

MARIA STUARDA

DE GAETANO DONIZETTI

REPARTO:

Personajes	Intérpretes
Maria Stuarda	MONTSERRAT CABALLE
La Reina Elisabeth	INA DELCAMPO
El Duque de Leicester	PIERRE DUVAL
Anna Kennedy	MARIA CORONADA
Lord Cecil	RAIMUNDO TORRES
Talbot	JOHN DARRENKAMP

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MARIA STUARDA

Notes on aspects of platonic and traditional thought

by

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'In my end is my beginning' Mary Queen of Scots.

'Di un cor che more reca il perdono
A chi mi offese, mi condannò' Bardari - Donizetti.

The following essay is substantially taken from the writer's 'Donizetti and the Tradition of Romantic Love'. The book consists of two parts. The first traces the composer's preparation at the hands of Mayr and La Misericordia Maggiore, discussing themes which were to form Donizetti's approach to artistic creativity. The second part is an analysis of eight operas in the light of the ideas expressed in part one. Each analysis takes a fundamental theme in Donizetti's thought which may be applied in turn to any of his mature compositions.

Donizetti's fascination with 'gothic' romanticism caused him to write nine operas related to the British Isles. The first, Alfredo il Grande (1823) was a theme already used by composers of the day. Mayr had composed an opera on the same subject produced in 1821 at Bergamo. Donizetti's opera was marred by his librettist, the notorious Andrea Leone Tottola. Emilia di Liverpool (1824) was the first conscious attempt at 'gothic' romanticism. In 1829 Tottola did his best with Scott's Kenilworth and the result was Elizabetta al castello di Kenilworth, one of Donizetti's least interesting operas. All the remaining operas are of considerable importance. Anna Bolena (1830); Rosmonda d'Inghilterra (Eleanora di Gujenna) (1834), a much maligned work which nevertheless contains music of great beauty. Maria Stuarda based on Schiller's play dates from 1834. Lucia di Lammermoor was composed in the following year. In order to set this masterpiece in context, it should be recognized that the subject had been used by others. For example, Hans Christian Andersen wrote a libretto on Scott's novel. L'assedio di Calais (1836) is a work well-worth reviving. The haunting quality of Roberto Devereux (1837) has now been recognized.

Maria Stuarda is an opera which illustrates Donizetti's economy and dramatic sense for the romantic stage. The libretto is by the virtually unknown Giuseppe Bardari and follows fairly faithfully the outlines of Schiller's play, with one important difference. The opera's inner themes and ideas are Donizetti's. Perhaps Donizetti was able to guide and influence his lawyer friend turned librettist. The opera certainly revolves around certain main themes, which may be traced in all the mature works. It is important to remember that as yet Donizetti had not worked with Salvatore Cammarano who proved to be the poet who came closest to the composer as a librettist. (Cammarano wrote for Donizetti: Lucia di Lammermoor, L'assedio di Calais, Pia de Tolomei, Roberto Devereux, Poliuto, Maria di Rudenz, and Maria di Rohan). Donizetti had worked with Felice Romani, undoubtedly the most competent librettist of the day. However, he found him aloof and unreliable. When forced to write in close relationship with the composer the result was however, a masterpiece, L'elisir d'amore (1832). Romani had, up to this period, written the following operas for Donizetti: Anna Bolena, Gianni di Parigi, Ugo, conte di Parigi, L'elisir d'amore, Parisina and Lucrezia Borgia. Otherwise, as correspondence shows, Donizetti had had to struggle with his friend Jacopo Ferretti (Il furioso all'isola San Domingo and Torquato Tasso), on whom he forced his own ideas but was not greatly rewarded. Up to his death in 1831 Domenico Gilardoni provided Donizetti with eleven libretti. By all accounts he was a strange fellow, haunted by bad luck, and none of his libretti aided Donizetti to find expression for his inner thoughts.

