

LORD BYRON

22 January 1788 - 19 April 1824

The 150th anniversary of Byron's death will be commemorated in 1974.

Three operas by Donizetti were based on works by Byron: Il diluvio universale (1830), Parisina (1833), and Marino Faliero (1835). A fourth opera Torquato Tasso (1833), was influenced by the poem Lament of Tasso. (See page 91).

INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN S. ALLITT

It is a great privilege to find oneself writing the Introduction to the first Journal of the Donizetti Society. We must all hope that our project will be a real success, growing and maturing, so as to contribute as much as possible to the revaluation of Donizetti which is taking place in our own times. Our aim is to be a centre for practical information and creative thought and this depends on us all to share our knowledge and information on the work and age of Mayr and Donizetti. We need to have a better understanding of the civilization that produced them. It is all too easy to presume that we of the twentieth century have understood history, that the situation has been finalized once and for all in the light of our prevalent mood of humanism. It is perhaps more honest to realize that we have lost for the greater part the necessary preparation to interpret the realm of the spirit which was certainly still alive in Donizetti's times, even if in a state of post-Trentine decay. Our understanding of history and the great men and women who helped to create it, change according to the fashions and needs of the times we find ourselves in. Therefore it is of paramount importance that we attempt to appreciate the ideas and concepts which created an age. History is not founded on individualism, as our present vogue may often presume, but on a people's response to the salient ideals which give them a common purpose. The orthodox of any civilization of the past had, what we may call for argument's sake, 'Tradition'. They believed that their own tradition was the essential vehicle for the life of the spirit within the community. The members of that community were responsible for incarnating the particular form of tradition into their lives, for it was considered to be the vehicle for the health of all art and integrated living. Mayr and Donizetti lived through the times of revolution and social upheaval; however the world they ascribed to was still theocentric. Study shows that the civilizing forces which produced the two men were christian and platonic. It is only

when we begin to view Mayr's notebooks, certain of Donizetti's letters and their music through these traditional lenses, that we begin to appreciate the composers from their point of view. Donizetti, for example, no longer appears as a 'simple' composer but rather as a profound man (who admittedly hid behind a self-protective social mask), intimately concerned with his age and its civilization. Take one simple example, his literary pursuits in the choice of subject matter for his libretti. We find a person deeply aware of Western Literature. We observe a mind capable of 'externalizing' so much of what was 'within' the early romantic age. Lucia di Lammermoor is as vital as any canvas of Girodet or Delacroix, or landscape of Turner or Friedrich. Lucia is pure romanticism, untainted with the self-conscious psychic delusions which imprisoned the artist in his ivory tower later in the century. Lucia di Lammermoor or Maria Stuarda may well be considered masterpieces of romanticism, whilst Don Pasquale sums up a whole literary and musical tradition. Only a truly creative genius could have produced such amazing works.

The facile image of Donizetti as a womanizer who died a syphilitic madman, a portrait so many ascribed to, is in keeping with the promiscuous ideals of our times. It is, however, a sterile portrait, conceived on the same level as the scandal columns of ephemeral journalism. There is a great desire to drag our betters down to levels often lower than our own. Consider a recent film made on Tschaikowsky, need we say anymore? Regarding Donizetti, there is little evidence for the scandal many would pin on him. A person who spends his time digging exclusively around the compost heap (which is indeed essential to the life of a garden as it is to the making-up of a person), is forgetting to look at the flowers, the trees, the interplay of light, the joy of it all. He is to be pitied.

Serious study of Donizetti presents us with a profound soul. He was a man who understood through suffering and compassion our human predicament. Professor Barblan rightly quotes the following words of Maeterlinck with reference to Donizetti: 'Si j'étais Dieu, j'aurais pitié du coeur des hommes ...'

(Pelléas et Mélisande). With Donizetti we are concerned with a perennial soul in which the heart 'had not grown cold'. His instructions to his librettists were clear, he wanted 'passions and not battles'. A friar who knew Donizetti discounted the scandal and said that the composer had taken his gifts into the battlefield of the world where the maëlstrom of passions had encircled him. He considered the real cause of the composer's death to be exhaustion through uninterrupted creativity. The vast catalogue of works and numerous letters testify to this point of view.

