

UNKNOWN DONIZETTI ITEMS IN THE NEAPOLITAN JOURNAL 'IL SIBILO'

By JEREMY COMMONS

The great excitement and joy of musical research is that, at the time it takes place, it is not something cut and dried and academic, or even ordered, but a personal adventure: a voyage of discovery into unknown seas, urged on by the hope of finding an unknown continent - or at least perhaps a modest island. The discoveries detailed below are modest enough - islands rather than continents, certainly - but of sufficient interest, I feel, to warrant inclusion on the Donizetti map.

The first are concerned with Caterina Cornaro, that last-produced (though not last-written) opera which has always stimulated the interest of students of Donizetti because of the composer's own continuing belief in it, despite its initial failure in Naples in 1844. Of all his operas, this was the only one whose authorised first performance he was unable to supervise himself[1], for he was prevented from travelling to Naples by prior commitments in Paris and Vienna and by the deterioration in his health which before long was to lead to madness and death. The news of the opera's total failure - it achieved only six ill-received performances, followed by one further performance of the prologue alone - elicited his concern for the distress and humiliation suffered by his friends in Naples, and his indignant denial that any part of the score had been composed by other hands, or had been deliberately badly written as an act of resentment.

Caterina received only one more production last century - at Parma in February 1845 - but fortunately the five performances given there were successful, and came at a time when the composer was still well enough to comprehend and appreciate that his continued trust had been to some extent vindicated. 'I was never blind on [the subject of] my own labours,' he wrote, 'and I always said: Caterina will not be a masterpiece, but it did not deserve that ruin [caused] by the singers, not those criticisms from the Neapolitan journalists. Now I'm satisfied!' Recent revival in our own time has confirmed Donizetti's judgement: the opera may lack the

tuneful and bravura items that would make it a popular success, but it is written with a strong feeling for dramatic expression and dramatic development. A number of late Donizetti operas are commonly said to foreshadow those of Verdi[2]: this is one of them.

My own acquaintance with Caterina Cornaro began when I was a student in Italy in 1958, and studied Donizetti's autograph score at S. Pietro a Majella, the Naples Conservatorium of Music. More recently, my interest was renewed when the work was revived in 1972, and on a return visit to Naples last year I determined to try to trace some of the original reviews of the 1844 fiasco in the hope that they would clarify the exact reasons why the opera had failed: the features, whether of performance or of the music itself, which led to its rejection by the public.

I went, therefore, to the newspaper and Neapolitan sections of the Biblioteca Nazionale in the royal palace of Naples. But it seemed as if gremlins had got there before me. Search as I might, the issues for January 1844 seemed to be missing, or incomplete, or damaged.

In Naples my studies have always been warmly and enthusiastically encouraged by Professoressa Anna Bossarelli Mondolfi, Head Librarian of S. Pietro a Majella, and by her husband, Professore Francesco Bossarelli. To them I took my problem. The shelves of the Conservatorium resulted in an almost equal blank, but it was there, nevertheless, that we made our first discovery. Professore Bossarelli, checking on my behalf the entries for January 1844 in the Programma Giornaliero, the official contemporary daily list of Neapolitan theatre programmes, was surprised to find no mention of Caterina Cornaro on January 12th, the date given as its premiere in all books on Donizetti and catalogues of his works. The first performance, we found, took place on January 18th[3]. This discovery in itself stands as eloquent comment on the insufficient research hitherto carried out into the genesis and early history of this opera.

His interest now fully aroused, Professore Bossarelli began suggesting to me the titles of 19th century Neapolitan theatrical journals that I might seek in other libraries. Day by day I pursued my

enquiries, and gradually we beat the gremlins.