The composer had difficulty in finding suitable librettists to work with, who would co-operate and be prepared to appreciate his themes of the soul and its mysteries. Giuseppe Bardari's verses are not inspired. They are, however, acceptable, even better than many the composer had been obliged on occasions to set to music. The libretto's clear-cut economy is no doubt due to Donizetti's guiding hand. The result was a masterpiece for posterity, but a fiasco for composer and librettist. Donizetti witnessed the failure of an opera in which he had confidence.

Donizetti, from a superficial, historical level,

did not favour either queen. He regarded them with his usual equanimity. His impartiality is mirrored in the libretto. Nowhere is Queen Elizabeth I portrayed without sympathy. She is a sad, lonely figure, trapped through her destiny as monarch, unable to reconcile the emotions of her heart with politics. She is a proud woman, concerned with her emancipation and ultimate freedom from her emotions in order to rule wisely and for the good of her people.

From the inner point of view, in the realm of ideas (not to be confused with personalities), Queen Elizabeth represented for Donizetti the matrix holding Mary Queen of Scots (the soul) prisoner. Leicester (the fallen intellect) stood between the two, unable to serve two masters (Elizabeth, Monarch of the realm, or Mary, the soul in whom he saw mirrored the life of the Spirit). All three characters are gripped by fate and are condemned to live out their destiny. Leicester desires to free Mary from her captivity. Outwardly, he fails, and she is executed. Inwardly, he succeeds, for she dies in a state of grace. The story shows, at one point, Mary as proud as Elizabeth. Symbolically this is correct, for through identification with the matrix, the soul is born into a realm of sin. It is only through confession and absolution that Queen Mary may lay the past behind her. Once forgiven she has to enter into the mysteries of redemptive love. Historically, Mary Queen of Scots was executed; inwardly, her earthly fate was reversed, for her death became the gateway to eternal life.

Act I takes place in Westminster Palace. Four straightforward sections set in motion the conditions which bring about the catastrophic encounter between the Queens in Act II.

The opening chorus shows the court awaiting Queen Elizabeth who is about to return from a jousting tournament 'Ella è vicina / Dalle giostre a far ritorno'. Symbolically this is important, for the opera commences with an image of the Wheel of Fortune. It concludes with the severing of the Wheel's endless rotation. For Donizetti, the execution of Mary was to be understood on more than one level. The chorus builds up to a climax around the words, 'la possanza dell'amor' which is the theme of the whole opera.

Elizabeth's scene is an example of how Donizetti broke up a conventional aria for the sake of dramatic flow and action. He thus dispensed more and more with formal recitative. The Queen informs her court that France seeks to rule Britain through marriage. She has received messengers from the French King proposing marriage, but as yet she has not made up her mind; her first concern is for the good of her people. In this short opening recitative the word 'trono' (throne) is ornamented, drawing the audience's attention, for around this image the destiny of all concerned radiates. Ideally, the worldly throne should be a reflection of the Heavenly Throne, upholding the laws of eternity. In reality, it has become degraded through the machiavellian reign of Henry VIII. The Queen confesses that she can think of no heart except the one (Leicester) who has stolen hers. Sadly, she recognizes that 'a fatal barrier' (Mary) has come between them. In sacred symbolism there is a strict parallel between the throne and the heart. Here, Elizabeth's loss of her true Centre is implied. Note that the words, 'Un altro core involami / la cara liberta' (Another heart took from me my cherished liberty) are suitably ornamented.

The Queen's Larghetto is separated from her cabaletta with an episode which introduces Talbot and Cecil for dramatic purposes. Talbot emerges clearly as the champion of Mary, whilst Cecil is portrayed as the considerate and trustworthy servant of the Queen. He will not have mercy shown towards a woman who has been the pivot of intrigue and plots against the throne. On the other hand, Talbot and the chorus appeal for mercy to be shown towards Mary. The flute underlines Elizabeth's response: 'Perchè forzarmi a piangere/Sul capo della rea/Sul tristo suo destin?' ('Why constrain me to weep Over the head of the Queen And her sad destiny?').

