Maria Stuarda
The Opera and its Music
By
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(Since I first wrote these passages about Maria Stuarda a number of years ago, I have discovered some errors in them and had others pointed out to me. The clarification of the past is always a corporate effort and whatever one puts down about it at any given time can at best be only the product of considered and informed judgment exercising itself upon the information available. To all past and present writers upon Donizetti I am grateful, and I am eager to see what those in the future may turn up.)

Donizetti's intensely active career as a composer of operas divides itself into four principal phases. The first extends from 1816 until 1822, a period of apprentice work, climaxed by his first fleeting success, the now-forgotton Zoraide di Granata. The second stage, mostly centred in Naples, lasts from 1822 until 1830. During this period Donizetti consciously absorbed the style of Rossini and then worked through it to arrive at a more personal idiom with Anna Bolena, his first great international success. The third phase of his career, like the second, revolved around Naples and runs from 1831 to 1838. To this period belong a number of Donizetti's more familiar operas: L'elisir d'amore, Lucrezia Borgia, Maria Stuarda, Lucia di Lammermoor, Belisario and Roberto Devereux. The final stage of Donizetti's career had its focus divided between Paris and Vienna. It ends with his mental and physical collapse late in 1845. These years saw the first production of La fille du régiment, La favorite, Linda di Chamounix, Don Pasquale, Maria di Rohan, and Dom Sébastien. Such a division of Donizetti's career is an over-simplification, but it permits a handy over-view of his activity.

The composition and launching of Maria Stuarda, probably the 43rd of Donizetti's nearly 70 operas, was beset by troubles.

The first difficulty concerned the librettist. During the production of Lucrezia Borgia at La Scala late in 1833, Donizetti had come to what turned out to be a parting of the ways with Felice Romani, then regarded as the best librettist available. The rift between Donizetti and Romani was not a personal one; basically it grew from Romani's dislike of the increasingly violent and melodramatic tendencies of high-romantic plots, from his dismay over the many problems Lucrezia raised with the censorship, and from his desire to take up the post of editor to the official gazette of Piedmont. When the time drew close for the opera which Donizetti's contract with the San Carlo demanded for the summer of 1834, he used every means of persuasion at his disposal to enlist Romani's collaboration, but from Turin, where Romani had just embarked upon his career as a royalist journalist, there was no word at all — just a reverberating silence. And so, at the last minute, Donizetti had to materialize a librettist and find a subject. He came to what must have been a precipitous agreement with Giuseppe Bardari, then just seventeen years old and a law student, who had little or no previous experience writing for the stage.

The first indication they had decided on a subject occurs on June 7, 1834, in a letter from Donizetti to his publisher Ricordi. 'Here I will do Maria Stuarda' That is all he says; probably at that moment he knew little more himself. Six weeks later, however, he wrote to his father in Bergamo to inform him of his recent appointment as Professor of Counterpoint and Composition at the Naples Conversatory, and he adds, 'the middle of next month my new opera Maria Stuarda will have its première.' Putting these letters side by side, one sees that in the space of six weeks the libretto had been completed and the music sufficiently advanced so that Donizetti assumed the rehearsals would start about August 1. But for all his sangiune predictions, and it was Donizetti's habit to be optimistic about such matters, the dress rehearsal was not held until probably 6 September, when the trial of the new score produced a 'furore', as Donizetti reported, perhaps with intentional ambiguity, in a letter to the baritone Salvatori (22 September 1834; Z*30 S.D.I).

He adds another bit of news in the same letter: 'The King forbade the performance as the Queen is descended from [Mary Stuart].'

