Maria Stuarda

By Jeremy Commons

A tragic heroine, Schiller believed, was one who becomes transfigured through suffering. As her ultimate fate approaches, she rises above it to a new plane of awareness: exalted, sublime, forgiven and forgiving. In Mary Queen of Scots he found a figure whose final serenity was historically true; but he interpreted the fact, whatever may have been its cause, as the actual and evident sign that she had entered into a state of grace. And, consciously or unconsciously, Donizetti and his librettist, Giuseppe Bardari, remained true to Schiller's original when they set his play as an opera in 1834. Some of Donizetti's other heroines die pathetically, some with cries of anguish and protest; but Mary looks back from a new-found 'peace that passeth all understanding', forgiving those she leaves behind her :

Di un cor che more reca il perdono
A chi mi offese, mi condannò.
Dille che lieta resti sul trono,
Che i suoi bei giorni non turberò.
Sulla Bretagna, sulla sua vita,
Favor celeste implorerò.
Ah! dal rimorso non sia punita:
Tutto col sangue cancellerò.*

It is this conception of Mary that gives Donizetti's opera its individual quality and which has been responsible for its assuming, in the comparatively few years that it has been known to 20th century audiences - since its revival in Bergamo in 1958 - a major place in his output.

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* 'Carry the pardon of a heart that is dying to her who offended me, condemned me. Tell her that joyful she may rest upon the throne, that I shall not disturb her happy days. Upon Britain, upon her life, I shall invoke heavenly favour. Ah! may she not be punished by remorse: with my blood I shall cancel all.

It is this conception of Mary, too, that must be set in the balance as sufficient merit to outweigh the historical inaccuracy of the plot. How often has Schiller been criticised for bringing Mary and Elizabeth unhistorically face to face in Fotheringhay park, and for making Leicester Mary's lover! His own defence would have been that his imaginative view of the Scottish queen was far more important than historical accuracy - 'History,' he once wrote, 'is only a store-house for my imagination, and its subjects must put up with what they become in my hands.' He speaks here, admittedly, with the cavalier bravado of poetic licence; but even if we wish to judge more rigorously, neither of his major liberties with history would seem to justify a recent dismissal of the plot as 'ridiculous'. Some slight justification, at least, for making Mary, as well as Elizabeth, in love with Leicester lies in the fact that their names were historically twice linked: once when Elizabeth suggested her favourite as a suitable consort for her Scottish cousin, and again when he was implicated in one of the several conspiracies aimed at rescuing her from captivity. As for the confrontation in Fotheringhay park, so essential to the dramatic structure of both play and opera, it is, surely, a translation into action of a clash which was implicit in history - of a clash which took place in the letters the queens exchanged.

It is, once again, this conception of Mary which is responsible for her role being more inspired than that of Elizabeth. Donizetti clearly felt sympathy for both characters - he appreciated Elizabeth's predicament as ruler and woman, just as he felt for Mary as her prisoner - and he took pains to differentiate the two roles dramatically, giving Elizabeth fiery, emphatic declamation to contrast with Mary's limpid, legato lines. But by the time we reach the last scenes of the opera, his emotional identification is inevitably and clearly with Mary.

It is, finally, this imaginative vision of Mary and her exalted nobility in death which has resulted in the opera's urgent sense of direction. Schiller himself noted that 'one special characteristic' of the story 'is that one sees the catastrophe from the very first scenes, and that one is led ever more closely to it while the action of the play seems to be moving away

from it'. Donizetti and Bardari, in pruning Schiller's plot, have simplified the web of political intrigue, and have enhanced this feeling of a sparse, clearly-constructed action leading to an inescapable end. And since that end is the focus of all interest, it is not surprising that the final act is musically as well as dramatically the culmination of the work, growing out of but eclipsing all that has gone before. In the words of Kenneth Loveland, 'The score consists of a stream of solos, duets, trios and ensembles which are in the greatest tradition of the period. The role of Mary herself... is worthy of the finest modern sopranos, and the last scene, which she dominates, has a flow of noble, tragic music which is certainly not surpassed by the best that Donizetti wrote for Lucia. In it the composer really gets down to the job of expressing tragedy through lyricism and makes hardly any concessions to the demands of his period for extravagant and un-realistic ornamentation.'

To both composer and librettist must go the credit of having created a work which ranks highly and worthily in the literature that has grown up around an enigmatic and fascinating queen - a queen who, in the words of Swinburne:

. . . was born right royal; full of sins,
It may be, and by circumstance or choice
Dyed and defaced with bloody stains and black,
Unmerciful, unfaithful, but of heart
So fiery high, so swift of spirit and clear,
In extreme danger and pain so lifted up,
So of all violent things inviolable,
So large of courage, so superb of soul ...
She shall be a world's wonder to all time,
A deadly glory watched of marvelling men
Not without praise, not without noble tears,
And if without what she would never have
Who had it never, pity - from none
Quite without reverence and some kind of love
For what which was so royal.