The episode is built around an orchestral theme which with Rossini would have been a mere pleasant exchange for the woodwinds in the orchestral pit; for Donizetti the theme is a dramatic portrayal of fate weaving its way into Elizabeth's life. In her cabaletta she asks for a ray to be sent from Heaven to illuminate her intellect in order that she may recognize clemency in her heart. Mayr's influence is

easily recognizable, for certain words are clearly underlined by various instruments:

raggio - clarinet,
intelletto - flute and clarinet,
petto - flute,
clemenza parlerà - clarinet and bassoon,
l'empia m'ha rapita - horns,
speme al cor gradita - oboe and bassoon. Here the clarinet enters on the middle of the word gradita to be later joined by the flute on the words giorno atroce.
(Donizetti's symbolic use of instruments is discussed elsewhere in the book).

Leicester now enters. On seeing him, the Queen gives him the betrothal ring sent to her by the King of France with the words: 'Che libera son io/Prendilo .... Ingrato!' ('That I am free. Take it .... thankless one!'). The Queen and her court begin to leave the scene. As they do so, Leicester catches Talbot's attention and asks him, 'Did you not ask after me during the jousting?' The two men remain alone on the stage. Elizabeth notices them together and recognizes their friendship.

The third section now follows in which Talbot informs Leicester that he has seen Mary Stuart and wins the Count to her cause.

It is interesting to note how Talbot's arioso, 'Un angelo d'amor, bella qual'era,/È magnamina sempre'. ('She is like a loving angel, as beautiful as ever And always strong in spirit'), is underlined by the violas and cellos, whilst the violins rise and fall in broken chords. Donizetti no doubt here wishes to emphasize the potential angelic quality of Mary's soul. Talbot is to reveal himself as a priest in the Third Act. He gives the Count a letter and a miniature portrait. Mary Stuart asks for his aid by asking the Queen for clemency. On seeing the portrait, Leicester sings an ecstatic melody which most composers would have been pleased to evolve into an aria per se. Donizetti simply uses the melody in order to lead into the tenor's aria in which the Count resolves to liberate Mary, 'Se fida tanto / Colei mi amò' ('If she trusts me so, she must have loved me'). The aria becomes a duet with suitable

comments from Talbot. Donizetti changes the tempo (più mosso) for Leicester's words: 'Del fato mio/ Superbo andrò'. Leicester has proudly accepted his fate.

Leicester's melodic line is what has been called popolaresco, a style which recalls the spontaneous songs of Naples. The composer uses these popular forms when he wishes to emphasize the frankness and sincerity of passion. Other examples are Gennaro's aria in Lucrezia Borgia, and the trio in Belisario. The scene is of great beauty, providing the tenor does not shout his way through with the taste of what an unfortunate type-setting error once called 'can belto'. Furthermore the taste of the conductor will be immediately shown up in the way he unites the orchestral 'colourings' to the words, and in the tempo he sets for the singers. It must be secure but capable of 'breathing', enabling the vocal line to 'soar'; thrusting the melody forward with Verdian impetuosity will only reduce it to banality.

The final section is between Elizabeth and Leicester. The Count encourages the Queen to meet Mary Stuart in the grounds of Fotheringay Castle where she is held prisoner. There is no historical evidence for such an encounter. Operatic understanding of English History is factually unsound at the best of times, simply because the creators were more concerned with the 'story' and its dimensions, than with compiling catalogues of facts and reasoned arguments.

Leicester makes an impassioned plea for Mary's cause, singing again in the popolaresco style. The orchestration is full of shadings and colours, whilst the setting of the words, 'era celeste l'anima' ('her soul was heavenly') is a clear example of the intimate relationship between the words and the vocal line.

In contrast to Leicester's frank openness, Elizabeth's response is agitated. She agrees to the meeting, but the audience is left in no doubt whatsoever that the encounter will take place under fated circumstances and certainly not in the right spirit conducive to reconciliation.

The First Act has shown Queen Elizabeth I to be a lonely, melancholic and unstable figure, her personal

'centre' of integration being constantly frustrated through the conflict between her sense of duty and her impassioned yet unfulfilled womanhood.