The questions raised by the banning of Maria Stuarda at Naples in 1834 were illuminatingly examined by Jeremy Commons in a paper he presented at the Donizetti Conference in Bergamo, 1975. He raises serious doubts about the tradition that Queen Maria Cristina attended the dress rehearsal and fainted during the last act, pointing out that as a devout woman who disliked the theatre she would be unlikely to do anything so unconventional as to attend a dress rehearsal. I suspect this tradition got started when some later writer learning the Queen had been displeased with the subject - her ancestress Mary Stuart being generally regarded in Italy as a martyr to her Catholic faith - but unaware of the family relationship between the two royal ladies, invented out of hand the story that Mary Cristina fainted at the dress rehearsal, utilizing thereby the princple of se non ẽ vero ẽ ben trovato. Whatever reasons lay behind the banning of the opera, Jeremy Commons has shown there were serious questions about the plot from the time the libretto had been submitted to the censors, even though the musical preparations were allowed to proceed until the last minute. When word of the interdiction came, it came as a royal command and to that there was no possible recourse then in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Donizetti sent an ironical report of these events to Ferretti on October 7, 1834 "...Stuarda has been forbidden, heaven knows why! but better not ask, as it is the King himself who ordered it...I suggested another subject, Maria Stuarda not being permitted, but Giovanna Gray (Lady Jane Gray) met the same fate: the opera died a second time before it could be resurrected. 'What can we do? Maestro, help!' the management shouted. And then, noble bugger that I am, I answered: 'It will take money. You were going to give me 1400 ducats for the opera; add 600 to that and I will be able to help.' That was settled in a few words. Thus, Buondelmonte came to light, and Maestro Donizetti tears up part of his work and then revises and re-revises. (What beautiful verses! Accidenti!) A new duet and new choruses have been pasted together; spurious recitatives have already been copied. Today

the first rehearsal of this concoction was held. If I get out of this safe and sound, never again, never again will I meddle like this!..."

From Donizetti's letter it is clear that although Maria Stuarda had been banned, the score was hastily re-vamped and a new text (the work of Pietro Salatino) contrived to fit it. This new version was entitled Buondelmonte, and far from having anything to do with Tudor England - the appropriate sets and costumes for Stuarda having already been created - the new plot dealt with family rivalries in Florence circa 1215, when the Guelph and Ghibelline antagonisms were introduced there. Donizetti's letter to Ferretti gives some insight into the violent changes in the plot. 'You will get the idea if I tell you that the big prayer in Stuarda has turned into a fine, full conspiracy in Buondelmonte. The leading female character went to her death? Now it is the tenor Pedrazzi who dies. It was Del Sere who signed the death sentence? Now she suffers ill-treatment. There used to be six characters in all? Now there are ten or more. You can imagine what the opera has become! The same scenery, appropriate or not, will be used. I haven't been able to bring myself to ask whether it works or not...'

Near the end of this letter Donizetti refers to an event that had occurred during one of the last rehearsals of Stuarda. The battle between Giuseppina Ronzi De Begnis, who had been assigned the title role, and Anna Del Sere, the Elisabetta, was one of the more colorful bits of operatic gossip of the time. "You know of the fight between the women, but I don't know if you heard that Ronzi maligned me. Believing me out of earshot, she said: 'Donizetti protects that whore of a Del Sere!' And I unexpectedly replied: 'I do not protect either of you, but those two queens were whores and you two are whores.' She was convinced, she was either ashamed or decided to keep quiet. She said no more, the rehearsal continued, she sang, and then the opera wasn't given..." The story goes that when Ronzi in the scene between Maria and Elisabetta turns on her tormenter and calls her a vil bastarda, Del Sere, forgetting her role and taking the text literally, attacked Ronzi, who retaliated by knocking her rival down and pummelling her, while the whole San Carlo resounded to their screams of rage.

Neither this battle, nor the circumstances that led Maria Stuarda into becoming at the last minute Buondelmonte augured well for the new score. Small wonder, then, that Buondelmonte, when it was given on October 18, 1834 made no lasting impression. And for all the aggressiveness of Ronzi and Del Sere, one can readily sympathize with a cast that had just learned a new score having to re-learn substantially the same music to a different text and different plot. In spite of the failure of Buondelmonte, Donizetti had not lost faith in the opera in its original form of Maria Stuarda. With the King of Naples' ban upon it, obviously the original opera could only be produced outside of the King's territories; accordingly Donizetti's thoughts turned first to Milan, where he could count on his publisher Ricordi's aid.

