IL CAMPANELLO di NOTTE:

further evidence, further questions

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As Donizetti studies have progressed over the last thirty to forty years, so a number of old myths and legends have been exploded and left behind us. Every so often, however, we have had to eat humble pie and admit that the legends contained "a grain or two of truth among the chaff" - more truth, perhaps, than we had thought possible.

One such instance relates to the comic opera, IL CAMPANELLO DI NOTTE, composed for the Teatro Nuovo in Naples in 1836. Adolphe Adam, who at a later date met Donizetti in Paris, mentioned this work in his "Derniers Souvenirs d'un Musicien"(1859):

> Here is an... anecdote which shows that (Donizetti) combined both generosity and talent. In 1836 he was in Naples and there he learns that a poor little theatre has just closed, and that the artists are in frightful distress. He goes to find them, and gives them all the money he has to meet their most pressing needs. Ah! one of them says to him, you would make us rich indeed if you could give us a new opera!
>
> Well, if that's so, replies the maestro, you will have it in eight days.
>
> He had no libretto - no poet would have wished to give him one for a theatre which had just closed. But Donizetti remembers a vaudeville which he had seen in Paris, "La Sonnette de nuit": in less than a day, assisted by his memories, he makes a translation of it; eight days later the opera is finished, learned, memorised, performed, and the theatre is saved.

Now all of us have long since rejected this story as certainly supposititious, a figment of the imagination dreamed up by Adam in a well-intentioned wish to illustrate Donizetti's generosity of character. The theatrical historian soon discovers, for example, that Donizetti could not have seen "La Sonnette de nuit" in Paris, for this vaudeville, the work of Brunswick, Troin and Lhérie, was not produced until 27 November 1835, and though

Donizetti had been in the French capital earlier in the year, to produce MARINO FALIERO on 12 March, he had left towards the end of that month and did not return until October 1838. But, quite apart from a factual detail like this, the story simply did not seem to ring true. William Ashbrook, in his "Donizetti" (1965), the first of his two books on the composer, voiced a fairly general scepticism when he discredited it thus:

> Adam tells an apocryphal tale, which many writers on Donizetti have mindlessly perpetuated, of the manager of a little theatre who had fallen in dire straits and appealed to Donizetti to save him by writing him an opera and of how in a week's time Donizetti presented him with the complete score of IL CAMPANELLO.

Ashbrook proceeded to show - and in this he was correct - that the traditional date for the premiere, 7 June 1836, was wrong, and that it should be 1 June 1836. In evidence he quoted a letter written by Donizetti's close friend, the music publisher Guillaume Cottrau, on 4 June:

> I send you two duos from a charming comic opera by Donizetti, IL CAMPANELLO, which has just been given here with an unheard of success the first of this month. The subject is taken from a very droll vaudeville, "La Sonnette de nuit", that Benedict sent me and which I proposed to our composer.

In his second book, "Donizetti and his Operas" (1982), Ashbrook affords Adam's anecdote less space, but he is clearly still sceptical since he writes that "Adolphe Adam's often repeated anecdote about the origins of IL CAMPANELLO is certainly misleading". And so it probably is, in some of its details at least. Adam, like all raconteurs, is telling a good story, and the 'facts' are changing slightly each time it is repeated. But his basic assertion - that Donizetti wrote the score to save a band of singers from distress - is <u>true</u>. There is good documentary evidence for this, and it goes <u>back</u> much further than Adam, right to the very first reviews of the opera.

IL CAMPANELLO DI NOTTE was first given on Wednesday, 1 June 1836. Three days later, on Saturday, 4 June, Torelli, the owner-editor of the Neapolitan paper "L'Omnibus", began his review thus:

> This time the merit of a musical composition by Cavaliere Donizetti must yield to his thousand times greater personal merit. He, the maestro par excellence, when he saw a band of artists left without bread because the management had come to an end, when he saw them dispersing like the Jews and unlike them ill-adapted to any and every profession, when he saw them close to perishing from sufferings and desperation - he imagined freeing them in part from the penury they were enduring through a treasure

> of his intellect presented as a gift in this theatre (the Teatro Nuovo); and working at full speed he set himself to compose an opera which he dedicated to their benefit.

