The Unmistakable Donizettian Voice

By

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Before the first night of a new production of Maria Stuarda at Bologna early in 1976, Lorenzo Arruga introduced the opera to a large audience and the following is a résumé of what he said. translated and adapted from the Italian by Giacomo Antonini.

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The composer will not attend this evening's performance of his opera, but his absence is not of his choosing; the fact is that, as now only too often happens with the most eagerly-awaited operas that are new to an audience, the composer died in the last century. It is a pity, nevertheless, because in our gloomy musical, theatrical and cultural world, that is at the same time so precarious and so formalistic, Donizetti is just the man we would really wish to see; a true man, unpredictable in his reactions - indeed, so much so, that before listening to Maria Stuarda, whilst for a moment we talk over the importance and beauty of the opera, the incredible reaction that it originally provoked and the way the composer then behaved, we shall be first curious, then amused and surprised and finally, in an unexpected way, very thoughtful.

When Maria Stuarda was written, it did not even receive a first performance; it was suspended for ideological reasons and motives of public order after the dress rehearsal. This happened in Naples, in 1834, under King Ferdinand II, one of those Bourbons who started their reign by giving constitutional guarantees and later light-heartedly revoked them. The 'confession' scene, when the Catholic queen, Mary Stuart, admits to her confessor the sins that she had committed through passionate love and her connivance in the crimes that were the consequence, and the scene in the preceeding

act in which Mary violently insults and, accuses Queen Elizabeth proved to be unacceptable. It was all done with intense passion, great nobility of expression and powerful humanity, as always in romantic opera, nevertheless, because the people were already questioning the sacred right of kings and as there was what we call preventive censorship, it was natural to enforce it.

For Donizetti, it was a very great blow; not only for the fact in itself, which increased his already severely-tried nervous tension but also for his personal prestige. He was professor of composition at the Royal Conservatory of Naples, which meant that he held one of the most important chairs in Europe, for it had been one of the most illustrious schools of music during two glorious centuries. He had been given this honoured post because of his fame after Anna Bolena, L'elisir d'amore, Lucrezia Borgia and several other operas. Donizetti was also a very learned musical scholar, being one of those who discovered Haydn and Beethoven in the first decade of the 19th century when they were practically unknown in Italy. He was a conductor of great technical ability, for whom the great Rossini had a predilection and the composer of operas that were to have an enormous success all over Europe, starting in Paris. He had already written many of his nineteen string quartets, quintets and instrumental compositions many years before the re-evaluation of chamber music in Italy and the creation of the 'Società del Quartetto', which took place in the second half of the 19th century. A man of wide culture, highly interested in literature and the theatre, Donizetti had a great admiration for Manzoni, knew Dante's work well, quoted Ariosto from memory and was very familiar with the works of Torquato Tasso. Even before they were translated into Italian, he was aware of the works of Walter Scott, Victor Hugo and many other European writers of the time.

What could have been his reaction when Maria Stuarda was banned?. One hypothesis we could suggest is that he could have appealed to the intellectuals and cultured men of the time, who, in Naples, were seasoned fighters and, as they had shewn a few years earlier were interested in the operatic world when they rallied round Rossini.

They were heirs to those who had led the failed but glorious revolution of 1799, and were searching for

inviolable beauty in the cause of art and politically looking forward to new times. Today, there would certainly have been a manifesto covered with famous signatures and probably a demonstration; in those days it would not have been difficult to rouse public opinion. Another hypothesis would be that Donizetti could have exploited the influential friendships he had made both by his natural charm and as the authoritative 'maestro di camera' of the Prince of Salerno; through these friends, he could have sought a compromise, as had often been done before and was usual in his day, and indeed, is, I suspect, not entirely a forgotten practice, I do not say in Naples alone, but in all Italy. But, for the first performance of Maria Stuarda, neither hypothesis is correct. Nothing of the kind happened - Donizetti did not even consider it.

Albeit, Maria Stuarda must have interested him greatly it was a drama of unusual importance with the fusion of passions and political motives opposing the Anglicans and Catholics grouped around the Tudor and Stuart dynasties. Enflamed by the two women, rivals for the throne, who had become almost legendary and mysteriously linked in the romantic mind by their tragic loves, it had made a great impression on the romantic imagination, for which this historic period was more familiar than it was clearly known.