The historian, during this act, notes that the librettist has thrown in a little history amidst all the fantasy. Talbot mentions the name 'Babington'. He presumes that Leicester is being drawn innocently into 'Mary's cause'. The famous Babington Plot was discovered through Walsingham's interception of letters which completely recriminated Mary Stuart and prepared her way to the scaffold.

Act II takes place in the grounds of Fotheringay Castle. The stage should portray a wooded landscape. The horizon merges with the distant sea. The act consists of a scene for Mary, the meeting of Leicester and Mary and the encounter of the Queens which consists of a sextet and final stretta.

Mary's scene shows Donizetti and Bardari contending with Schiller's nature mysticism. The Queen experiences ecstasy before the ravishing beauty of Nature*. One thinks of the landscapes of C.D. Friedrich. Donizetti was a lover of Nature but no romantic nature mystic. He has Schiller's thought translated into straightforward platonism. Mary, representing the soul, awakes to the reality of generation and realizes that even 'the open sky is her prison'. (According to platonic thought, the soul is imprisoned within the material world). However, she recognizes Nature as a series of images mirroring the Divine Archetypal World from which man has fallen - 'Oh! cara la voluttà che mi circonda!' ('Oh! how beloved is the voluptuousness which encircles me!'). In a beautiful andante she contemplates the flowers and is profoundly aware of the sea breezes. The whole of Nature commands her to be joyful with the joy she once knew in her youth. The larghetto portrays Mary recognizing the lightness of a certain cloud. She asks it to take her affection and sadness to the shores of France, the land where

* Schubert's song, Ganymede is an interesting parallel. Donizetti did not set all of Bardari's words to music. His clear understanding of what he wanted enabled him to select the fundamental words and concepts which he required.

she once knew happiness. Then in a moment of intense awareness she realizes that the cloud has drifted across towards France, leaving her alone. In platonic imagery a cloud is often used to represent the physical, materialistic body. Thus the scene for Donizetti becomes the moment when Mary intuitively recognizes her fate. The soul will now gradually grow away from its earthly prison. The ascent and descent of the soul is emphasized by the harp playing broken chords.

Queen Elizabeth's hunting party is heard off stage. Mary's thoughts are interrupted. Her final cabaletta portrays her sense of doom and her queenly pride.

The next section contains the beautiful duet between Mary and Leicester. The Count attempts to win her confidence so as to prepare her for the meeting with Elizabeth. Leicester's words, 'Qui viene / chi t'adora a spezzar le tue catene'. ('Here comes / he who loves you to shatter your chains'), refer literally to Mary's imprisonment; allegorically, they refer to the intellect freeing the soul from the bondage of the world with its wheel of fate.

The duet begins with Mary's self-pitying words, 'Da tutti abbandonata' ('Abandoned by all'). The melodic line rises and falls. The orchestration comments and underlines certain essential words and phrases. The result is a short, beautiful duet. The scene, however, concludes in an agitated state. Mary shows growing apprehension for the Count's involvement with her plight and for the meeting that is about to take place.

All the cast now moves onto the stage. A sextet expresses the thoughts of all present. Elizabeth cannot abide Mary's pride and self-assertion, even when she kneels before her. Elizabeth recalls to her rival, her first husband Darnley, and how she conspired with Bothwell, who was to become her second husband, to have Darnley murdered. Mary's presence has been a constant menace to the throne. Eventually, Mary's pride overcomes her and she delivers her famous scandalous lines. She accuses Elizabeth of being the 'impure' daughter of Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth is a 'bastard' child profaning the throne of the land. The scene's dramatic effect need not be laboured. A 'fate' theme weaves its way

up to the exchange of insults, and the act ends with an exhausting stretta. Mary's doom is sealed.

