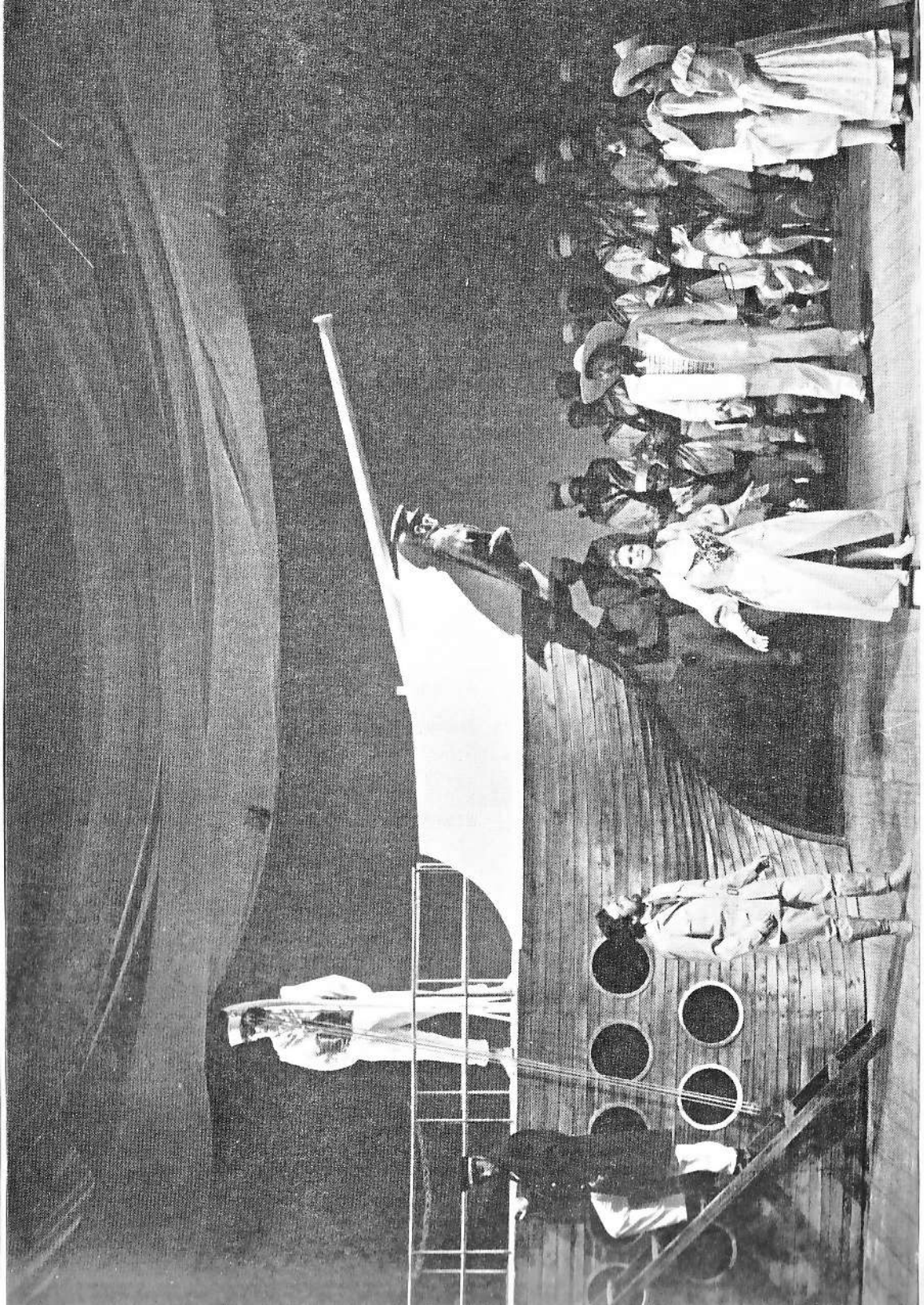


EDITORIAL

DONIZETTI AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

It is sad but true that the operatic contemporaries of Gaetano Donizetti are not much more than musical ghosts. The flood of operas and cantatas for which they were responsible and which once captivated a dauntingly hypercritical public, has not just been put aside, it has been treated as if it never occurred: while Europe scrapes the bottom of the barrel in search of music worthy of revival, almost one whole generation of Italian composers is stranded on a Mount Ararat of complete indifference.