For two centuries, a long chain of dramatic authors had taken possession of the story, starting with the great, tragic 17th century writer Federico della Valle, with his Reina di Scozia, continuing with playwrights such as Vittorio Alfieri and Friedrich Schiller, who were joined, timidly, by opera composers such as Carlo Coccia and Saverio Mercadante, to name only the two best-known. Giuseppe Bardari, the author of Donizetti's libretto and a non-professional highly valued by him, chose Schiller's drama in the Italian translation made by Maffei in 1830 as his basic source. In his adaptation, Bardari has tended to deepen and increase the lyrical solitude of Mary, whose full and fascinating beauty is not only an overwhelming and fatal gift but also a means of disturbing the emotions in all those who love or are near her and bring troubled fear to those who have to condemn her; innocent candour recaptured through suffering or the sudden, almost childish self-oblivion in memories of early youth and

love of nature. Everything around Mary has been simplified to the purest line of operatic form, reflections and characters revealed by the action. These latter are reduced to their essential aspect: Lord Cecil personifies with impressive force all those who incited Queen Elizabeth to sign the death sentence of her rival; Talbot becomes both defender, confessor and Mary's Catholic priest; Leicester is no longer only the calculating diplomat and Elizabeth's favourite but has also absorbed the impetuous nature and the overwhelming passion for Mary Stuart that were those of another character, Mortimer, in Schiller's drama. Even if you only read the libretto, you can clearly see how concisely and coherently the story proceeds; how the figure of Queen Elizabeth is distinctly shown in the official strength of her power and at the same time in her regrets for the love that she feels has been disturbed by her political rival, in the tragic continual doubts that assail her, and how the destinies of these two women are inexorably interwoven in the last decisive hours.

When you listen to the music for the first time your soul is immediately touched by Donizetti's unmistakable voice. You are surprised by his capacity to sustain strong prolonged melody; delight wells up at the first notes of the arias, the sudden effusion of revealing words, the absolute force of the finales to each act, the bravura with which he sums up, in an 'ensemble' what each of the various characters has in common and in contrast with the others, being forced to look into themselves and, for a moment, arrest the passage of time. Then, the supreme naturalness of the orchestration, where spontaneous instinct is very elegantly expressed with a refinement influenced by the great Austrian composers; the beauty of the instrumental score, whether in the intuitive intervention of the clarinet that announces Mary Stuart's last appearance ('Io vi rivedo alfin'.), or shortly before, in the art that alternates and intermingles cellos, flutes with clarinets, and trumpets, all the instruments stressed by the sinister rolling of the drums when the chorus foresees and tells of Mary's tragic execution. When one hears this music again and reflects on it, one discovers more and more links between the different parts, the intense dramatic rhythm and the sense of

proportion. One is deeply moved by the chorus of the Scots, when they suddenly emerge to give a deep, meditative meaning to the story in their moral condemnation of those who kill the Queen of Scotland, with the transposition in the music from E minor to E major, using that very characteristic, tragic, all-embracing and timeless 'Donizettian major key' that we can hear in other operas by the master, such as Lucia di Lammermoor and the finale of the little-known Il paria. One is astounded by the varied vocalism of Mary, from the moment when she appears and tells of her joy beneath the open sky with 'fioritura' and melodic lightness, until later, when vertiginous intervals and different timbres express her shuddering horror at the evil she has committed; then, the crescendo and sudden modulation which indicate her ardour and her gradual discovery and conquest of a profound religious faith, and, even more, one feels that the music rises from her inner being. One senses, too, that here, as so often with Donizetti, he has been influenced by Manzoni's meditation in his drama, Adelchi, for, as with Manzoni's Ermengarda, Mary, the fragile royal victim, gives significance to the whole story through her sacrifice, because she accepts to redeem it with her prayer.

Well now, what did Gaetano Donizetti do when his Maria Stuarda was prohibited? It is incredible, but, to save the venture, he accepted to redo the text entirely and, with the help of Pietro Salatino for the libretto, he transformed the opera into Buondelmonte. We have a record of his complaints about this in a light-hearted letter in verse written to Jacopo Ferreti, a friend who wrote several librettos for him.

What was the reason for his behaviour? We can imagine what we will; the simplest explanation - money- is difficult to accept because we know from his life that Donizetti was never money-minded. There may have been a certain fatalism in the hope that the original opera would be performed the following year at La Scala in Milan, as did, in fact, happen. I would suggest two other possible reasons: the first, that it was a habit of all opera composers in the last century to try to save difficult situations with a new creative act; the other, is a certain wisdom, disillusioned but firm, that made him believe little in polemics and fleeting

disputes but, on the contrary, to trust that his creations would in time find their true destiny.

And this, as we all now know, did indeed happen with Maria Stuarda, as with other operas by Donizetti.

Translator's note

1. Franca Cella who published an excellent and exhaustive study on the French sources of the libretti of Donizetti's operas in 1966, has now completed a study of all the other sources of Donizetti's opera libretti, a publication that is eagerly awaited.

2. Lorenzo Arruga's really expert presentation of Maria Stuarda corresponds entirely to what has been written about Donizetti as an opera composer by authoritive critics such as Imre Fabian and Giovanna Kessler (Opernwelt) in Germany, Jacques Gheusi (Diapason), André Tubeuf (Harmonie), Sergio Segalini (Lyrica) and Carla Maria Casanova (Opéra) in France. What they all assert is the best answer to the writings of certain obdurate, prejudiced people who, in order to diminish the merits of this great musician whose works they ignore, still write with rather ridiculous ironic superiority of the 'Donizetti lobby'.

G.A.