

DONIZETTI

ILLNESS, caught at Paris

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Many of the older potted biographies of Donizetti's life have been as inaccurate about his final illness as they have been about his Scottish 'origins' and his place in the development of Italian opera in the first half of the 19th Century. Even as recently as the 1966 edition of that standard reference book 'Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians', the entry for Donizetti contains this jumbled reference to his final illness: 'during the last years of his life, Donizetti was subject to fits of melancholy and abstraction, bordering on insanity which became more and more intense, until in 1845, he was attacked with general paralysis'. This is an improvement on the more usual biographical statement that Donizetti worked so hard that he drove himself insane, and so had to be taken to a private asylum (or psychiatric hospital as it would be called today). Nevertheless, the 'Groves' entry is still inaccurate in that it gives a quasi-psychological explanation of a clear physical condition, caused by a specific micro-organism.

Ashbrook (1) and Weinstock (2) both have very detailed accounts of the final years that cover very accurately the steady decline in Donizetti's physical and mental health from 1844 onwards. This pattern was not sporadic, as the 'Groves' entry suggests, but a state in which physiological and psychological control was progressively lost. What this monograph seeks to do is to examine some of the likely facts in the composer's medical history.

What is incontrovertible is that the post-mortem performed by the Italian Doctors Locatelli and Maironi revealed tertiary syphilis, a condition often referred to as 'Dementia Paralytica' or 'General Paralysis of the Insane'. This is a late stage of the venereal disease, syphylis, during which the sufferer's physical and mental faculties decline quite quickly (over a period of 2 years or so)

until he or she becomes a human 'vegetable' '.... second childishness and mere oblivion' - sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything! (3)

The daguerrotype of Donizetti and his nephew Andrea is a moving and eloquent visual commentary on this degeneration especially when compared with the youthful bust carved in 1827 in Rome at the age of 30. How did this pitiable state come about? Syphilis, a highly infectious venereal disease is usually contracted as a result of sexual intercourse; exposure to the disease results in a painless weeping genital sore that heals quickly and is easily dismissed by the victim. This is the first (or primary) stage of the disease. Several weeks later a generalised fever occurs, accompanied by a coppery coloured rash that can be mistaken for an allergy, this is the secondary stage. Lastly the disease goes 'underground' to appear after any period of time from 2 to 20 years or more in different bodily systems eg

a Heart and blood-vessels
or b Spinal cord
or c Brain.

This last type - nowadays called Cerebral Syphilis was the disorder from which Donizetti was to die.

The number of recorded cases of syphilis in the 1970's was about 1200 in the United Kingdom each year, making it a rare disease, and the numbers of cases progressing to tertiary cerebral syphilis are virtually nil. This seems to have been the case in Western Europe, prior to the Napoleonic wars, as reported in contemporary literature (4). However, by the 1830's, Paris as well as Northern France, experienced a steep rise in admissions - especially of men with tertiary cerebral syphilis - to psychiatric hospitals. This rise was only experienced in other Western countries after 1850; it persisted throughout the late Victorian period until the end of the century, since when its numbers have dwindled. What seems to have happened is that there was a mutation of the causative organism - Treponema Pallidum - that took place in the 1800's in Northern France. This has passed

almost completely away at the present time. The effect of this mutation was to produce a strain that attacked the brain substance by choice; Esquirol, one of the great French Doctor/Writers and legislators on all forms of mental illness, noted that in 1834 tertiary cerebral syphilis was very rare in Northern Italy. Even in 1849 it was rare in Southern France, this makes it extremely likely that Donizetti contracted the disease during one of his visits to Paris rather than at home in Italy. The visit of 1838/1840, following on Virginia's death, therefore would seem to be more likely than that of 1835, before this latter occurrence.

Ashbrook on page 347 of his book, surmises that the 'convulsions with bilious attacks and piles' (6) that Donizetti suffered, and which caused the delay of the premiere of IL CASTELLO DI KENILWORTH, were probably early signs of the disease. If so, they are not the usual ones. It is much more likely that they arose from some kind of gastro-intestinal upset. In a world of poor sanitation and inadequate kitchen hygiene they could be due to salmonella, or to a virus, or quite simply to over-eating. There is also the remote possibility that there could have been lead poisoning present, lead was frequently added to promote fermentation of wines and the preservation of cider. (7)