Donizetti must have known that his opera risked causing a scandal. What had he in mind other than remaining faithful to Schiller and declaring himself to be a romantic? Many problems vanish if the imagery of the soul is accepted once more. In choosing an event which may historically have taken place, as far as he was concerned, he sought to show how the eternal mysteries are constantly working themselves out in historical time. Man has free will, but wherever and however he acts out his part, he remains always a player strutting on the stage of the Divine Comedy. As we have already seen, Elizabeth represents the will causing the abyss (the matrix); Mary is caught by life in the Wheel of Fate, and consequently shares in the guilt of the matrix. That is, all men share in original sin and the fate caused by their own actions. The history of the English Throne, seen through Roman Catholic eyes, aided his symbolism. However, he did not idolize Mary as a person above Elizabeth; both women were in his somewhat forthright language 'puttane'. In the opera Mary is portrayed as guilty of all manner of sins, for example, adultery and being an accomplice to murder. However, according to the law, she was not a bastard born out of Henry VIII's adulterous affair with Anne Boleyn. In Mary's eyes, Elizabeth profaned the throne which she, as all royalists, considered to be a divine institution. Mary in her outrage merely stressed the Roman Catholic judgement on the ex-communicated Queen.

Perhaps this now clarifies Donizetti's symbolism. Since Elizabeth allegorically represents the matrix she cannot be anything else but the usurper of the throne and born out of adultery. Mary corresponds to the soul, fallen into generation, attracted by the Divine Comedy brought into play through the matrix. The soul is capable of redemption and the return to the paradise lost. The reader should not think that Donizetti committed the individual, historical Queen Elizabeth to Hell fires; her role as 'matrix' in the opera is simply a literary and symbolic device.

Act III is divided into three main scenes. The music and dramatic action gathers gradual momentum to

culminate with the final scene portraying Mary's last moments before her execution.

The first scene returns to Westminster Palace. There are two main sections, a duet between Cecil and Elizabeth, and a trio for Leicester, Cecil and Elizabeth.

The Queen is ready to sign the death warrant, but is unsure if her action is completely just. In the following duet between Elizabeth and Cecil 'Quella vita a me funesta' there are many examples of typical Donizettian orchestration, a sound as characteristic as Rossini or Verdi. The duet concludes without formality and Leicester enters to plead for mercy to be shown towards Mary. The very presence of this fated man encourages Elizabeth to sign the warrant out of jealousy. The Queen insists that he witnesses the execution. Leicester retorts that the Queen has condemned to death a sister, (Mary Queen of Scots was heir to the throne). The Queen coldly replies that at the firing of the last of three cannon shots Mary shall die. There is a trio and finale of great beauty.

Next is the confession scene. It caused more problems in performance for Donizetti than the insults of Act II. Not even Mayr would have sanctioned the scene. The portraying of a sacrament on the stage Mayr would have considered a lack of taste and a sign of the times.

The woodwinds rise and fall, recalling the musical image associated with Mary. Cecil and Talbot bring the death warrant to her appartments in Fotheringay Castle. Cecil offers her a Minister of the Established Church to comfort her in her last hours. Mary refuses, maintaining that she will remain faithful to the rites of her own Church. Note the melody played on the clarinet just before Cecil asks Mary if she wants to make her confession. It is repeated by the flute and clarinet once Cecil leaves Talbot and Mary alone.

Mary remarks that her heart may be read in her face. Talbot tells her that Leicester is commanded by the Queen to assist at her execution. This causes some of her old pride to ferment in her heart once more (allegro), but she has changed. She desires to find peace before dying. No longer does she possess

Scotland, her Throne or her Liturgy; everything has been taken from her. Talbot questions her on her state of conscience. Mary falters, her mind is haunted by Darnley's ghost. She sees the bloody garments of her secretary Rizzio, who was murdered at her feet. Talbot warns her that she is approaching everlasting life and removes his cape to reveal the vestments of a priest. Mary looks at the Crucifix he is holding and says that she wishes to wash away her sins at the foot of the Cross. She is told to have hope in Christ's mercy.

Now follows the 'confession' aria. The obscure language leaves the audience to construct discreetly its own interpretation. The following lines are important for the opera's inner symbolism. Again the imagery is platonic and relates to the soul entering generation and becoming lost through its false loves. 'When light glowed/And when day shone upon me/When amidst pleasing images/Which this soul imbibed/Love (<u>eros</u>) made me sinful .. Love opened the abyss before me'.

