Notes on the interpretation of DONIZETTI'S QUEENS

Leyla Gencer (trans. Stephen Hastings)

I feel quite nervous about taking part in a seminar, particularly one with such a great tradition behind it. I feel there is also an element of contradiction... While interpreting Donizetti's operas in the theatre I am always sure of having understood the character I am portraying and of communicating that understanding, that 'truth', to the audience. Now that I am called in the name of this very interpretative truthfulness, I begin to question it. I sense its relativeness; and indeed today I would probably change my interpretations in some way. This doubling of roles is thus difficult.

However I am firmly convinced of certain principles - particularly where Donizetti is concerned. The most important things are:

a) Faithfulness to the written score;

b) the attempt to reveal the psychological, poetic and dramatic truth of a character by vocal means;

c) a profound knowledge of the linguistic conventions of 19th century Italian opera, and

d) a constant study of the specific language of the composer, and the different uses he makes of it.

I would like to talk about Donizetti's queens, who have generated much interest, but also a certain confusion. I am going to examine three queens in particular - all of them rediscovered during the 'Donizetti Renaissance' - Anna Bolena, Maria Stuarda and Elisabetta in ROBERTO DEVEREUX. (The first role I learnt as Callas's understudy for the famous Gavazzeni-Visconti edition at La Scala in '57. I later made the role my own. The roles of Maria and Elisabetta were rediscovered through my interpretations and have since re-entered the repertory.)

A common enough prejudice dismisses the musical language of Donizetti (citing as causes the composer's haste, or natural inclination) as generalized and repetitive - a mixture of talent, craftsmanship and routine. The 'English' Donizetti, according to this view, represents a single type; the queens resemble each other to the point of confusion...

(...) The real risk, however, is that it is we performers who fail to bring out the differences between the operas! This may occur because the performer is boring in the first place - in which case there is no remedy - but more frequently it is because:

1) one has little faith in Donizetti's genius;

2) one assumes the conventions of 19th century opera are a fixed formula, rather than a starting point;

3) one thinks of vocalism as something abstract, rather than intimately linked to a particular context, a particular 'meaning'.

In fact the differences are there, written in the score, and it is the duty of the singer (who must of course possess the necessary vocal technique) to discover them.

One must remember that Donizetti lived at a time when the Romantic movement was already well established. The vocalism in his operas is closely linked to the dramatic action. It is more modern - in the sense of being more congenial to us - than that of the first years of the 19th century. His theatrical vision is less complete than Verdi's, but at the same time more open-ended. There is a constant evolution of structures, forms, vocal patterns. (...)

In the three operas I have chosen the three queens have very different characters. Each of them has a specific psychological identity which is evident from the very first scene in which she appears; a clearly identifiable form of expression and dramatic destiny. To prove my point we can examine the opening and final scenes of the three characters.

ANNA BOLENA

From the beginning of the opera, with its long and tortuous musical phrases, one breathes the sombre atmosphere of court, an environment characterized by intrigue, suspicion and legalized injustice.

In this opera, as with the other two under discussion, the protagonist makes her entrance within the conventional formula recitativo/cavatina/cabaletta - but in each of the operas the formula is used in a different way.

In ANNA BOLENA the 'recitativo' begins with the words "Si taciturna e mesta Mai non vidi assemblea". The character must be conveyed by the singer from the very first words - in their colour and stress. The entrances with 'recitativo' are like the entrances of an actress in the theatre; they mustn't be rushed through in the belief that what counts is the aria that will follow. One must remember (and this applies also to conductors) the convention by which the 'recitativo' is always written in 4/4 time does not indicate a rigid beat, but rather an interpretative freedom enriched by the expressive markings of the composer.

The chords which accompany the entrance of Anna Bolena already

suggest her regal quality as well as the melancholy and vulnerability which portend her tragic destiny. Callas had the dark burnished tone that made the melancholic aspect of the character all the more evident - it immediately made a great impression, as did her regal bearing on stage. My Bolena was lighter in tone; when I sang the role with Gavazzeni in 1958 I thought of her as very young, adolescent...

The 'cavatina' "Come, innocente giovane", is not a show-piece. The character is speaking to herself; softly. It is one of the typical 'a parte' arias, which are very important in Donizetti's works. They have their own particular colour, like the asides of Goldoni or Corneille. The 'cavatina' conveys Anna's melancholy, her lost innocence - a result of the ambition that led her to choose the King as marriage partner. The reference to her first love should be stressed. It recurs throughout the opera and proves useful to Enrico who, able exploiter of the psychological weakness of others, accuses her of adultery.