Details of my general findings need not detain us here, since they are more suited to a critical introduction to the opera than to the present article. What is important in the present context are the discoveries we made in Il Sibilo ('The Hiss'), a literary and theatrical journal which ran for two years between 1843 and 1845. The issues for the second year of publication were on the shelves at S. Pietro a Majella; and although he said that he had never seen those for the first year, Professore Bossarelli told me that there were meant to be sets in the Biblioteca Nazionale and the Biblioteca Storia Patria. A visit to the former as usual proved fruitless, but eventually I found the set in the Biblioteca Storia Patria, high up in one of the flanks of the Castel Nuovo or Maschio Angioino, the Norman castle which still dominates the port of Naples. Even to visit this library is an experience - crossing a wooden bridge over what was once the moat, passing under the triumphal arch of King Alfonso I, and finding oneself in the forbidding courtyard of the keep. It was midwinter when I was there, on a day when one of the windows was being replaced. Workmen trampled to and fro, the elements circulated unobstructed, and we all, librarians and readers, sat huddled in our greatcoats. But what I discovered in Il Sibilo soon took my mind off the weather.

It has always been known (though rarely pointed out) that Donizetti entrusted the supervision of the production of Caterina Cornaro to his fellow-composer, Mercadante - and that, after the opera had failed, he generously exonerated Mercadante from all blame[4]. Yet no correspondence with Mercadante at this time has ever come to light: no letters are to be found in Zavadini's massive volume of Donizetti's correspondence[5] or in its sequels, the two volumes of Studi Donizettiani[6]. In Il Sibilo, after duly finding short notices of the first and subsequent performances, I happened to turn back the pages to the week preceding the production. And there, in the issue for December 28th, 1843, in a report that the opera had gone into rehearsal, I found printed the full text of the letter with which Donizetti had asked Mercadante's help. Written in the familiar second

person, it reads as follows:

Caro Mercadante,

Sarai tediato con questa mia, perchè abbi la bontà e l'amicizia di prender cura dell'esecuzione della nuova mia opera Caterina Cornaro che si darà a S. Carlo in dicembre - Sai quante volte un errore di riga strumentando porta disguido, sai quante volte speriamo, crediamo sicuro l'effetto quando meno havvi probabilità: toglimi da si fattì errori, invigila con occhio benigno l'opera mia, fa in essa ciò che più credi utile in tutta l'estensione del termine; accresci, istrumenta, diminuisci, scorta, allunga, trasporta, in somma fanne cosa tua, che [sic] sei a portata di conoscere le côté faible des artistes.

Riposo su te per la parte musicale e vivo tranquillo.

I direttori subalterni avranno la bonta di secondarti, e non posso che offrirmi agli ordini tuoi, per esternarti la mia riconoscenza.

Parigi 5 Novembre 1843.

Il tuo Donizetti.

(Dear Mercadante,

You will find this request of mine irksome - that you should have the generosity and the friendship to supervise the performance of my new opera Caterina Cornaro, which will be given at the S. Carlo in December. You know how often an error of a stave when one is orchestrating throws everything out; you know how often we hope - we believe - that an effect is certain when there is less than a reasonable chance of it. Rescue me from such errors, watch over my opera with a kindly eye, do whatever you believe had best be done, in the fullest meaning of the term; increase the sound, orchestrate, reduce the sound, abbreviate, lengthen, transpose - in sum make the work your own, for you are in a position to know the weak sides of the artists.

I rely on you for the musical side and I live at peace.

The junior directors will generously support you, and I can only put myself at your service, to demonstrate my gratitude.

Paris, November 5th, 1843. Your Donizetti)

It is an important letter. The humility of Donizetti has long been proverbial, but here it is strikingly illustrated. He freely admits his own fallibility, and, realising that a participant does not have the detached view of a spectator, he entrusts his work - to all intents a part of himself - wholly into the hands of another. Also noteworthy is his attitude towards the 'sanctity' of what he has written: a completed score is not for him a final entity, but still the raw material that one will test and tailor during rehearsals (and perhaps even in later productions). His practical sense of the requirements of the theatre could not be more vividly witnessed.

The letter is startingly similar in tone and sentiment to the only other surviving letter which he wrote to Mercadante almost twenty years earlier, at the other end of his career, on August 18th, 1824[7]. Mercadante was in Vienna to produce his Il Signore del villaggio, and since there was a chance that Emilia di Liverpool might also be produced, Donizetti wrote from Naples, recommending to his supervision not only several new items in the second act, 'but... the whole opera: you know my manner of writing, and know well where at times some change of tempo is needed. Do this for me, then, for I trust you in all things .... I have made several puntature[8], but for the most part the author is the worst person to do these things because he lives with his first ideas...'