We should realize that Donizetti understood the 'passions' of love through the tradition of romantic love. His art and life find their roots in the mystical traditions of the troubadours, St. Francis, Dante and etc. These foundations he had learnt from the religious society which had educated him and through the wise and loving care of Mayr. Consider the serious operas. They are concerned with the pursuit of the ideal, its loss, its betrayal, its victory through death, and ultimate union with the Beloved. The comic works are concerned with initiation into the mystery of love. If these thoughts do not meet with the reader's approval, I refer them to my essay in Studi Donizettiani Vol. II and my book, Donizetti and the Tradition of Romantic Love when it is published, for there the whole argument is worked out at length, showing how the operas are products of fundamental ideas common to the tradition referred to. This introduction is simply concerned with airing certain thoughts which may be clues to the reader for leading him to a better understanding of Donizetti. Perhaps it is this metaphysical background which we are either unconsciously attracted to or repulsed by, in the same way as we need to have a certain sympathy with Wagner's ideas if we are to find contact with his music. When we say we like a thing, it is because we found a mirror to reflect something we are trying to recognize within ourselves.

The founding of the Donizetti Society is a natural outcome due to the revival of his work over the past few years. It is not hard to think of a time when no one took the composer seriously, a view which still

persists in certain circles to this day. Donizetti, however, is being reconsidered year by year as his work becomes better known through recordings, tapes, sympathetic performances and reliable editions. The climate is still not right for the validity of Donizetti as a great composer to be accepted by the history books. It will only be when historians and critics have ceased to judge and to interpret musical history by what may be called 'post-Beethoven musical evolution', and abandon the notion of 'progress' or 'progressive', that Donizetti will emerge in his true status. There can be no 'progress' in the arts. It is only a modern art severed from what we have called tradition which can proudly claim 'evolution'. The present for many is an age which suffers from the loss of the source which gives unity to all the art forms of the great civilizations. If we favour 'progress' we will look for pre-Verdian characteristics in Donizetti's music. We will note the use of the chorus or arioso in passages of recitative etc. in order to justify our appreciation of the music. If, however, we are honest we shall have to admit that Donizetti had no great mission to reform or to change; indeed he remained somewhat aloof to the revolutionary mood of his age. He was apolitical. He was far more concerned with maturing his own innate gifts together with those of his nation, like the polishing of a precious stone. (The image is Donizetti's own). He took the tradition which had produced him for granted, whilst being fully cognizant of the advent of European romanticism, the growth of industrial materialism, revolutionary politics and the loss of the ideal of romantic love.

Consider Donizetti as a romantic artist. He emerges as one of the most important figures of Italian romanticism. He stands alongside Leopardi, Foscolo and Manzoni as an exponent of Italy's contribution to European romanticism. Lucia di Lammermoor expresses the quintessence of an age, a fact that Tolstoy, Flaubert, Zola and others readily recognized. Donizetti responded to his own country's poets like Leopardi and Foscolo. He also responded to Scott and Byron, to Goethe and Schiller, to Hugo and Chateaubriand. From the past he gleened from Dante, Tasso, Goldoni, Sograffi, Cervantes, Camoens,

Corneille and etc. Donizetti understood romanticism as Rossini might have done if he had not wasted his gifts. Rossini's well-known cynicism places him closer to the age of Voltaire than to romanticism. Donizetti learnt from the intuitive and lyrical romanticism of a unique voice like that of Bellini, while retaining the better musical and historical grasp of the times he lived in than his rival. Verdi is already a man of the Risorgimento. Moravia rightly said in an essay that Verdi belongs to the modern age and is a product of renaissance humanism. Donizetti on the other hand, stands firmly on the rich foundations of tradition. When compared to Verdi, Donizetti is 'medieval'. He readily ascribed to that realm of ideas which Lord Clarke considers we escaped from by 'the skin of our teeth'. Donizetti set sail across the sea of passion with his ideals of love, rather like a Celtic monk might have set out in a coracle in submission to the Divine Will.