The account continues by pointing out that, to ensure that the gift involved the singers in no expense whatsoever, Donizetti supplied his own libretto. Torelli adds his encomium of the music, but reserves his detailed comments till a week later, till the issue of 11 June, since at this stage he cannot resist returning to his admiration for Donizetti, the man of generous impulse:

> Long live, then, this most celebrated composer's heart and mind, and on this occasion long live the former even more than the latter. Let us hope that all the journals of the world will echo (our sentiments), if they do not wish to be deaf to compassion, the first-born child of virtue.

The second notice, the following week, is mainly devoted to an account of the plot and mention of the principal singers, but Torelli begins by describing the opera as "the gayest music in the world - all is life, all is song", and ends by stating that "This has been a great gift to the poor artists and the management".

Before we proceed further, let us look more closely at a number of events, theatrical and otherwise, which were transpiring in Naples in 1836. It was a year that began in apprehension, since a cholera epidemic, already affecting the more northern parts of Italy, was expected to spread its way south. At the beginning of the year Donizetti had been in Venice for the first performance of BELISARIO, and in a letter written a couple of months later, after his return to Naples, he recorded that "the cholera is always present in Venice - I was there in its fiercest moments". The apprehension of the Neapolitans proved justified, for though the epidemic did not appear in Naples until October, and did not reach its full magnitude until the following year, it proved one of the most violent and disastrous outbreaks in modern times. Already, however, when Donizetti reached the city in early March, he found it, in the words of Herbert Weinstock[1], "in a state of suspended life, its usually thronging streets and narrow ways largely deserted".

If the everyday life of Naples was thus disturbed, so too, though for different reasons, was the organisation of its theatres. Since 1834, the management of the two Royal Theatres, the S. Carlo and the Fondo, had been in the hands, not of a single impresario, but of a none-too-efficient society, the Compagnia d'Industria e Belle Arti. When this organisation's lease

1. Herbert Weinstock, "Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (1964), p. 120.

expired, at Easter 1836, it was not renewed, with the result that, writing to Giovanni Ricordi on 30 March, Donizetti could report: "Here the theatres are closed, and so far no one is offering to take them over... hence desolation... poverty".

Now though Donizetti makes what appears to be a blanket statement - "Here the theatres are closed" - examination of the Neapolitan papers of the day reveals that it was the Royal Theatres, the S.Carlo and the Fondo, which were closed, for lack of an impresario, while independent theatres, such as the Nuovo, the Fenice and the Partenope, remained open. And it is at this point that a dismaying doubt arises that the present authors are, at least as yet, unable to answer. Was it the impresario of the Teatro Nuovo who suddenly found himself in difficulties, and whose singers Donizetti rescued from distress? Or might it not rather have been the singers of the Royal Theatres who, the management at an end, were left high and dry and in need of assistance? All those who have repeated Adam's anecdote have assumed the first alternative, but Adam may have been misled by the fact that IL CAMPANELLO was a small work which had its first performance in a small theatre. Torelli's statement and Donizetti's remark to Ricordi would seem to favour the latter alternative. Donizetti could not write for the artists of the Royal Theatres an opera for performance at the S. Carlo or the Fondo, for these theatres could not reopen until a new impresario was appointed, but he could write them a work they could perform at the little Teatro Nuovo, for there the doors were still open... Indeed the evidence so far presented would seem to lean strongly towards this latter interpretation.