For a little while it looked as though Maria Stuarda might be given at La Scala near the end of December 1834, a full year before it was actually produced there. The cause for Stuarda was being urged by none other than the irrepressible Ronzi, who was scheduled to open that season at La Scala in Donizetti's newest opera, Gemma di Vergy. Never a bashful woman, Ronzi suggested that the second opera of the season should be Stuarda, with herself, of course, as Maria. After a little consideration, Donizetti rejected Ronzi's rash proposal. As he wrote to Ricordi, he knew well from personal experience just how capricious the La Scala public could be, and he could well imagine what a jaundiced eye they would turn upon a composer and an ambitious prima donna who courted their favour in two new works in immediate succession. He added that he was afraid of being betrayed by Ronzi, 'who before had said she could not endure the part of Maria Stuarda.' He urged that the opera be put off for a season, and to make his offer more attractive he volunteered to write a full-scale overture to Maria Stuarda. By May of 1835, the production is set for the following December, but without Ronzi; the title role had been assigned to Maria Malibran.

Malibran (1808-1836) was the most celebrated singing personality of her generation. The daughter of the celebrated Spanish tenor Manuel Garcia and elder sister of the imposing Pauline Viardot, Malibran had won

a great reputation in New York, London and Paris for the dazzling expressiveness of her extensive mezzo-soprano voice and for her originality as an actress. When she made her first appearances in Italy (in Naples in 1832 and in Milan in 1834), she aroused extraordinary enthusiasm. Today it is difficult to catch a clear impression of a singer who lived before the days of the phonograph or the camera, particularly one able to inspire reams of uncritical adulation. Yet from the various accounts of Malibran emerge two conflicting impressions. According to one, she was an extraordinarily gifted singer who relied heavily on spontaneous impulse or inspiration. When things went well and she was in form, she could arouse fanatical approval. According to the other impression, she was a wilful singer, and when she was out of sorts and things did not go her way, she left her audiences unmoved. Malibran was only 28 when she died, leaving a romantic legend that obscures the truth. There seems to be no doubt, however, that Malibran's unpredictable character jeopardized the Milanese première of Maria Stuarda.

When Donizetti arrived in Milan early in December 1835 for the La Scala production of Maria Stuarda, he found the theatre in uproar. The singer whom he counted on for Elisabetta, a soprano named Sofia Schoberlechner, was unhappy with her role. Finding it not important enough to coincide with her own view of her merits, she stormed and eventually rejected the part, being replaced by Giacinta Puzzi-Toso, who gained more fame as a singing teacher in Paris during the 1860's than she ever earned upon the stage of La Scala. Schoberlechner's self-esteem was bolstered by the fact she had been chosen to open the season at La Scala in the first Italian production of Bellini's I puritani. This bit of casting raises a crucial question. Why was the less celebrated Schoberlechner given priority over Malibran in this important assignment, particularly when it was known that Bellini, before his death a few months earlier, had made a special version of I puritani 'expressly' for Malibran? Whatever the answer it can scarcely be one that elated the impressionable Malibran.

Although there was dissension among the ranks of the singers, other things related to Stuarda seemed to be progressing nicely. As early as November 12, the Austrian censors had passed the libretto without changing a syllable. (Judging from the printed libretto, some changes had been introduced before it was submitted, but then someone, probably Donizetti himself, persuaded Malibran to use the original text, including the famous vil bastarda.) On December 16, Donizetti got around to signing an agreement to supervise all phases of the production, for which he was to be paid about $1,250. On a private level, however, Donizetti had sustained a severe shock when he learned of his father's death on December 9. He was unable to go to Bergamo for the funeral, either because the state of affairs in the theatre would not permit his absence, or else because he could not bring himself to go. (In his letters to friends at Bergamo at this time, he could not even bring himself to write the word 'funeral'.)