When read with understanding, Donizetti's notes for his lecture to the French Academy reveal a man consciously taking a position in one of the great European debates of the period. He had gained an insight into the Germanic tradition through his education with Mayr. He writes of the conflict between the merits of the 'German' and 'Italian' traditions. Mozart is singled out as the only composer to have succeeded in marrying the two traditions. The composer is responding to a mood which was passing through European consciousness of the time. Today it is possibly more accessible to us in the work of a group of painters called the Nazarenes. These painters sought, amongst other things, to synthesize the genius of Germany (the romantic, the gothic) with the genius of Italy (the classical). The thought may be seen in Friedrich Overbeck's painting, 'Italy and Germany'(a theme worked on by the artist from about 1811 to 1828). We should also remember in this context, that Cammarano (librettist of Lucia etc. and a close friend of the composer) knew Gabrielle Rossetti. It is possible to recognize something of the Pre-Raphaelite in Donizetti, for example, his religious faith, his love of Dante, his concern with the image

of Womanhood, his emphasis on tradition and craftsmanship, his choice of subjects and etc. The mood is to be found as late as Boito (see Mefistofele and his various writings) and it came to an unfortunate and profane climax with the political union of Germany and Italy in the last war.

Donizetti's sources are essentially metaphysical and spiritual. Let us pursue the thought a little further in order to justify our assertion. Donizetti owed his education to La Misericordia Maggiore and to Mayr. La Misericordia Maggiore is a religious lay society which has its foundations in the Middle Ages. There is no doubt whatsoever that Donizetti belonged as a lay member to a religious society. He was an initiate into the knowledge which opens the many dimensions of religious thought. Indeed, his life, thought, music and libretti may be better understood once this is realized. A new world opens out and we begin to share in the ethos which produced the man and his music. Mayr was a devout and wise man, fully aware of the age in which he lived. He taught Donizetti the foundations of the musical science of the West from its origins with the Greeks, i.e. Pythagoras, to his own day. He used Sir John Hawkins' 'A General History of the Science and Practice of Music' (1776) when teaching his pupils. Donizetti learnt the spiritual and metaphysical framework which lies behind the modal and harmonic structure of traditional music, together with the rich symbolism of music and instruments. He was taught that music is the key to creation and that to participate in music is to enter into the mystery of intoxication as understood by mystics of all religions. It is not for nothing (most people think it was the influence of his brother Giuseppe over the Sultan) that the Islamic world decorated him with the highest order granted to lay men. The Order of Nicham-Iftihar is awarded in certain Moslem countries to this day to those who have rendered outstanding service to their country though the preservation of the true foundations upon which all civilizations are based. An Islamic Sufi would grasp more readily the modal and alchemic symbolism of Donizetti's music than a person educated at a contemporary college of music. Here, it is enough to remind the reader, that

Turkey was the adopted home of Rumi, the great Persian mystic and poet, together with the fact that the metaphysical background of Dante's 'Divine Comedy' has much in common with Rumi's thought. The 'Comedy' was a fundamental influence over Donizetti.

Mayr and Donizetti were both deeply concerned with the change brought about in Western music by the advent of Beethoven. They understood that the traditional modal and harmonic bases of music in the West were in the process of being misused. Mayr's notebooks show that he foresaw a time when composers like Messiaen and Stockhausen would have to invent their own individualistic solutions, owing to the fact that the traditional foundations of music had been lost. Mayr and Donizetti would have most likely described the present as a fumbling with residues. They are in this sense 'right wing'. They certainly did not believe in 'progress', rather they foresaw a gradual loss, through man's ignorance and self-centred will, of the inner tradition of all that is sublime and beautiful in a civilization.

All our revivals suffer from our lack of sympathy and knowledge of this traditional framework or 'intention' as Donizetti called it. His genius is that his music lives on regardless, as do the works of Dante, Shakespeare, Spencer or Blake. All presume to interpret and to reinterpret, but few realize that their performance of Shakespeare's Othello or of Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore has engaged them in some of the deepest mysteries of the soul. 'The dogs bark but the caravan passes on'. (An Islamic saying).

In this introduction I have attempted to consider what I believe to be the essential grounds for our re-evaluation of Donizetti's art. If he is to be recognized as the great composer he undoubtedly was, we need to appreciate and to revalue the deeper and wider grounds of his music. Such music does not belong to the few to talk operatic 'shop' over, it is a treasure chest holding many jewels hidden for too long from our unhappy and anarchic generation. The music of which we have spoken is archetypal music, the vocation of which is to integrate not only our own souls into the life of the spirit, but also all communities, nations and peoples.