Though written so far apart, one letter is the counterpart of the other. Ironically neither led to fortunate results. The production of Emilia di Liverpool in Vienna seems never to have taken place[9], and Caterina Cornaro failed. On each occasion Donizetti was to learn that, even with the best of goodwill on the part of others, there is no substitute for self-help and taking responsibility for one's own endeavours.

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It was while searching through the pages of Il Sibilo for information on Caterina Cornaro that I made - blunderingly - my second discovery. I found that in every second issue - once a fortnight - the journal published a song by one of the popular composers of the day[10]. There were twenty-six in all: nine by Pacini, seven by Donizetti, three by Luigi Cammarano,

two by Lillo, and one each by Rossini[11], Mercadante, Luigi Ricci, Sarmiento and Crescentini. All are short, since each has to fit on to a single 27 x 18 cm. page. The engraved notation is small in size, therefore, and not always as clear as one could wish. But the collection forms a fascinating compendium of salon-songs of the time. Romanzas and ariettas alternate with barcaruolas and songs in Neapolitan and Sicilian dialect. Sung by a small group of singers in alternation, they would make a most attractive recital on record[12].

Of those by Donizetti, the arietta 'Eterno amore e fè' was already familiar to me, and it occasioned me no initial surprise that I did not recognise the others, since Donizetti wrote so many songs and left them, in published or manuscript form, in so many places. What did surprise me, upon checking further, was to find that four of the seven have hitherto escaped the attention of all cataloguers of his works. The seven, with their dates of publication, are as follows:

1. [September 7th, 1843] Arietta, 'D'un genio che m'accende'. A setting of words from Metastasio's Semiramide. (Listed by Zavadini[13] under 'Melodie ad una voce' as no. 384 'per voce di sopr., n. 2 in Raccolta di canzonette.')
2. [October 5th, 1843] Canzonetta, 'Addio Brunetta, son già lontano', 'dedicata al suo amico Raffaele D'auria [sic] '. (Previously known only from the manuscript. Listed only by Weinstock[14]: 'given by Donizetti to Raffaele D'Auria. Autograph later belonged to Verdi.')
3. [December 28th, 1843] Romanza, 'Malvina la bella sull'arpa sciogleva'. (Not previously known, and not to be confused with another song entitled 'Malvina': 'Depuis qu'un autre a su te plaire'.)
4. [February 22nd, 1844] Barcaruola, 'Sovra il remo sta curvato'. Property of the music-publisher, Giuseppe Fabricatore. (Not previously known.)
5. [April 4th, 1844] Romanza, 'Se a te d'intorno scherza', 'Dall'Album della Sig.ª Contessa Angela Carradori'. Property of Giuseppe Fabricatore. (Not previously known.)
6. [May 2nd, 1844] Canzonetta, 'Che non mi disse un dì', 'Dedicata alle ornatissime Signorine Elisa e Giulietta Bouchet'. A setting of words from Metastasio's Olimpiade. (Not previously known.)
7. [May 30th, 1844] Arietta, Eterno amore e fè'. Property of Giuseppe Fabricatore. (Listed by Zavadini[15] under 'Melodie ad una voce' as no. 388 'arietta per voce di sopr., n. 1 in Raccolta di canzonette.')

William Ashbrook[16] divides Donizetti's songs into three categories: narrative and 'operatic' songs; romantic songs, closer to ariettas than to lieder; and songs in popular style, often to Neapolitan words, generally in triple rhythm, with forthright melody of a prevailing minor colour. All seven songs in Il Sibilo would seem to belong most easily to the second category, although as one would expect there are cross-influences. The florid and expressive declamation of 'Che non mi disse un dì', the stunned and wounded cry of a woman abandoned by her lover, owes much to the Rossinian cavatina, while 'D'un genior che m'accende', which expresses the impossibility of explaining why one loves, is built over an allegretto cabaletta rhythm. Both therefore show an operatic influence, quite apart from the fact that they are settings of words by Metastasio. 'Addio Brunetta', on the other hand, a sailor's song of farewell to his temporary sweetheart, is necessarily popular in character.

