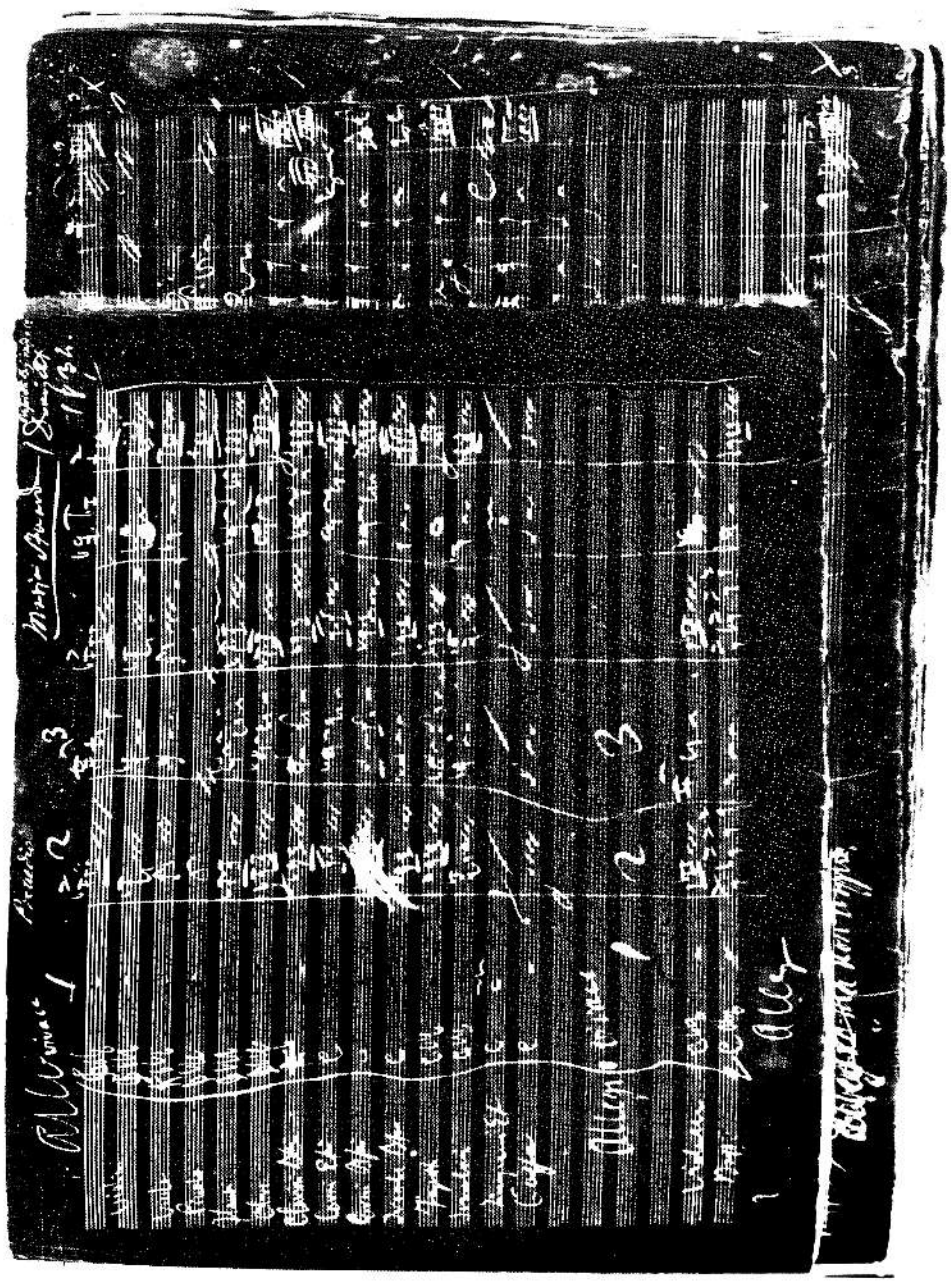


REVIVAL IN DEPTH

While the list of his revivals continues to lengthen as further rarities come to performance, two recent publications might well be regarded as summing up the current state of Donizetti studies. Indeed, they could well be described as the treble and the bass of the Donizetti Revival. Ashbrook's *Donizetti and his operas,* the 1982 edition of which examined the whole of his operatic career in an exemplary format, has now been reprinted in a two-volume Italian translation by EDT/MUSICA of Turin: *Donizetti: La vita* (1986), and *Le opere* (1987) have been extensively edited and annotated by Fulvio Lo Presti and translated by the latter and Luigi Della Croce. These volumes may be regarded as the treble clef of modern scholarship. At a more specific level - underpinning these largely chronological studies - has appeared Philip Gossett's remarkable *Anna Bolena and the Artistic Maturity of Gaetano Donizetti* (Oxford University Press 1985) which supplies an analytical bass rare indeed when applied to an Italian composer of Donizetti's generation and offers an examination of the evolutional dilemma of a maestro following in the footsteps of Gioacchino Rossini.

The disdain for Rossini's immediate heirs, a disdain which was almost universal until recent years, might be described as the B theme of both these books. Ashbrook - as long ago as 1965-addressed these prejudices, his 1982 book re-addressed Donizetti's range and merits which this present Italian translation, even more boldly I dare say, has succeeded in putting emphatically within the European tradition which gave them birth. These volumes are the definitive Ashbrook we shall all refer to. Gossett's book takes the form of a close examination of one of his autograph scores; assuming, as a point of departure, the popular view that *Anna Bolena* represents the composer's struggle to escape stylistic enslavement, he has painstakingly examined the false-starts, the deletions,the legion of crossings-out and second-thoughts which disfigure this manuscript to discover if it is true.

The significance of this book should not be underestimated. As Professor Gossett himself says when rejecting Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony as the subject for the first in a new series of *'Studies in Musical Genesis and Structure'*, substituting *Anna Bolena*:

"even for a less exalted composer an autograph document remains a fascinating document"

To be sure, proceeding from the view that Italian opera

"is generally deemed unworthy of being 'analysed'"

he demonstrates, with admirable precision, that an analysis of paper, script, marks, cyphers, corrections, replacements and pastings-over can clarify the musical mind wonderfully, even that of an exponent of a once-despised artform. Within the teeming irregularities of Donizetti's autographs

"we can catch him in the act of composition".