She is warned by Talbot to confess all her sins. Mary confesses her association with the Babington Plot, imploring God's mercy. Talbot eventually pronounces absolution, and speaks words of comfort set to a melody which recalls Raimondo in <u>Lucia di Lammermoor</u> encouraging Lucia to offer herself as a sacrifice. Mary embraces the words of hope like a chalice receiving wine - 'Heaven alone can give peace to this troubled heart'.

The final scene is of outstanding musical beauty. Donizetti entitled the opening prelude and chorus a 'Hymn to Death'. The music is a vivid portrayal of suffering and grief. Many of Verdi's better-known choruses found their origins in such moments.

Mary enters. She is totally reconciled to death. She even preaches to all around her, exhorting them to flee from the sins of this world and she leads a prayer to the God of Mercy. The harp returns to accompany Mary, drawing a musical parallel to Mary's ecstasy before Nature. Her soul is now purified through having overcome death. She is experiencing ecstasy, an octave higher in the soul's spiral.

The first cannon shot is fired. Cecil enters. The ordeal of execution has begun. In another

beautiful aria Mary prays for forgiveness to be granted to all and that the sins of the fathers will not visit their children's children. She prays that all evil fate will be cancelled, through the outpouring of her blood. Her death is offered as a final sacrifice. Donizetti appears to have considered her death as a political martyrdom.

Leicester enters. The second cannon is fired. He accompanies Mary towards the scaffold as she sings her last moving aria. The hand which was once to have won her in love must now guide her, she meditates, through the presence of love to her death. She prays that the scourge (The Italian has flagello - 'whip') of the Punishing God (the Judgement man brings upon himself through his actions,) will not sweep through the realm. Donizetti's understanding of the Divine Anger may be illustrated here by a quotation from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans I, 18-19: 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them'. It is man who incarnates through his sin the wrath or Anger of God into life, this condition Donizetti called 'l'ira dei mortali!'

The third cannon is heard. The opera is quickly drawn to its conclusion.

Many overlook, or simply do not hear, the important words sung by all excepting Mary and Cecil, words which seem to echo Holy Scripture or a meditation made at the foot of the Cross: 'Why am I unable through the outpouring of my blood/To take away from you the blindness of your anger?' Wherever 'the anger of mortals' spills innocent blood, the Sacrifice of Calvary is evoked. Through blood, men, indeed the whole realm of generation, groan for liberation from bondage and unwittingly hasten the coming of the Kingdom. 'Go .... and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice ....' (The Gospel of St. Matthew IX, 13).

These thoughts on Maria Stuarda indicate an aspect of the unity to be found in Donizetti's operas. From the score, the operas may appear to be simply a series of musical 'numbers' set aside for the benefit of singers to display their talents. Conductor and

producer must work together to overcome these apparent forms which are so often misused by singers. They should use the fundamental musical and spiritual ideas in order to unite the work as the composer intended. Donizetti must not be performed with the same energetic masculine dynamism which many associate with Verdi. The opera has to 'breathe' and respond to the inner inspiration of all concerned. Maria Stuarda, when performed without love and understanding for the spiritual quality of the music, appears as banal and tedious. It is a mark of his genius that his music may not be prostituted. However, if the conductor and producer inspire unity, of words and music, of instrumentation and vocal line, of harmony and rhythm, then another life takes over the raw material and transfigures it. When Donizetti is properly interpreted, he ceases to be merely his limited self, for the music may enable the hearer to confront the Heart, where all that is true and abiding reveals itself in naked transparency. Perhaps it is precisely this quality which many dislike in the music and protect themselves from it. Donizetti, long before he is a composer, is a child of Paradise, seeking to communicate his vision and knowledge to all lost in the vale of exile.



Editor's Note

This article replaces the one on Maria Stuarda and Buondelmonte which now appears in the December 1973 issue of the magazine OPERA.