In this aria the ornamentation is completely integrated into the vocal line. The 'abbellimenti' and 'gruppetti' are a means of expression, not an excuse for vocal acrobatics. For example, on the words "il core" the voice should suggest the effect of weeping.

(...) In the 'cabaletta' "Non v'ha sguardo", it is important to observe precisely the indications of 'rinforzando' written in the score. They shouldn't sound too sudden. You will find that once the essentials of the character have been grasped the expressive details will come naturally.

MARIA STUARDA

'Recitativo': "Allenta il piè, Regina. - E che! Non ami Che ad insolita gioia ..."
The mood of this entrance, anticipated in the orchestra, is one of openness, of freedom. The colours are very different from those of BOLENA or DEVEREUX - more luminous and hopeful. (...) Even after years of imprisonment she is not resigned to her fate. She still hopes to succeed in her mission. There isn't an underlying sadness (as in BOLENA) nor a lust for power (as in the case of Elizabeth, whose every phrase has a sculptured quality). Instead there is a re-awakening to life's possibilities, expressed in a very feminine way. The sense of freedom makes her think back to her happy years in France, where she was brought up and where she became the friend of the king who was later to be her husband. (...)

'Cavatina':"O nube! che lieve" - the expression of an emotional state quite different from that of Anna Bolena. Although there is a reference to the past, it emerges spontaneously, following a free association of thought. It requires the lightest, most delicate of tones. It is an aria full of movement, of passing thoughts and images. It is the expression of a gentle femininity, which exists alongside the regal bearing, the religious conviction and, in the end, the heroism of the character. (Singing

this aria, I've always noted the similarity to Verdi's "Tu che le vanità" in DON CARLOS, which also opens with a solemn, Bossuet-like invocation, followed by memories of flowers, fountains, France... and I instinctively sought in both arias vocal colours which suggest the mood of someone enchanted by memories.)

ROBERTO DEVEREUX

The opera is dominated by the figure of Elizabeth; a great queen, full of inward torment. An historian has said that it was Elizabeth's indecision that made her great. Her motto was "take one's time", and this proved a perfect political strategy for England at that time; the secret of her success. Her indecision and suspiciousness probably derive from her difficult childhood as the daughter of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. Forever threatened and in danger she has learned to be suspicious of everyone. This it true also of her relations with men.

'Recitativo':"Duchessa, Alle fervide preci"
From the very first bars the music conveys the splendour of the English court and the imposing regal figure at its centre. Elizabeth enters from the back of the stage, amid great pomp; a determined, obstinate figure. The vocal colours must convey great authority, a sense of command. Her words must be uttered distinctly and with deliberation; her work is law.

She agrees to receive Devereux after his failure in Ireland, but secretly she has her doubts, she questions his fidelity. She confides in Sarah, but always in a regal manner. Although she is very close to Devereux, she will sentence him to death. There is a Freudian logic to this act. She takes revenge on a man, almost as if to vindicate her mother's death. (When I prepare an opera I read everything I can find on the subject. I find this helps me in the interpretation of a role. If then I exaggerate in some way it is up to the director and conductor to correct me.)

Both the 'cavatina' and 'cabaletta' maintain the tense chiselled line established in the 'recitativo'. Elizabeth always reveals sharply contrasting moods: regal anger ("Un perfido, Un vile, un mentitore"- here the notes must be cleanly, but sharply accented) and tender, sad memories (of her meetings with her lover - "Alma infida, ingrato core"). Throughout there is a sense of grandeur which also infects the chorus and orchestra.

Three final scenes

Also the final scenes of the three opera, centred on the protagonist, are based on the formula - freely adapted - recitativo/aria/cabaletta. The 'cabaletta', however, is not a fast show-piece, but solemn and 'maestoso' (the tempo often suggested by Donizetti in the score). The repetition of the 'cabaletta' requires a few minimal variations and usually involves the chorus (echoes of Greek tragedy, filtered by Mayr's teaching).

ANNA BOLENA

The opera closes with a mad-scene - something fairly common in Donizetti (its genesis can be traced back to the 'Commedia dell'Arte' and also to Manzoni's ADELCHI, in which the rejected and delirious Ermingarda dies with a gesture of forgiveness towards those who have wronged her.)