At La Scala by the 28th of December, the date first announced for the prima of Maria Stuarda, things had ground to a stand-still, and one can imagine the state of Donizetti's nerves. Malibran was sick, unable to sing, and no one had an inkling when she would be able to sing. That she did on December 30 can be explained not by Malibran's sudden recovery, but by the fact that she stood to be penalized 3,000 francs if she did not appear by that date. Obviously, Malibran was more concerned about her pocketbook than about the fate of the new opera. Donizetti described the opening night in a letter to a friend as 'painful, from start to finish'. Malibran was voiceless, also the hapless Puzzi-Toso. The audience was quickly aware of Malibran's motives for appearing when she was in poor condition and made their disapproval clearly apparent. Besides Malibran as Maria, the cast that night consisted of Puzzi-Toso (Elisabetta), Reina (Leicester), Ignazio Marini (Talbot), Pietro Novelli (Cecil),and Moja (Anna Kennedy). Donizetti himself conducted the first three performances and then scurried off to Venice, where another new opera of his, Belisario, was to have its première in little more than a month.

The subsequent history of Maria Stuarda at La Scala that season did nothing to raise Donizetti's hopes. Malibran apparently was in better vocal shape for the second and third performances (as Donizetti reports she was applauded), but after the seventh performance the censors demanded changes. No longer could Maria denounce Elisabetta as vil bastarda; no longer could Maria kneel in the scene in which Talbot hears her final confession. Malibran promptly refused to accept these changes. Thereafter, on four further evenings, only the first act of Maria Stuarda was given, in which Malibran did not appear, and this was followed without any dramatic logic by the second and third acts of Rossini's Otello, with Malibran as Desdemona. After this humiliating debacle Maria Stuarda had to wait over 130 years to be heard again in La Scala.

Following its Milanese premiere, Maria Stuarda received, until 1866, about a dozen productions in various Italian theatres, as well as performances in Spain, Portugal, and Malta; details of the history of this opera during the 19th century are explored elsewhere in this Journal. A revealing letter by Donizetti to the conductor Mazzetti in Faenza (Z.* 235) indicates he had come to expect that Stuarda would be performed in a mutilated condition, a clear sign that his faith in the opera had been undermined by his disillusioning experience at La Scala, Naples, where the score had been introduced disguised as Buondelmonte, did not hear the original version until 1865, and even there nearly a century was to pass before the opera was given again.

For all the bad luck that hounded its early years, Maria Stuarda today has become one of Donizetti's most frequently revived operas, a phenomenon that would undoubtedly be a most agreeable surprise to Donizetti. Although he lost faith in the opera that for him apparently not even a Malibran could rescue, today's resurgence of interest in bel canto opera has permitted Maria Stuarda to reveal itself in its true colours as one of Donizetti's most persuasive and dramatic scores, one that builds musically to an uncommonly affecting final scene.

THE OPERA AND ITS MUSIC

Donizetti composed most of the score for Maria Stuarda during the summer of 1834. He did include in it some material he had written earlier - an aria and two duets - composed some months earlier for a special production of his Fausta in Venice that starred Giuditta Pasta and the tenor Donzelli.(I have seen printed copies of these additions to Fausta in the Bibliotecca Marciana in Venice.) Such self-borrowing of music written for a specific occasion and place was standard practice in Donizetti's time. The changes made in the score for the La Scala production are detailed in the article, 19th Century Performances of Maria Stuarda, elsewhere in this Journal.

To describe the score of Maria Stuarda in terms of its general outlines is to render it indistinguishable from any number of serious Italian operas of the period. The two women and the tenor are each given a 'double-aria' (a cavatina followed by a cabaletta) at their first entrance. There are three duets, each involving a different pairing of characters. The second act contains a sextet and a concluding ensemble for all the characters and chorus. The opera ends with a second 'double-aria' for the prima donna. On this level, Maria Stuarda seems standard fare.