There is, however, a further piece of circumstantial evidence which would seem to point just as strongly the other way. Neapolitan theatres normally closed during Holy Week and reopened on Easter Day. And this was the pattern they followed in 1836, except that, as already explained, on Easter Day it was only the independent theatres which reopened, the Royal Theatres remaining closed. The independent theatres ran on, performing almost every night, until 20 April, when again they had to close, this time for the Novena, which traditionally started on the Thursday before the last Sunday in the month and lasted until the second Sunday in May. On this date, 8 May, the Fenice and the Partenope duly reopened as one would expect, but the Nuovo remained in recess until 1 June, when, as we know, it staged the first performance of IL CAMPANELLO. Several vital questions immediately arise. Why did the Nuovo not open, as the other independent theatres did, after the Novena? Why did it remain closed for a whole three weeks further? Was it because, despite successful performances earlier in the season of such operas as Rossini's IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA and Aspa's I DUE FORZATI, the impresario had run into financial embarrassment? Was Adam right after all?

The answers to these questions are anything but clear. As so often in research of this nature, increasing evidence does not necessarily bring greater clarity. One moment one seems to have found the essential clue which will unravel all the entangled

'facts'; but further reflection only multiplies the possible explanations and the tangle remains as impenetrable as ever.

Whatever the answers to these questions, there are still further interesting aspects on IL CAMPANELLO to be mentioned.

No libretto appears to have been printed, either for the first performance of this work or for that of BETLY (Teatro Nuovo, 24 August 1836), the second short opera with which Donizetti followed up the success of IL CAMPANELLO. Again, there is more than one possible explanation. If Donizetti composed IL CAMPANELLO in haste, as has always been believed, there may simply have been no time to print a libretto[2]. Alternatively, in view of the disturbed state of the city, it could be that a deliberate decision was taken not to print a libretto for either opera. A third possibility, equally plausible, is that a bankrupt company decided to dispense with a libretto as a measure of economy.

The absence of a printed text gives rise to a further problem: we do not know the full list of singers who made up the cast of IL CAMPANELLO. The only ones known, from mention in Donizetti's letters and the original reviews, are the three principals: Giorgio Ronconi (Enrico), Amalia Schütz (Serafina), and Carlo Casaccia (Don Annibale Pistacchio). And these names, in themselves, constitute a mixture of intriguingly disparate elements. For though two of them are singers one would expect to have found at the Nuovo, one is most certainly not.

Carlo Casaccia was a long-standing performer at this theatre. The finest buffo bass for dialect roles that Naples could boast, he was obviously choice for the role of the elderly hoodwinked apothecary, and Donizetti wrote him a part which must have shown off his ability to get his tongue round swiftly moving ebullient patter.

Amalia Schütz was also engaged at the Nuovo. Although Donizetti would seem to have had little cause to be enthusiastic about her, she was, "in the absolute penury of women at the Teatro Nuovo"[3], clearly the best soprano available. Born in Switzerland, she had already sung at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris and at La Scala in Milan. High hopes had been held of her when she arrived in Naples in December 1835, and indeed her debut, at the Teatro Nuovo in IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA, had seemed to fulfil them. "L'Omnibus" had reported on 23 January 1836:

2. It should be added that we know - from the papers of the Superintendent of Theatres and Spectacles preserved in the State Archives of Naples - that the censorship notified the Teatro Nuovo of its approval of the libretto of 28 May. We do not, however, know when the libretto had been submitted. If ever such information should come to light, it could well throw important light on the length of time it took Donizetti to compose the opera.

3. "L'Omnibus, Saturday, 19 December 1835.

> An attractive figure; good pronunciation even though she is Swiss; a fine voice, clear, facile, agile; and her technique will become perfect with the aid of good Neapolitan examples. She has thus given decided pleasure and was much applauded.

Unfortunately these favourable impressions soon began to wane, In April she was reported to be ill, and on the 19th of that month Donizetti wrote that "Now the public applauds her, now they whistle her to death, and now they ignore her". Many of us in the past have wondered why the soprano role in IL CAMPANELLO is not of greater size and interest: here, plainly, we have the reason.

The surprise in this cast - the singer one would not expect to have found at this theatre - is Giorgio Ronconi. One of Donizetti's favourite baritones, he had sung in all the major opera houses of Italy, and it was he, predictably, who scored the greatest success in IL CAMPANELLO. Donizetti had written him a superb acting and singing role: a role which, by allowing him to assume different disguises and indulge in unlimited caricature and mimicry, gave him the opportunity, in a word, to play the virtuoso.