We should not expect Professor Gossett - one of the most brilliant Rossinian scholars of our day - to insist overmuch that the Rossinian 'stranglehold' on his younger contemporaries has been exaggerated, but in fact he supplies a perfectly candid survey of the commonplace assumptions of indebtedness which have always been used to attack Bellini and Donizetti; Gossett despatches these cliché-ridden attacks with energy and good humour. He does not say 'If all we hear is Rossini all we shall hear is Rossini' but this, of course, has been true until recent revivals have helped us to hear otherwise; and the lesser composers - or at least those composers who are lesser known (and even less revived) - Pacini, Mercadante, Coccia, Vaccai and so on - are still tarred quite indiscriminately with the Rossinian brush. Professor Gossett sweeps out some of the nasty corners of sloppy terminology: he roundly dismisses 'convention' as a term of critical obloquy when refering to the structure of these operas, pointing out that this is "simply unacceptable; much of Donizetti's finest music (not to mention Verdi's or, for that matter, Mozart's) is worked out within the most rigidly conventional boundaries". He reminds those who have ears to hear that speed of composition has never prevented genius from revealing itself and that "the aesthetic quality of a work... is not a function of its period of gestation. Let us purge this diction from our critical vocabulary".

This book makes its points with the aid of a carefully reasoned and minutely observed examination of specific texts. With the assistance of lengthy incipits of music - extracted from cavatine and cabalette, from cori, from various of the many ensembles in this opera - we are able to surprise the composer, not only searching to eliminate banal figuration, commonplace triplets, predictable harmonies etc., but also - and rather more urgently - striving to conjure-up musical patterns precisely to illuminate key words in the libretto. As Gossett says "we can observe his ear at work, testing musical patterns..." He makes changes to reassert continuity, momentum, to whip-up drama "prodding here, pushing there. cutting, revising..." in order to eliminate stasis and routine, finding the right musical gesture instead of the anticipated one and thus keeping the audience not only alert but constantly surprised and stimulated. As well as stressing Donizetti's individual voice and decisions he does something too to remedy the misconceptions about the Rossinian module which have been so readily accepted (and repeated, ad nauseam); pointing out, en passant I suppose, but none the less effectively for all that, that the great pesarese has been slandered quite as regularly as his heirs, that the Rossinian models have in fact been varied, been sensitively fashioned, not straightjacketed by *formula* as Boito and others have so firmly maintained. He makes it clear that the Rossinian codification was not a prison, it was simply the most persuasive and economical use of factors inherited and refurbished as well as invented.