The onset of cholera in Rome during the production of FRANCESCA DI FOIX is mentioned by Donizetti (8) in 1831, later, in the much more severe outbreak of 1837 he outlines a regime that is reasonably hygienic. He advises that salads were to be avoided (these could have been washed in contaminated water), and only to take cooked foods and boiled drinks. Bellini's death two years previously, due to an unknown intestinal infection together with a liver abscess, affected Donizetti deeply and he was eager to protect his frail wife from the ravages of the cholera epidemics that raged across Europe and Asia. It was a tragic irony, worthy of Byron at his most sardonic, that Virginia should die of measles. Syphilis is not a likely possibility for these 1829 symptoms. Indeed there is just a chance that Donizetti contracted the disease from Virginia; syphilis in the

pregnant is a known cause of abortion, stillbirth and infant death. Virginia remains a shadowy character at best but all the indications are that she was as chaste before the marriage as she was faithful to Gaetano after it. Though circumstances frequently parted the couple there was no breath of scandal during their marriage, all the more surprising as Donizetti moved in the amoral and corrupt theatre world, and was lionised as a popular composer not only in Italy, but in the fashionable society of Paris and Vienna. Even his disturbed behaviour later seemed to provoke concern and pity rather than unduly salacious gossip. In this he is more like Weber and Meyerbeer than his more obviously 'romantic' contemporaries Rossini, Chopin and Bellini - as remarkable for their 'amours' as for their music. Like Liszt he was generous in his approval of the music of his contemporaries and singularly free from professional jealousy. He showed concern for the advancement of his art and his letters demonstrate this in an amusing and at times mildly ironic turn of phrase.

By 1837, at his peak and aged forty, he felt Virginia's death as the severest blow. He had been upset in the previous years 'in the three months on tour, I have lost father, mother and baby daughter' (10). His wife's death would leave his life with a gap that neither increasing mastery of his craft, nor the social round could fill; he seemed to avoid establishing any new relationship with any of the women in his life. The key to his feelings is expressed two months after Virginia's disappearance 'There are moments when I could give myself in hand to a hundred women if they could distract me for half-an-hour, and I would pay them what I could' (11).

It is probable then that Donizetti tried to assuage his grief in this way, but it may have simply been passing thoughts. The tension and perhaps home-sickness in the French capital could well have made the earlier thought a reality during his stay there during the period October 1838 to December 1840; or even possibly during the last two months of 1842 while involved with DON PASQUALE. It is strange that he remarks that he has 'a new illness caught at Paris' when he arrives at Vienna in the new year of 1843 (12). It was some kind of fever - was it

secondary syphilis? It would not fit into the normal pattern of syphilitic infection, allowing a period of only 6 months or so between catching the infection and the onset of the degenerative changes noted during the rehearsals of DOM SEBASTIEN. All in all the longer stay from 1838 to 1840 seems the most likely time, and the new year fever of 1843 could well have been influenza.

To conclude, it is interesting to consider whether poor Donizetti would have fared better today. Penicillin is now the drug of choice, administered in high doses. It usually clears the primary and secondary stages of the disease and halts, but does not reverse, the damage done in the tertiary stages. Therefore if he was alive now it is likely that he would have needed some form of provision and care, either in his own home or in a psychiatric hospital. The care that Donizetti received at Ivry was excellent, and his last days at Bergamo are models of care for the dying. In tribute to the devoted medical team, his man servant Antoine Pourcelot, and the Basonis, it must be said that despite all our enlightenment, our government legislation and our sociology, the care given to Donizetti could not be bettered today.

NOTES

(1) W ASHBROOK 'DONIZETTI' London 1965

(2) H WEINSTOCK 'DONIZETTI AND THE WORLD OF OPERA IN ITALY, PARIS AND VIENNA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY' London 1964

(3) W SHAKESPEARE 'AS YOU LIKE IT' c 1594 Act II Sc 7

(4) HUNTER & McALPINE '300 YEARS OF PSYCHIATRY'

(5) E H HARE 'ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF DEMENTIA PARALYTICA' British Journal of Psychiatry 1959

(6) G ZAVADINI Letter 45, 7 5 1829 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948

(7) A CANTAROW and M TRUMPER 'LEAD POISONING' 1944

(8) G ZAVADINI Letter 67, 30 7 1831 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948

(9) " Letter 242, 28 6 1837 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948

(10) " Letter 197, 5 3 1836 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948

(11) " Letter 259, 13 9 1837 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948

(12) " Letter 470, 30 1 1843 'DONIZETTI' Bergamo 1948