These rejected maestri shared the same generous education as Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, the same traditions, and much the same apprenticeship literally on the stage. All were scoured by the fire and brimstone of capricious theatrical enterprise, all were lauded or dismissed by critics; championed by impresarios; fêted by torchlight processions and showered with odes and sonnets whose superlatives, today, make ironic reading. Theatres know them no longer; all that remains for most is a bust in a provincial opera house, set upon a column of mild misinformation in Grove.

Were they so very inferior? No one at the time thought so. It would have been hard to persuade the Neapolitans that *Niobe* or *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* were not great operas; both Milan and Turin fell for *Caterina di Guisa*. The *triestini* believed *La prigione di Edimburgo* to be a worthy successor to such operas

as *Norma* or *Lucia di Lammermoor;* Mercadante's *La vestale* displaced lingering memories of Spontini's great opera; Coppola's *Nina* did the same for Paisiello; Pacini's *Medea,* using part of the same libretto put Mayr's version to sleep in the same sequence of renewal that had enabled Mayr to replace Cherubini. But Spontini, Paisiello and Cherubini are still alive as musical personalities; their supplanters fight hard even to be recalled to mind.

Is it true that neglect follows upon excess? The output of a composer like Giovanni Pacini (more than ninety operas) is truly intimidating but surely an age which finds merit in the interminable revival of Baroque operas cannot claim that sheer prodigality is a deterent. Nor were these composers necessarily fitful or complaisant in their composing, many of them were quite as insistant upon the quality of their librettists, their casts, their theatres and their publishers, as Verdi or Bellini. Some even were bolder (or more foolhardy). Verdi never attempted anything as bizarre as a representation of the Aurora Borealis (such as features in Vaccai's *Le fucine di Norvegia*); Vaccai's Witch of Endor (in his *Saul)* was a perfectly credible (*respectable* is not really the right word) precursor of Verdi's Shakespearian hags. Pacini's *I cavalieri di Valenza* embodied a scenic body-blow to the audience that nowadays is attributed exclusively to such composers as Rossini, Meyerbeer and Auber. In fact *I cavalieri di Valenza* dates from 1828, why is Pacini never credited with a role in the rise of *grand-opéra?*

The highly selective processes of history have not yet, it appears, worked in favour of these composers despite advocacy from musicologists; even the music Festivals - devoted as they so often are to lost causes, find little enthusiasm for the works of these discarded maestri. Those amateurs of the unusual have, it is true, made an investment in the recordings of Opera Rara whose "One Hundred Years of Italian Opera" is a magnificent enterprise, but sometimes seems likely to take one hundred years to come to fruition. From New York has emerged a disc called "Rossini's Rivals" with songs and arias by Vaccai, Federico Ricci, Pacini, Mercadante and so on; and from New Zealand another called "Una serenata italiana" featuring even such rare birds

from somewhat later in the nineteenth century as Francesco Chiaromonte and Filippo Marchetti as well as Pacini, the Ricci brothers and Mayr; but who listens to these discs apart from the small and highly specialised band of the already converted? How does one prevent the endless, mindless, repetition of operas which are already so familiar that it is impossible to hear them again without tedium? The repertoire of international opera houses, never very extensive, has recently (through financial restraint, to be sure, but this excuse has been trotted-out almost since opera was invented) shrunk to a handful of masterpieces which are set fair to drive everyone out of the theatres before long. The big recording companies - once modestly innovative - now prefer to re-record rather than break new ground. What hope is there for new listeners, for new singers, for new conductors, even for a new critical environment, if all we hear is the same threadbare few over and over again?

