THE AUTHORSHIP OF 'I PICCIOLI VIRTUOSI AMBULANTI'

By JEREMY COMMONS

Donizetti wrote so many operas that it is difficult to study them all. And I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti ('The little wandering players'), the one-act opera buffa or operetta which was performed by Giovanni Simone Mayr's pupils in Bergamo at the end of their scholastic year in the summer of 1819, must surely come well down on anybody's list. But the present writer, to occupy a spare afternoon in Bergamo in 1958, decided to read the printed libretto[1] which is still preserved there at the Biblioteca Civica. It proved an afternoon of surprises. For it rapidly became clear that the accepted version of the work's authorship is far from accurate.

Zavadini's entry in his catalogue of Donizetti's operas[2] can be translated as follows:

7 - PICCIOLI VIRTUOSI AMBULANTI, opera buffa in one act, libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli, presented at Bergamo in the summer of 1819. Performers: Forini, Gorini, Cantù, Trezzini, pupils at the Pia Scuola di Musica of Bergamo (autograph orchestral score, introduction only, Museo Donizettiano).

In his biography of Donizetti[3], he writes at rather greater length:

Also dating from 1819 is the small work in one act, written for the annual Accademia or end-of-year concert of the pupils of the little conservatorium of of Bergamo, entitled: Piccioli virtuosi ambulanti. Into this short operetta, of which the Introduction survives in autograph, Donizetti also inserted, in the fifth scene, a Recitativo and Aria con coro, taken from the one-act[4] opera buffa, Le nozze in villa, which at that time had only just been written, but which was later performed in the Teatro Vecchio at Mantova in the carnival of 1820-21.

The obvious interpretation of these passages is that Donizetti wrote the music - all of it, even though only the introduction survives (at least in the autograph score) - and that Merelli wrote the libretto - all of it, once again[5].

Now although one does not wish to take one of the greatest of Donizetti scholars to task over such a minor work as I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti, it does look as if the responsibility for the misunderstandings which surround this operetta must be laid at Zavadini's door. For he had certainly seen the libretto. When mentioning the aria from Le nozze in villa he adds the note:

This information is taken from the libretto itself: Piccioli virtuosi ambulanti, a 'musical dramatic action' for the final Accademia of the pupils of the Lezioni Caritatevoli di musica ['Charitable Music Lessons' as Mayr's Pia Scuola was commonly called], Bergamo, Tip. Sonzogni, 1819.

Yet this being the case, why did he not give us a more accurate description of the work? Why did he not tell us - what a perusal of the libretto makes perfectly clear - that the introduction is the only part of Donizetti's autograph to survive simply because, apart from the aria borrowed from Le nozze in villa, it almost certainly represents the sum total of his contribution to the opera?

Let us look at this libretto again, for it is an interesting document, disconcertingly revealing and cryptic by turns.

The first surprise comes on the title-page, where there is no mention of either author or composer. As far as the title-page is concerned, the work is anonymous.

At the beginning of the text proper, we are told that before the performance began, two pupils of the Lezioni Caritatevoli performed a concertante for two violins and orchestra by Kreutzer, and a third pupil played a piano concerto by Antonio Gonzales[6].

The opera itself, which can thus have taken up no more than half the programme, consists of musical items separated by spoken dialogue. The setting is real: the classroom of the Pia Scuola. And the characters are the pupils themselves, acting under their own names: Trezzini, Forini, Gorini, Cantù, Rossi, Campana, Perico, Ceribelli and Ceruti. We see them at their studies, and we hear them performing the items they are preparing for their lessons. The spoken dialogue that is put into their mouths

makes edifying but not very attractive reading: it is humourless, and heavily larded with expressions of gratitude to the Congregazione di Carità (the governors of the Pia Scuola, who formed the audience at this very performance). One the other hand their musical versatility is remarkable and provides ample evidence of the breadth of instruction they received. All of them have to sing, particularly Forini, Gorini and Rossi. Gorini and Cantù also play the piano, Perico and Ceruti the violin, and Ceribelli the guitar. Perico, moreover, has to recite poetry in addition to his other accomplishments[7].

The plot is fictitious, but it is not difficult to imagine that incidents such as this must have occurred frequently enough when Mayr began his 'charitable lessons' to train choirboys drawn from poor families. Three little waifs - the 'wandering players' of the title - are befriended by the pupils of the school. Their mother has died and their father is ill, so armed with guitar, violin and triangle, they have set out to earn such pittance as their playing can bring them. The happy ending may be readily foreseen: the pupils apply to the Congregazione di Carità with the result that the father is admitted to a convalescent home and the three children are accepted as pupils of the Pia Scuola.

