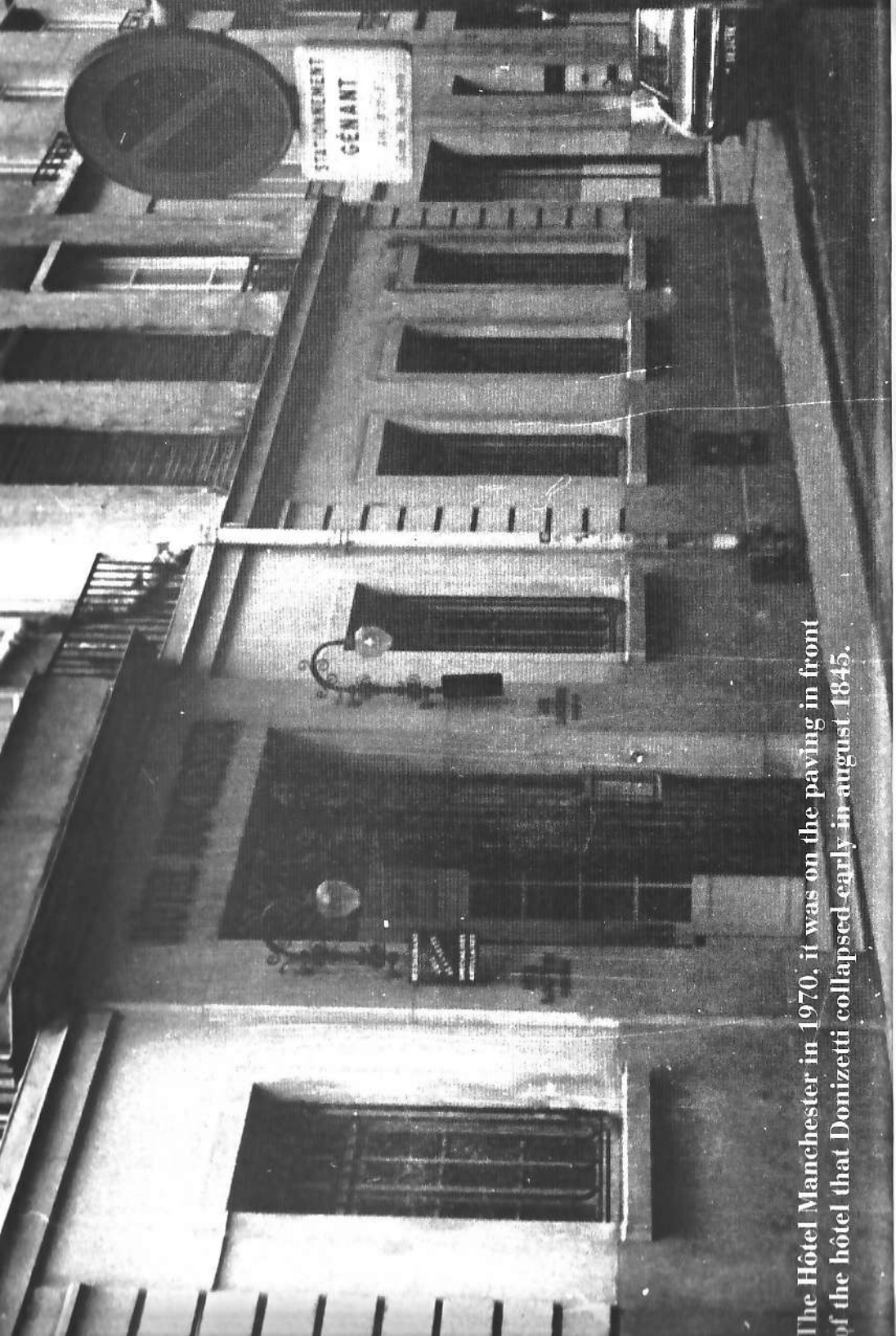


The Hôtel Manchester in 1970, it was on the paving in front of the hôtel that Donizetti collapsed early in august 1845.