With Italian operas of this period, however, their special merits, if any, are found in the composer's skill in adapting this conventional framework to a specific set of dramatic circumstances. The most obvious sign of his skill was found in the writing of expressive and vocally grateful melodies. Maria Stuarda is well endowed with persuasive melodies. The seamless rise and fall of Maria's 'Oh nube! che lieve per l'aria' conveys her nostalgic desire for freedom, and the little figurations suggest the floating of the cloud she describes. The prayer near the beginning of the final scene is filled with passionate invocation. (Donizetti was so fond of this melodic idea, which he had already experimented with in Il paria, that he was to use it with slight modifications in the uncompleted Le duc d'Albe and again in Linda di Chamounix.)

Particularly interesting are those melodies in which Donizetti anticipates Verdi - whose first opera was

still four years in the future when Maria Stuarda was given at La Scala. These anticipations are most apparent in Elisabetta's opening phrase in the Act 2 sextet, 'E sempre la stessa', which with only a slight modification becomes Leonora's opening phrase in the Miserere from Il trovatore. The general pattern of this sextet is clearly the model for a very similar ensemble in Verdi's Nabucco. Maria's larghetto aria in the final scene, 'Di un cor che more', is very much in that vein of pathos Verdi exploited so well in La traviata. To say this is not necessarily to claim that Verdi consciously imitated Donizetti; rather it is evidence that in Maria Stuarda Donizetti enlarged the musical rhetoric of Italian romantic opera by finding means to vivify and communicate more directly the emotional and spiritual lives of his characters in ways that were to prove fruitful to his successors. In Maria Stuarda, then, we see Donizetti creating something of the musical syntax that Verdi was to exploit and to amplify hugely.

Donizetti's mastery of his craft in Maria Stuarda stands out in his frequent avoidance of rote repetition. The clearest example of this is Leicester's double-aria in Act 1. Each aria is in two balanced sections, but in both cases Donizetti achieves variety by turning the second section into a duet for Leicester and Talbot. In the cavatina he gains further variety by changing the key in the second section - rising a major third from C major to E - and by modifying the contour of the tenor's phrases. Within the compass of a single number he has introduced two characters and significantly advanced the dramatic action.

Another instance of Donizetti's relative freedom of expression occurs in the Elisabetta-Leicester duet that ends Act 1. As the tension between the characters mounts, the recitative is transformed into a powerful arioso that vividly contrasts Elisabetta's barely contained fury with Leicester's steadfastness. In the duet itself, beginning with Leicester's 'Era d'amor l'immagine', this broad melody is set against Elisabetta's ironic interjections, providing a contrast of rhythmic emphasis and melodic pattern to the tenor's balanced lyric phrases.

The dramatic highlight of the opera is the famous encounter between the two queens. Here Donizetti has chosen to subordinate music to the dramatic situation, keeping the whole scene in expressive arioso-style rather than writing a full-scale duet. This passage serves as a point of origin for such famous confrontations as those between Aida and Amneris, between Gioconda and Laura, and between Adriana Lecouvreur and the Princess. By avoiding the repetitions of formal design, Donizetti achieves a scene that for immediacy and impact can compare with the corresponding moment in Schiller's play. (Hearing it today involves no strain in believing that Ronzi and Del Sere were carried away by it to the point of physical combat at that Neapolitan rehearsal back in 1834!)

Like almost all of Donizetti's opera (and those of most composers for that matter) Maria Stuarda has its ups and downs. The big allegro finale to Act 2 can scarcely be called musically distinguished, but Donizetti wisely kept this section to more reasonable proportions than he allowed himself in the correspoding moment at the end of Act 2 of Lucia. What is most surprising about Maria Stuarda, an opera that seemed moribund for nearly a century, is that it contains so many effective and moving pages. If I were to choose just one passage to set beside the famous highpoints of many better-known operas of that period, I would pick Maria's larghetto from the Confession Scene, 'Quando di luce rosea'. The melody evolves easily and naturally, touching on a broad range of moods, all the way from contrition to a final note of exaltation. The harmonic progressions reinforce the idea of Maria's spiritual transformation. Here Donizetti achieves the goal of all opera composers: that of making this music strike us as the inevitable expression of his character's emotions.

Z* G.Zavadini, Donizetti: Vita - Musiche - Epistolario (Bergamo, 1948).

