sing a scale in D Minor[4] and end up gamutised[5], he can with appropriate chords[6] set to right the debts between you and the public and he takes for good money all the counterfeit you have given - At the last show be around for the end and be not the first to disappear because of some illusionary ailment and so oblige yourself to pay up the required retribution to all those who had by St. Stephen[7] the sure promise of not missing the last days[8] of the carne-val[9] - be assured all this merits giving with an honest heart; it will be your guardian to save you from all disasters on all your journeyings, be they by carriage, cart or sedan chair - live happily amid the cat-calls and the applause and return quickly to the bosom of he who sighs for you, who fears for you when you are in the arms of another and who will be faithful alive, dead and in eternity - amen.

Smyrna, the amphibious capital,
in Arabia clinical.[10]

(the letter is unsigned).

NOTES

1 The constant flow of words with little punctuation, the play on words and mock legalistic tone, recalls the traditional mask of the Doctor. It is the Malatesta within Donizetti himself who is speaking.

2 Agostino Rovere, a comic bass who was friends with the composer. He created the role of the Marchese in Linda di Chamounix, and was, according to Donizetti, a good Don Pasquale. Rovere died in New York on the 10th December 1865.

3 A play on words - a common term for money, but meaning in Venetian a fork (i.e: a jab from a fork which turns you about) also the pirouette of ballet.

4 A key associated by Donizetti with death - again the literal hides an inner world of puns. The wigs and gloves must relate back to a personal joke between the two men.

5 The word is Donizetti's - the musical term meaning also 'range' and 'acoustic waves' and in Italian recalls gambaretti - crayfish or lobsters, i.e. the booing audience.

6 Donizetti's word here is arcata - literally, arch, arcade - hence the architectural sense needed in constructing truly musical ornamentation. The word also means the angle at which a cannon is set to hit the target together with the bowing of the strings of the orchestra needed to cover up the singer's fiasco.

7 The letter was written in Brescia on the 24th January (the exact year is unknown but written almost certainly in 1842). The Carnival must have been under the patronage of St. Stephen whose feast day is the day after Christmas.

8 Donizetti has underlined die, a pun on 'goddesses'.

9 The carne of carnival is underlined, stressing the meaning of carne - 'meat' and 'flesh' - the sport of carnival time!

10 Had Donizetti met Edward Lear on their mutual travels?! The meaning here is obscure. Smyrns appears to be a pun on S.M.I.R.A. (Sua Majestà Imperiale Reale Austriaca). Donizetti was made composer to the Viennese Court and Royal Chapel on 8th July 1842. (A post formally held by Mozart). The letter seems to have been written in that year whilst Donizetti was in Lombardy for the first performance of Maria Padilla. Perhaps he visited Brescia whilst on a visit to Bergamo to see Mayr. Donizetti was at that time composing Linda di Chamounix for Vienna and very conscious of his fated destiny. The Austrian Court becomes Smyrna, a foreign country, floating like the Ark, offering possible rest and fame to the weary composer. His letters to friends are full of humour, puns, doggerel verse, school-boy Latin and dialect.



La Favorita was staged in a new production at La Scala, Milan on the 28th January 1974 with Piero Cappuccilli, Fiorenza Cossotto, Luciano Pavarotti, Ivo Vinco, Gianfranco Manganotti, Luisa Macchinizzi, and Regolo Romani. The conductor was Nino Verchi.

Parisina will be given a concert performance in New York on the 6th March with Montserrat Caballé James Morris, and Louis Quilico.
The conductor will be Eve Queler.

Maria di Rohan will be staged at the Teatro la Fenice, Venice on March 14th, 17th, 20th, 23rd, 26th and 29th, with Renata Scotto, Elena Zilio, Umberto Grilli, and Renato Bruson. The conductor will be Gianandrea Gavazzeni.