Given the situation in Naples, it is not difficult to account for Ronconi's presence in the Teatro Nuovo. He was singing there, simply and certainly, because the closure of the Royal Theatres meant that he was out of work elsewhere. There is, moreover, at least circumstantial evidence to suggest that he considered the theatre beneath his dignity, for some time between the premiere of IL CAMPANELLO and the end of July he broke his contract and left the city. There could be no question of his following up his success by performing in BETLY, since, quite simply, he was no longer in Naples to do so. For that opera Donizetti was forced to fall back on the elderly baritone, Giuseppe Fioravanti, who, for all his efforts, proved the weak link in an otherwise strong cast.

In all that has been said, there is one assumption that has not for a moment been questioned, and that is that Donizetti wrote the libretto of IL CAMPANELLO himself. Yet, strange to say, there is some doubt even about this. In July 1841 - five years after the first performance of IL CAMPANELLO - a dispute erupted over a performance at the same theatre, the Nuovo, of I PAZZI PER PROGETTO , an opera which Donizetti had written at the beginning of 1830 to a text by Domenico Gilardoni.[4] When the poster announcing the performance was put up, the Prefect of Police received a visit from Gilardoni's heirs (Gilardoni himself had died in 1831), complaining that the management had not agreed with them a fee for their rights in the work. This complaint was referred to the Superintendent of Theatres, the Marchese Imperiale, who fixed a sum of eight ducats, which was duly paid over to Gilardoni's heirs. When he wrote to the Superintendent to confirm payment, the impresario, Antonio

4. Naples, Archivo di Stato, Sez. Teatri, Fascio 41.

Felice Ventura, added that since he was shortly to give performances of IL CAMPANELLO by the same author, could the Superintendent call in the heirs and fix a like sum for their rights in that work? There is no further correspondence extant on this matter, but I PAZZI PER PROGETTO was performed on 14 August; IL CAMPANELLO did not appear till 29 October.

The important phrase is, of course, "by the same author" ("del stesso Autore"). The work "Author" was used of the librettist, not the composer (who would have been described as the "Maestro"), and Ventura, who was not without experience in these matters and who was never over-eager to hand over money in other circumstances, accepted that Gilardoni's heirs had a right to compensation when he revived the opera, just as they had when he performed I PAZZI PER PROGRETTO, which was indisputably Gilardoni's work.

The obvious inference of this is that, contrary to the anecdotal and other information discussed above, the libretto - or at least the 'programma' (an outline of the dramatic action) - was not Donizetti's work, but had been written for him by Gilardoni before he died; and that when Donizetti needed a libretto in a hurry, he remembered it and set it to music, perhaps making any necessary amendments to it himself. When IL CAMPANELLO saw the light of day, Gilardoni had been dead for five years. "La Sonnette de nuit", on which it was based, was not produced until 27 November 1835 - four years after Gilardoni's death. Here, therefore, we have yet another mystery connected with this opera.

Donizetti himself certainly took the credit for the libretto and accepted the congratulations - possibly the wry congratulations - of his close friend, the Roman librettist Jacopo Ferretti. "My Ferretti's having believed me half a poet," he wrote to him,[5] "has filled me with pride, and now" - this latter part of the sentence clearly referring to his next attempt at libretto-writing, BETLY - "I believe I am going to pile up a mountain of verses." The key-word in Donizetti's original Italian is "semipoeta". The first translation which comes to mind is the one we have given, 'half a poet', but William Ashbrook has suggested to one of the present authors that Donizetti may have been using the word in the sense of 'co-author'. Even if we accept this ingenious suggestion, it does not remove the difficulty of the date of "La Sonnette de nuit". It is, of course, possible to suggest that both the French vaudeville and Gilardoni's libretto were derived independently from an earlier common source which is not now identifiable, but such an argument violates the principle of Occam's Razor and should not be invoked save as a last resort.