This book does something to tackle the vexed problem of tonal structure in these operas of the primo Ottocento. No one will deny that Italian romantic opera is an empyrical artform (the willingness - even eagerness - to transpose, to ammend, and the acceptance of 'insert arias' is enough proof of that), as a result, tonal decisions are sometimes bafflingly impenetrable ("terra incognita") and mostly disconcertingly illogical. The symmetry and logic of so many of Rossini's scores was often abandoned in favour of an extraordinary anarchy. Encouraged by an imprecisely understood Romanticism many composers seem to have embraced tonal indiscipline with a misguided fervour. Pacini, for example, appears to have viewed large-scale tonality only in the light of fashion. As Lippmann has observed, in his first period Pacini only used bland keys, in his second period - from *Saffo* onwards - he hardly used anything except remote keys. Donizetti's musical sophistication (though not always his resource) invariably exceeded that of Pacini, in most of the examples quoted in Gossett's book an arching tonal structure is discernable - *Anna Bolena* was sufficiently near to the Rossinian exemplar to insist upon that - but can it ever be asserted that his tonal decisions were made other than with a view to making the voices as comfortable as possible? Mood and colouring were important considerations to be sure from the beginning of his career, but true tonal coherence - once the Rossinian spell was broken for good - was only to be looked-for in the work of Donizetti from 1837 onwards (and especially in the Paris/Vienna phase of his life) when the closed sections of the traditional Italian opera began to erode so dramatically.

With so much information so generously offered, one question remains paramount: for whom is this book intended?

Is it really only for the initiate as the analytical tables seem to suggest? But these tables (which feature essentially in the second half of the book) are outnumbered by the leisurely and quite general introduction (Introduction and Chapters I to IV) which might well deceive the interested reader that the technicalities to come could still remain within his grasp. And then the initiate in question will have to be gifted with excellent eyesight: the tables indicate the nature of Donizetti's continual readjustments and changes of direction without problem but the musical examples - though printed with admirable fidelity - rely upon minute arrows and asterisks contained within tiny circles to indicate deletions, to such an extent that one welcomes with undisguised relief the composer's own crosshatching (for example on page 68) which enables both an accepted and a rejected sequence to be compared side-by-side. OUP might well consider a less miniscule format on another occasion.

A book then of conspicuous merit and originality which can only dignify the analytical rationale it proposes, as well as justify the close scrutiny which is required to appreciate compositional decisions in the making. It is true that dense

musicological formulae leave no hope for the less-than-completely adept reader to follow the argument. Is this a defect? Not really I suppose, but a little less fine-tuning might have led to a wider comprehension of a theme which needs to be more widely understood. In a book which relies upon 'sampling' as a basis for study there is too brief and too precipitate a summing-up. There could well be made room for a valedictory itemising of what Donizetti and his peers were trying to avoid in order - not just to resist Rossinian emulation - but to forge a style appropriate to the pressured expansion of nineteenth century Europe. We should be reminded that Donizetti's desire to avoid 'learned' music, to avoid music lacking spontaneity, vividness and élan, refusing commonplace melodies, flat harmonies, drab instrumentaion, routine, was simply an expression of his refusal to conform to the formula which had conditioned society as well as music; that Italian opera was conditioned not only by matters of style but by such abstract notions as renewal, vitality, liberation, and immediacy: that Donizetti's instinctive formal decisions were concerned with an appropriate communication to the Italians of his day. In this sense, *Anna Bolena* was a plea for freedom from tyranny, musical as much as Tudor.

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