Like so many of Donizetti's songs, these are slight in character, yet saved from triviality by their graceful melodies, their firm sense of shape and direction, and above all by their frequent modulations and their hovering between major and minor modes. Lacking the scope for broader and more extended effects offered by the operatic stage, Donizetti so often seems to have compensated in his songs by chiselling a finely wrought cameo of intricate modulations and changes in tone-colour. The most striking example here is 'Che non mi disse un dì', which passes through several remote as well as nearly-related keys, but frequent modulation is a feature of every song in the collection. 'Se a te d'intorno scherza', in which a suave melody set over a flowing accompaniment is used to express a lover's fidelity and perseverance[17], is predominantly in the major yet keeps glancing towards the minor. The

elegiac 'Malvina la bella' begins in G minor, yet modulates mainly through major keys, and though returning to G minor ends with a simple but effective tierce de Picardie. Even a song like 'Sovra il remo', which suffers an initial disadvantage of banal words[18], is saved by its continuous shifts in key and its eloquent and dramatic sense of climax. Significantly none of the songs is strophic in character. Although one or two are in ternary form, the repetition is never sufficiently exact to destroy the impression of a single developing statement.

No one, knowing the greater riches of Donizetti's operas, would wish to be cast ashore on these small islands for any length of time. Yet he would have to be a very unbending critic who would not welcome a few moments' landing for refreshment among such gentle airs of Donizettian craftsmanship.

NOTES

1. Gianni di Parigi (Milan, 1839) was also staged without his supervision, but in this instance also without his permission.

2. A dangerous statement: it would be more accurate to say that Verdi imitated, assimilated and developed certain features of Donizetti's later operas. The distinction is an important one, since, as John Allitt has pointed out (Journal of the Donizetti Society, no. 1, p. 29), it is doing Donizetti a disservice to 'drive' his music in an attempt to make it sound like early Verdi.

3. This date was later confirmed by the review of the first performance found in Il Sibilo.

4. See his letter to Teodoro Ghezzi of January 30th, 1844 (no. 111 in Studi Donizettiani 1: Contributo all'Epistolario di Gaetano Donizetti: Lettere inedite o sparse raccolte da Guglielmo Barblan e Frank Walker, Bergamo, 1962), in which he renews his thanks to Mercadante. This letter became, in effect, Donizetti's public statement on the outcome of the production, since it was immediately published, and presumably by Ghezzi, in both Il Sibilo (February 13th, 1844) and Il Pirata (March 1st, 1844).

5. G. Zavadini, Donizetti: Vita, Musiche, Epistolario (Bergamo, 1948).

6. Studi Donizettiani 1, etc. (Bergamo, 1962) and Studi Donizettiani 2 (Bergamo, 1972).

7. The full text will be found in Zavadini, op.cit., p. 242.

8. Adjustments to suit the vocal means of particular singers.

9. A search of contemporary Viennese newspapers has revealed that although large numbers of Italian operas were performed in Vienna at this time, they did not include any by Donizetti. The first Donizetti opera to reach Vienna would seem to have been L'Ajo nell' imbarazzo on April 22nd, 1827.

10. A practice discontinued in the second year of publication.

11. The same setting of the words 'Mi lagnerò tacendo' from Metastasio's Siroe which Rossini had earlier included, in manuscript form, in his 'Album de Musique', presented in Paris to Mademoiselle Louise Carlier on the occasion of her marriage in March 1835.

12. In case anyone should wish to take up this suggestion, it should be added that the set of Il Sibilo in the Biblioteca Storia Patria is incomplete. The missing numbers can, however, be found in yet another incomplete set, in the Biblioteca Lucchesi-Palli.

13. G. Zavadini, op. cit., p. 203.

14. Herbert Weinstock, Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1964) p. 389.

15. G. Zavadini, op. cit., p. 203.

16. William Ashbrook, Donizetti (London, 1965) pp. 372-3.

17. Profane or sacred love? According to whether one takes 'oh dio' in the second line as an exclamation or as a literal apostrophe to the deity, so this song becomes either a lover's message to his lady or a most unusual prayer.

18. 'Over his oar a love-lorn sailor is bent ... Tears are his only comfort, for on a stormy night his sweetheart fell into the sea, fell into the sea', and so on ad infinitum.