Who then did write the libretto of IL CAMPANELLO? Donizetti claimed to have done so himself, and in such matters his integrity was usually beyond reproach. His claim is supported by the testimony of Adam, Torelli, and (almost) Cottrau. Later

5. Letter from Donizetti to Ferretti, July 1836, Zavadini, no 216, p. 414.

libretti published by Ricordi state 'Parole e musica di Gaetano Donizetti'. And yet five years earlier, the impresario of the Teatro Nuovo - a man who would not be expected to offer to pay authors' rights unless there were a firm legal requirement to do so - offered to settle with Gilardoni's heirs for the use of IL CAMPANELLO on the grounds that it was by the same author as I PAZZI PER PROGETTO.

It seems an unanswerable conundrum, but there may be a very simple explanation. There is no further correspondence between Ventura and the Superintendent extant, and no confirmation that a fee was either fixed or paid. Perhaps Ventura was misinformed about the authorship and withdrew his offer on realising that Gilardoni's heirs had no claim. Perhaps the heirs were just 'trying it on', or were, indeed, under a genuine misapprehension themselves. Perhaps they could not believe their good fortune when Ventura offered to pay them for a work for which they had not put forward a claim. All in all, the most likely explanation is that in his anxiety to avoid another brush with the Prefect of Police, Ventura relied on his memory, and did not check the facts, which were that Donizetti himself had indeed written both words and music.

Even this does not exhaust the problems associated with this opera, though some of those which have been put forward seem to the present authors more imaginary than real. It has been argued, for example, that Cottrau's ability to send his relatives two duets - certainly in printed form - only three days after the premiere constitutes evidence against Donizetti's having composed the opera in haste. This is not, we believe, convincing. The friendship between the Donizetti family and the Cottrau family was a very close one. Gaetano and Virginia spent much time with Cottrau and his wife, escaping from the summer heat of Naples to spend their evenings at the Villa Majo, the summer retreat of the Cottraus in Infrascata, presumably a locality on the hills outside the city. There they made music together, and there Guillaume Cottrau took a keen interest in the progress of his friend's compositions. Nothing is more probable than that Donizetti should have handed over copies of the more important items as they were written - copies which would promptly have been delivered to the engraver so that they would be ready for release just as soon as the premiere of the opera had taken place.

One small mystery was cleared up recently with the publication by Marcello de Angelis of items from the correspondence of the Florentine impresario Alessandro Lanari. For many years, Ricordi published two versions of the libretto of IL CAMPANELLO, usually listed in their catalogue as IL CAMPANELLO and DETTO, CON PROSA, the authorship of the first being given as Donizetti, the second as N.N. In a letter written in November or December 1836 (probably 20 December) to Lanari a "Neapolitan publisher Gilberto Coltran" (Guillaume Cottrau?) wrote that "Donizetti meanwhile is taking steps to set to music the recitatives for IL CAMPANELLO, which have been written by Cammarano".[6] From this

6. Marcello de Angelis: Le Carte dell'Impresario. Sansoni 1982 p57

it appears that whatever Ricordi's listing may suggest, the original version of the opera had the musical numbers separated by sections of prose, and that the librettist Salvadore Cammarano subsequently rewrote the prose in 'versi sciolti'. This was a task which Donizetti was perfectly capable of doing himself, but he may have been too busy; if, however, this was done with an eye to the forthcoming production of the Teatro Fondo, Cammarano's involvement, as Poet of the Royal Theatres, would be easily explained.

But if some problems can be dismissed in this way, enough has been said to show that there are many which cannot. It is an amusing reflection that IL CAMPANELLO, in itself a light-hearted web of deception, should have spawned so many problems, so many 'perhapses'. The deceptions within the opera are all played at the expense of the elderly apothecary, Don Annibale Pistacchio. In preparing this study, there have been many occasions when the present authors have begun to feel rather like poor Don Annibale himself....