'Recitativo':"Piangete voi? donde tal pianto?"
This 'recitativo' is preceded by a superb chorus sung by her maids, and it is to them that she speaks in this scene, alternating continually between consciousness and semi-consciousness. Ideas, memories, nightmares pass quickly through her mind; moments in which she relives the different episodes of her tragic story (...)

The scene requires an ethereal voice, that should seem to come from another world. It is important to remain within the tempo set by Donizetti - although internally there should be rhythmic flexibility. The pauses are very important. For example, those after "E'questo Giorno di nozze..." "Il Re miaspetta..." are necessary for the words to impress their meaning, to be visualised in her mind and in the minds of the audience. Here the psychological reality is at one with the vocalism. Another example comes after her guilty recollection of Percy. Here it is necessary to suggest, also through movement and gesture, the confusion in her mind over her feelings for Percy, the man she loved once, and for the King, whom she also loved ("Ei m'accusa.. ei mi sgrida.. Mi perdona, mi perdona...) leading up to her final declaration of desparate unhappiness: "Toglimi da questa Miseria estrema", that seems almost a prayer.

'Aria':"Al dolce guidami". Here the introduction by the cor anglais prepares us for the nostalgic memories of childhood that follow. After the confusion of the two loves in the 'recitativo', there is a sense of purification, of calm, of refound security which turns into an invocation of her first love. It is important not to upset the intimate quality and linearity of this aria and to use one's imagination in finding as many colours as possible within the vocal framework.

'Cabaletta':"Coppia iniqua". This 'cabaletta' requires clear diction, dark colours and the voice of a 'soprano drammatico d'agilita' to cope with its forceful high notes followed by sudden drops into the middle or lower registers. It seems an invective, but in fact she condemns and pardons at the same time. In effect she is saying 'I am not an adulterer, it is you who are the adulterers. I don't want to have my revenge on you. I shall go before God in a spirit of forgiveness.' She thus forgives protesting, with a touch of regal disdain.

MARIA STUARDA

Here the atmosphere is very different. The Queen is perfectly in command of her senses, and dominates her fears. The structure of the scene is similar to that of ANNA BOLENA - beginning with

a chorus of maids who accompany her to her death. Here too there are analogies with ADELCHI and also with the five episodes of Carissimi's cantata "Lamento e morte di Maria Stuarda"; and examples of a certain continuity from Baroque to Romantic opera.

The 'recitativo' and aria "Anna tu sola resti...Di un cor che more " isn't sung to the chorus, but with the chorus. Also the great invocation "Deh! Tu diun umile/Preghiera il suono" is a dialogue with the chorus. Her pardoning of Elizabeth has a mystical, religious quality to it - she doesn't rebel against her fate like Anna Bolena.

'Cabaletta':"Ah! se un giorno da queste ritorte". These are final words, delivered in the usual tempo 'maestoso' before ascending the scaffold. She leans on Leicester, to whom she has been tied by bonds of love and affection - but even these sentiments have ceased to exist in her resignation to her fate. Here the vocal colours should be very contained; they should suggest an almost religious, saintly quality as well as the experience of a woman who has lived life - with its errors, its acts of faith and heroism - to the full. The underlying tension finds an outlet naturally in the high notes. In this 'cabaletta' it is best not to distract the audience with variations during the repeat. The simple change to the major key gives the passage all the intensity it needs.

ROBERTO DEVEREUX

Elizabeth's final scene is full of anguish, terror, delirium and grandeur.
'Recitativo':"E Sara in questi orribili momenti". Here the style is tragic; 'maestoso', yet full of anguish. She is waiting for Sara, anxious and full of remorse. She still hopes to resolve the situation, to annul the sentence. In the phrase "Io sono donna alfin" she confesses the ambivalence of her roles as queen and woman. The continual changes in tempo reflect Elizabeth's changes of mood/mind. She experiences moments of suspicion, anguish, jealousy. Time seems to fly. She thinks of the ring that could save him. Terrified of the idea of seeing him dead, she would like to stop the clock.
'Aria':"Vivi, ingrato". As long as he is alive, she sees him beside her rival - with the jealousy of one who admits no infidelity. It is a desperate moment; every word is weighted by her great solitude. The injured woman cries, but it is only the consciousness of her regal status that makes her realize the full import of those tears which no one must see. The phrase "La Regina, la Regina d'Inghilterra" conveys this infinite lonliness.