Some of the composers given a brief exposure in this Journal succeeded in shouldering-aside much greater names, not once, but often in their extensive careers. Just occasionally it will be conceded that the Neapolitans actually *prefered* to hear Pacini's *La regina di Cipro* or his *Lorenzino de'Medici* when they were running alongside Verdi; his *Allan Cameron,* whatever the obsequious Muzio reported to *"Il signor maestro",* actually outperformed both *Luisa Miller* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* when these operas were rivals for the favour of Venetian audiences. Music from Carafa's *Adele di Lusignano* (La Scala 1817) was still in print at the end of the nineteenth century. Luigi Ricci's *Un'avventura di Scaramuccia* joined *Norma* and Rossini's *Otello* in obtaining the ultimate accolade of "ottimo" at La Scala in 1834. Does this mean that *Un'avventura di Scaramuccia* (or *Adele di Lusignano,* or *Allan Cameron,* or *La regina di Cipro,* or *Lorenzino de'Medici*) is about to be revived? Not at all. Operas which aroused fervent enthusiasm throughout Europe and South America, staged at, say, the São Carlos in Lisbon, the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, at Her Majesty's in London, as well as obtaining major revivals in Rio, Buenos Aires, and Havana, the famous Théâtre-Italien in Paris, and the Imperial Theatre in St.Petersburg, are just wiped-off the musical slate as of no account

whatsoever, thus writing-off these audiences with as much disdain at the music. In Italy, even, interest in the revival of these composers is at a nadir, from time to time chamber works by Mayr or Mercadante are exhumed for the simple reason that there is a shortage of concert pieces for the repertoire-starved flute or oboe or the like; those rarities which have somehow managed to obtain a modern printing or re-printing (Pacini's *Octet* comes to mind) are evidence of musicological enterprise of a high order, but performances are few if at all.

Those enthusiasts like Rubino Profeta - so recently and so lamentably silenced - who have laboured so hard and so long to revive forgotten works, are few and far between. Work to revive a lost opera is unconscionably problematic and expensive. Autograph material is elusive, the age of the computer has not yet given us the essential references we require to make research as finite as we would wish. The task of editing, re-scoring, re-interpreting the not-always very precise wishes of a long-dead composer living in a period when performance tradition was strong enough to allow all sorts of shorthand to creep into scores, is both arduous and contentious. Which enlightened body is prepared to finance such research?

Who will defend these lost causes? This edition of the Journal of the Donizetti Society offers a brief selection of papers on the neglected rivals of Donizetti and his peers. They are necessarily diffuse in that so many composers are in need of coverage and so many aspects of their careers deserve examination, but it is to be hoped that a start may be made on a more systematic examination of their achievement. In this context certain heroic initiatives should be mentioned. Occasional publications have been received from those faithful sites in Italy where the memory of a locally-born composer is cherished: in this way Tolentino has issued a *Catalogo dei manoscritti di Nicola Vaccai della Biblioteca Comunale Filelfica* [Francesco Coviello: Comune di Tolentino 1985]; and Recanati a *Giuseppe Persiani - operista italiano dell'Ottocento* [Giacomo Bellucci: Città di Recanati 1980]. The city of Altamura has remained as faithful to Mercadante (with a series of publications, concerts and recordings) as Catania has been to Bellini. Possibly the most

encouraging factor of all, comes, however, not really surprisingly, from the United States, where Garland Publishing has been re-issuing a whole series of hard-to-find vocal scores; *Italian Opera 1810-1840* proposes to be a re-issuing of fifty-eight volumes of operatic material, complete operas and excerpts from operas by this lost generation of composers. Several of these volumes are already in print, and all have been prefaced by Philip Gossett with his customary attention to detail.

If the end product of musical research is musical performance, the readers of this Journal may well have to have considerable patience, but it is to be hoped that they will not wait too long, and in vain.

(Overleaf) The first page of the autograph score of Maria Stuarda conserved in the Stiftelsen Musikkulturens främjande in Stockholm with the music marked allegro vivace but without the dynamic markings of the published score.