The introduction, the surviving part of the score, shows four of the pupils, Forini, Gorini, Cantù and Trezzini, preparing their lessons in arithmetic, geography, Latin and history. A footnote informs the reader that 'the musical composition is by Sig. Gaetano Donizetti'. Now if Donizetti were the composer of the whole opera, as Zavadini would seem to suggest, why is this acknowledged in a footnote, rather than on the title-page? But the fact is that Donizetti did not compose the whole opera. This soon becomes clear. The second item is a spoken recitation, translated from the German (again according to a footnote) by Bartolomeo Merelli; the third is sung to a melody from L'amor marinaro, an opera by Giuseppe Weigl. And so on. Indeed the 'programme' of the opera, to list all the items (and the notes of acknowledgment contained in footnotes and text) is as follows:

1. Introduction. The musical composition is by Sig. Gaetano Donizetti.
2. Fable. A free translation made from the German by Sig. Bartolomeo Merelli.
3. 'Pria che di nuovo lo studio imprenda'. All in turn sing to the air of Sig. Giuseppe Weigl in the opera entitled L'Amor Marinaro.
4. Piano Sonata with Violin accompaniment [sic]. The composition is by Sig. Antonio Gonzales.
5. Scena ed Aria, 'Voi v'opporreste invan... Non mostrarmi in tale istante'. The composition, by Sig. Gaetano Donizetti, is from the opera entitled Le Nozze in villa: the poetry is by Sig. Bartolameo [sic] Merelli[8].
6. Swiss national country dance.
7. 'Suonatore sventurato'. The Romance which Rossi sings (at intervals also playing the triangle) is to a Swiss air. The words are by Sig. Bartolameo Merelli.
8. Scena e Duetto, 'Amor possente nume'. The composition is by Sig. Gioachino [sic] Rossini in the opera entitled Armida.
9. Finale.

I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti, then, was a pasticcio: a thread of story to join together a number of item in which the pupils of the Lezioni Caritatevoli might display their talents. And Donizetti's role in it as composer did not extend - could not extend - beyond the two items explicitly attributed to him (and, possibly, but as we shall see not very probably, the anonymous finale). Merelli's role appears similarly circumscribed, and while there is no proof that he did not write the libretto as a whole, the obvious comment - as for Donizetti - is that had he done so, there would have been no need to acknowledge his authorship of three specific items.

Donizetti and Merelli, it must be concluded, contributed to I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti; it does not appear likely that they designed it.

Who, then, can have done? Who in the circle of the Pia Scuola, might most readily be expected to

have prepared an operetta of this nature for performance by the pupils? And the sycophantic tone of the spoken dialogue - who would have had most reason to address the Congregazione di Carità in this way? And the anonymous finale (which must have been the most extended number in the score, containing as it does a five-part prayer[9] - who, rather than Donizetti, is most likely to have composed this most important item and yet to have remained anonymous?

There can be only one answer to all these questions: Giovanni Simone Mayr. As head of the Pia Scuola, it would have been perfectly natural for him to have undertaken the preparation of such a work, and equally natural that he should have omitted his own name from the credits. The tone of the dialogue becomes understandable when one realises that this was the head of the Pia Scuola addressing his Board of Governors[10]. And that he should have reserved for himself the composition of the finale with its five-part prayer is both convincing and interesting - interesting since the recent revival of his better-known operas has suggested that it was from him that Donizetti gained his own noted ability to handle complex ensembles.

But this attribution of I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti to Mayr does not depend merely upon a process of deduction. We know that Mayr did compose operettas of this kind - one of them is regularly mentioned in biographies of Donizetti, for he took part in it when he was himself a pupil of the Pia Scuola. In 1811, in an operetta called Il piccolo compositore di musica, composed by Mayr for just such another occasion, Donizetti had to go to the piano and pretend to improvise a waltz. His performance was prefaced by the words 'My mind is vast, my talent quick, my imagination prompt, and at composition I am a flash of lightning', while a footnote in the libretto informed the audience that he was indeed the composer of the piece - probably the first of his compositions ever to be performed in public.

Finally, the last link of all, with which this history of I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti falls into place. In 1853 a memorial to Mayr (who had died in 1845) was set up in the church of S. Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, and the inaugural oration, delivered by

Giovanni Finazzi, was afterwards printed[11]. As an appendix, there was annexed to it a catalogue of Mayr's works, based on earlier unpublished material by Girolamo Calvi. There, in the list of operas, arranged chronologically, we find the entry:

1805 - Bergamo - La prova dell'Accademia finale; Il piccolo compositore di Musica; I piccoli [sic] virtuosi ambulanti, etc.: small stage-works or farses for the final concerts of the pupils of the Scuole caritatevoli di Musica[12].

