Postscript on Maria Stuarda

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To The Secretary of the Donizetti Society
56 Harbut Road
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Dear Honorary Secretary

I would like to take issue with the Society for something appearing in Journal 3. I am, of course, open to any comment the membership would like to make, especially information from your more knowledgeable people whose opinion would be respected.

My objection refers to the many times that writers indicated that the role of Elisabetta seems equally important to the role of Maria in the opera, and that the opera might have been named "Elisabetta". When I was involved with the 1973 Lyric Opera production, the notes in the libretto indicated that the plot effectively ended with the trio (p 202 in the Egret House edition of the score), and that the two big Fotheringay scenes in the third act were effectively anticlimactic a point of view that seems to match the one proffered so frequently in your journal.

The view seems to come from the fact that the roles are nearly equal in the number of notes that the performer must sing, especially in the cut versions that are so

often performed today. In the three act version, Elisabetta has had a starring role in all three acts, while Maria has made but one appearance (Act II, from "E che! non ami..." p 80 to "ogni affano compenso." on p 171). The short disappearance while Elisabetta and party enter before the sestetto does not really detract from all of Act II counting as one of Maria's appearances. Even Beverly Sills was known to comment that the role of Maria was far less interesting to her than that of Elisabetta in DEVEREUX or Anna in ANNA BOLENA.

Two problems are inherent here that I would like to present to the society. It is well known that the opera was presented in two acts during some performances in which Donizetti had input, and that Donizetti is known to have suggested cutting the Elisabetta-Leicester Duetto and complete elimination of the Act III trio in those cases where the company planning the production did not have resources to engage a starring-quality Elisabetta. The thought of a two-act version with Elisabetta appearing only in Act I and having no major duet + cabaletta would indicate that the composer never intended the two parts to be equivalent.

Addressing this situation further, the two-act version seems to produce a more symmetrical balance (as found in ANNA BOLENA or the recent Bonynge-Sutherland version of LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR) than does the three-act version we hear today. In New York, the Metropolitan Opera has a long-standing tradition of producing an opera with some full intermissions reduced to scenery change waits and/ or some scenery change waits spread to full intermissions if it feels that the production can be strengthened by this change. Look at some of the timings I have seen:

London Recording:	Acts I/II combined	= 66 minutes
	Act III	= 54 minutes
ABC Recording:	Acts I/II combined	= 82 minutes
	Act III	= 70 minutes

Chicago Lyric Production (in which the Bartoletti tempo was somewhat faster than the Bonynge or Ceccato tempi and in which many cabaletta 'repeats' were eliminated):

Acts I & II	= 55 minutes
Act III	= 50 minutes

In all of these combinations, the symmetry is obvious. When the three act version is performed, the fact that Sills (or Sutherland or Caballe, etc) does not appear in Act I and that a through-composed finale is not written for Act I makes this act so anticlimactic for an opera that people tend to think of the first two acts as a single unit. It would not be too difficult to start performing a two-act version, which would have Maria in both acts. I also think that the two-act version might not be completely contrary to Donizetti's wishes, despite the fact that the Egret House score does specify three acts.

The second problem to be addressed is that Elisabetta never has back-to-back set pieces. The four places where she is prominent in the score are:

1 Her entrance through the recitative following her cavatina.

2 Her duetto with Leicester which closes Act I.

3 The last quarter-hour (approx) of Act II, from "Qual loco e questo" to the end of that Act.

4 The entire first scene of Act III, often considered a tour de force possibility for the artist portraying that role.

It is my feeling that because Elisabetta never has to be on the stage for a great stretch (18 minutes in the Ceccato version during Act III scene 1 seeming to be the outside limit, and this was only about 14 minutes at Chicago Lyric), the interpreter of that role does not need the kind of practical stage experience or technical ability to endure long periods of "set piece singing" that is inherent in the role of Maria. I claim that a singer could pass muster as Elisabetta without having either the stage experience or physical stamina to navigate even the first acts of such operas as LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR, ROBERTO DEVEREUX, LUCREZIA BORGIA, etc where the singer must face the ordeal of two lengthy set pieces requiring different vocal and acting styles

placed directly back-to-back.

Another facet of this problem is the richness of character portrayal and vocal line allotted to Maria compared with the relatively limited possibilities allotted to Elisabetta. While the character of Elizabeth in its particular style as perceived for nineteenth century theatre might be difficult to learn, the things the artist is asked to do within that character are rather limited. Someone who has promise or experience can be coached into a single set of postures, stage gimmickry, vocal and bodily style of expression, etc that adequately portray the character through all three Acts. This cannot, of course, be done with the part of Maria, and I have not really seen a great star in the part of Elizabeth make too much improvement on what a good neophyte or "lesser light" with lots of talent and coaching can do. In other words, I consider Elizabeth a long and prominent "supporting role", but in no way a fully formed prima donna role.

I have reduced the nineteen letters (A-S) in the score* to ten numbered sections, though without actually moving the position of any section of the score. My order also corresponds precisely to the order of the Egret House edition, though the placing of intermissions and score numbers is obviously different. What results is the typical Donizettian plan repeated ten times:

1 Recitative (with or without chorus)

2 First or "A" section

3 Additional Recitative

4 Second or "B" (ie "cabaletta") section

Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 are about even in length. Numbers 7 and 8 are somewhat longer, the only lack of perfect symmetry I could find. In #6, the sestetto becomes the "A" section, the dialogo the replacement for additional recitative and the stretta the "B" section. In #7, the duettino is merely an extension of the first recitative. In #9, the "Vedeste? Vedemo." of the inno becomes the first recitative, the "Ma d'una Regina" of the inno becomes the "A" section,

and the great preghiera is, of course, the "B" section.

FIRST ACT

1	Preludio, Coro, Cavatina	ELISABETTA, Talbot, Cecil, Paggio, Chorus
2	Scena e Cavatina	LEICESTER, TALBOT, Elisabetta, Cecil
3	Duetto	ELISABETTA, LEICESTER
4	Cavatina	MARIA STUARDA, Anna, Chorus
5	Duetto	MARIA STUARDA, LEICESTER
6	Scena, Sestetto, Dialogo, Stretta	MARIA STUARDA, ELISABETTA, Leicester, Talbot, Cecil, Anna, Chorus

SECOND ACT

7	Duettino e Terzetto	ELISABETTA, LEICESTER, CECIL
8	Scena e Duetto	MARIA STUARDA, TALBOT, Cecil
9	Inno e Preghiera	MARIA STUARDA, Anna, Chorus, (Talbot sometimes sings)
10	Aria	MARIA STUARDA, Leicester, Talbot, Cecil, Anna, Chorus

It can therefore be seen that Elisabetta never appears in any two consecutive numbers in a starring role, while Maria always has difficult numbers back-to-back. She can therefore display her ability to interpret a number of "A", "B", "C", "D", styles in continuous display. Furthermore, despite the fact that the parts are not too different in size (and longer than any of the leading men's parts in any of the staged versions I've seen), Maria requires a great star to perform it while Elisabetta can be adequately portrayed by a promising newcomer or established "second cast" personage.

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* The 19 letters are explained on p 173 of Journal 3.