'Cabaletta':"Quel sangue versato". When she hears of Sara's betrayal; that the sentence took place in spite of the expedient of the ring, the Queen becomes almost insane in her desperation. (...) Her fearful and obsessive imagining of his death are perfectly conveyed, not only by the music, but also by Cammarano's words. In extremis, the passionate woman, who had never been allowed to exist, emerges (at the time of these events she was sixty-seven). For a moment she denies even the reign for

which she had fought all her life. At the repeat (the same melody but with different words) it is possible to change the stresses and internal rhythm without adding anything - it depends on the performer. In the moment when Elizabeth denies and rejects everything added vocal ornamentation is hardly appropriate. She is a madwoman at the height of desperation, with the added weight of her regal status. While the chorus invites her to remain calm, she becomes more and more despairing. For me it is one of the most devastating and moving scenes in all Romantic opera.

Some advice

In one of these operas, MARIA STUARDA, two queens come face to face. Listen again to that scene and note how - if it is an intelligent performance - the two figures emerge very clearly, and in a way that is historically coherent. Elizabeth is powerful, but carries the signs of her terrible childhood. Stuarda has been the nightmare of her entire life - because she is beautiful; because she is a queen (and her rival), because she is loved and has had a child... Maria Stuarda, on the other hand (..) was born into a happy world. Her father died when she was young and at the age of 21/2 months she was already Queen of Scotland. (...)

In the theatre, the rivalry between the two queens becomes a form of vocal rivalry, as in the conflict of power between the two basses in DON CARLOS. The performance must be prepared scrupulously.

When I sang Stuarda for the first time, in Florence at the opening of the Maggio Musicale in 1967, the Elizabeth was Shirley Verrett - vocally and physically sumptuous. The first act is all Elizabeth's; Maria enters in the second act. I remember that with the typical egocentricity of the soprano, I ignored that first act; for me it didn't exist. I kept on saying to De Lullo (the director):"Giorgio, when I enter in the first act..." And each time De Lullo would correct me: "It's not the first act, dear. It's the second." Then when we rehearsed with Pizzi's beautiful costumes, I saw not only mine - simple, elegant, derived from the portraits of the period - but also Shirley Verrett's. In the first act, in a sedan chair, dressed all in white, she seemed an idol, while in the second act she wore red with fox-fur borders... I begged the director: "But Giorgio, isn't there even a single fur for me? It's not possible. At least a fur collar". But he was unmoveable. "No. For you nothing but a cloak and gloves; with the hands in the pockets".

On stage, one lives Donizetti's operas passionately. I had an argument with the conductor about the invective in the duet. The meeting is in the park. Elisabetta arrives with her imposing suite, Maria is alone with her lady-in-waiting and Talbot. The prisoner kneels and implores; the other insults her: "Trema". "No!" and I rose like a wild beast and let loose the tirade against her. The conductor wanted me to sing it exactly in time, whereas the 'recitativo' should be interpreted with a certain

freedom. After so much lyricism the queen emerges, and rebels... She says tremendous things: "Profanato è il soglio Inglese, Vil bastarda". I sang that 'recitativo' in a way that, now, I wouldn't recommend to anyone (because it doesn't do the voice any good), but the result was something very violent and aggressive that sparked off spontaneous applause and brought the duet to a climax of tension. It is possible that a proven belcanto technique would permit other solutions, with more orthodox sounds (...) However, one thing is certain; that an artist should not betray his most intimate feelings and instincts - particularly when he grasps some element of truth.



These notes were written by Leyla Gencer for a series of seminars on the interpretation of Donizetti's operas held in Trieste in the Spring of 1982. On that occasion she illustrated her talk with her inimitable gestures and voice - singing many of the arias discussed. What is published here (and originally in Italian in 'Musica Viva') is thus necessarily incomplete, and reflects the eternal inadequacy of words in describing music. Yet in spite of these limitations, these notes are of considerable interest. Perhaps no single singer since Callas has contributed as much to the Donizetti Renaissance, combining (far more consistently to some ears than Sutherland or Caballé) a sure sense of style and excellent technique with an unerring theatrical instinct and considerable psychological insight. Her interpretations are above all the product of a remarkable musical and dramatic intelligence, and it is this last quality that shines through these pages.

Stephen Hastings

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