This really leaves no further doubt: Mayr was the guiding spirit behind I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti. The only problem that Finazzi's catalogue raises is that of the date, and this need not detain us. It is obvious enough that not all these operettas were composed in 1805. What has happened is that the cataloguer - Finazzi or Calvi as the case may be - has gathered them together, unimportant as he considered them in relation to the rest of Mayr's works, and conveniently listed them all under the year in which the Pia Scuola was founded.

Although the principal credit for I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti must therefore go to Mayr, and not to Donizetti, it would be a pity to see it omitted from the works of either composer. Donizetti never forgot the debt he owed to Mayr, and although in later life he was to pass long periods without returning home to Bergamo, there was always an eagerly acknowledged bond between ex-pupil and early instructor. His contribution to I piccioli virtuosi ambulanti is testimony of his gratitude. It is an acknowledgment, too, of the debt he owed to the Pia Scuola and the Congregazione di Carità. It was thanks to them that, fifth child of the janitor of a pawnshop, he was able to set out on a career which was eventually to make him, at least until the rise of Verdi, the most popular operatic composer in Europe. Without their aid, what chance would be have stood? May he not very well have begun and ended like the waifs depicted in this operetta: as a picciolo virtuoso ambulante?

NOTES

1. 'I Piccioli Virtuosi Ambulanti' Azione drammatico-musicale per l'Accademia Finale degli Allievi delle lezioni caritatevoli, sotto gli auspici della Congregazione di Carità di Bergamo. Dalla Tipografia Sonzogni, 1819.

2. G. Zavadini, Donizetti: Vita, Musiche, Epistolario (Bergamo, 1948) p. 170.

3. Zavadini, op. cit., p. 16.

4. In fact in two acts.

5. This, certainly, is the way later writers have interpreted it. Herbert Weinstock, for example, leans heavily on Zavadini in his Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1964) when he writes:

   ... for the annual student concert at the music school he composed a one-act opera buffa to a libretto by Merelli, Piccioli Virtuosi ambulanti, sometimes referred to as Piccoli Virtuosi di musica ambulanti. Into it (Scene 5), he inserted a recitative and aria with chorus taken from Le Nozze in villa, still another opera buffa to a Merelli text, which he had composed earlier in 1819.

   In his 'Chronological List of Donizetti's Operas' which follows the biography, he adds that the libretto is 'attributed to both Bartolomeo Merelli and Gherardo Bevilacqua-Aldrovandini' and the the autograph score is 'lost'.

   William Ashbrook, Donizetti (London, 1965), gives a similar statement, but confuses matters still further when he says that both the introduction and the aria with chorus were borrowed from Le nozze in villa.

6. Teacher of piano and organ at the Pia Scuola from 1806 until his death in 1830.

7. Their later careers make an interesting sequel to their early promise as shown in this operetta. Girolamo Forini (1807-1876) remained in Bergamo

and taught singing at the Pia Scuola from 1829 to 1869; he also enjoyed a modest career as a composer, and Donizetti made a point of going from Milan to hear his opera Lutaldo di Vicolungo when it was produced in Bergamo on January 15th, 1842. Carlo Trezzini became a tenor of some repute. Giacomo Cantù continued his musical career as a composer, organist and pianist. Pietro Ceribelli became organist at the cathedral in Bergamo, and Giovanni Battista Rossi taught singing at the Conservatorium in Milan. Filippo Perico appears to have pursued a worthwhile career as a violinist. Of the entire cast, Orazio Campana and Francesco Tobia Ceruti appear to be the only two of whose later careers nothing is known.

8. The autograph score of Le nozze in villa is lost, but there is a copied manuscript orchestral score in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, in which this aria duly appears.

9. The Lezioni Caritatevoli existed primarily to supply choirboys for the church of S. Maria Maggiore. A prayer, in a plot such as this, is dramatically risible, but then the whole operetta is little more than a vehicle to display the pupils' ability in different fields of musical activity. It is not so inappropriate that in the finale, the most important item of all, they should demonstrate their ability in the branch of music for which they were principally trained.

10. The tone is paralleled, moreover, in the letter that Mayr had written at an earlier date - October 28th, 1815 - asking the Congregazione di Carità to contribute financially towards sending Donizetti to study with Padre Mattei in Bologna.

11. Per la Solenne inaugurazione del monumento eretto alla memoria del celebre Maestro Giovanni Simone Mayr nella basilica di S. Maria Maggiore in Bergamo. Orazione detta la Monsignor Canonico teologico Giovanni Finazzi. Bergamo, dalla Tipografia Mazzoleni, MDCCCLIII. The short title, printed on the spine, is Orazione Funebre e Memorie di Giovanni Simone Mayr.

12. The same entry is to be found, but in abbreviated form, in F. Alborghetti and M. Galli, Gaetano Donizetti e G. Simone Mayr (Bergamo, 1875).



La Musica Sacra

Monumento eretto in Bergamo alla memoria di Simone Mayr
Scolpito in marmo da Francesco Pozzi