THE CONTRACT FOR PARIS

John Black

On 21 May 1837, Donizetti wrote to the famous tenor Duprez, who was enjoying a successful season in Paris in the following terms:

I believe that the opera which I long to give at the Opéra should be *L'assedio di Calais*, which is the most fully worked out, the one which conforms best to French taste and, as such, is thought by one and all to have been written for Paris. In it there are ballets, effective choruses, decent instrumentation (as far as I have been able to), and if this could be put on I would owe my life to you.[1]

Nothing came of this proposal, but Donizetti's Parisian agent, Michele Accursi remained busy on his behalf, and the following February sent him a contract (as we know from Donizetti's reply; the contract was presumably for the Opéra, though this is not explicitly stated). Donizetti wrote back on 24 February 1838, complaining that the proposed timing was unsuitable: Accursi knew perfectly well that he was committed to a contract for an opera for the S. Carlo, but he could come later, after the summer. In the meantime he was anxiously waiting for news of the production of *Parisina* (at the Théâtre-Italien).[2] By April 1838 Donizetti felt he could tell his friends of his plans. On 11 April he wrote to Spadaro Del Bosch that after September he would go to Paris (that is, after the production of his opera for the S. Carlo), to wander around and to work.[3] Melzi was told rather more (5 May):

in all probability I shall be writing for the Opéra, and if their letters don't lie, Scribe is sending me the libretto. I am in firm negotiations with the Théâtre-Italien. As for the Naples Conservatorio, all is in disorder. They seem to have made the King believe that there is no need for a Director.[4]

Three days later, on 8 May, he wrote to Antonio Vasselli that there was still no firm news about Paris, whatever the newspapers might announce[5]. However, by the end of the month he was able to write to Charles Duponchel, the Director of the Paris Opéra (25 May 1838), accepting a contract for two operas, and outlining the conditions under which he would work[6]. He wrote to Antonio Dolci the next day:

> You will have read in the papers that I'm going to Paris but up to now this has been up in the air. It's a happy outcome because only the greatest composers are admitted to the Opéra, and that on rare occasions, and to be asked for two operas flatters the pride of a composer[7].

By the end of June he was telling his friends[8] that he had submitted his resignation from his post (at the Conservatorio), though he didn't know if the king would accept it; also that the opera required to fulfil his contract with the S. Carlo was to be *Poliuto*, and that it was to be given on 26 September. This was an important date in the operatic calendar of Naples, when the theatres opened again after 16 days of silence. With that date settled, he could write to Ruolz in Paris that he would be there in the following October (27 June)[9]. It is however clear from his letters to Antonio Vasselli throughout July that a firm contract from Paris was still awaited[10]. Significantly, it would seem from extant letters that he did not inform his Italian publisher Ricordi until the end of August.[11]

The choice of *Poliuto* for his S. Carlo opera had been made late in the day: the arrival of the tenor Adolphe Nourrit had necessitated a subject with a more important tenor role than the one previously decided upon. The librettist, Salvadore Cammarano worked fast, and the text was ready by the first week of July.

What happened thereafter is best told as a digest of the correspondence, memos, etc, and to understand it, it is helpful to know the names of the various officials involved, and how they related to each other in the administration of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

The Neapolitan Administration

At the centre of the government was the King, Ferdinando II, an autocratic, "absolute" monarch, advised by a Council of Ministers, each responsible for one of the various departments of state.

Two of these departments were directly involved in matters theatrical: first *Affari Interni*, of which the *Ministro Segretario di Stato* at the relevant time was Marchese Nicola Santangelo, a hard-working and apparently fair-minded official who had been in the post for some six years and was by this time fully experienced. The second department was *Polizia Generale* of which the *Ministro Segretario di Stato* was Marchese Francesco Saverio Del Carretto, whose reputation has been much blackened by history but who seems to have been well disposed in matters operatic (Donizetti dedicated the score of *Lucia di Lammermoor* to him, and from what we know of Donizetti this is most unlikely to have been a servile gesture of flattery.) The *Sopraintendente dei Teatri e degli Spettacoli* was responsible to the *Ministro Segretario di Stato degli Affari Interni*. The "*Sopraintendente*" was technically Chairman of a Commission of three members, but in practice he seems to have undertaken the supervision of theatres himself. It was perhaps unfortunate for Donizetti that on 5 July 1838 there was a change in the membership of the commission, with a newcomer, Duca Laurino Spinelli succeeding Principe Montemiletto as *Sopraintendente*. Montemiletto had only been 2 years in post, but was allowed to resign on health and family grounds. A year later Spinelli was himself replaced by Marchese Imperiale, who held the office with great distinction (and even greater diligence) for 10 years. Evidently the office was suffering from inconsistent leadership in the mid 1830s, though the senior civil servant, Don Vincenzo Brignole, had been in the post for some years. The other essential characters in the theatrical bureaucracy were the two members of the *Revisione*, the two censors. One of these was appointed by, and was directly responsible to, the *Ministro degli Affari Interni*. For some years this had been Giulio Genoino (the librettist of Donizetti's *La lettera anonima*), but on 6 June 1838 he was replaced by the Abbé Gaetano

Royer, a much less malleable character, who held the position till the reorganisation of 1848. His appointment was confirmed by Royal Decree on 16 June 1838.
The second Revisore was the long-serving Francesco Ruffa, who was appointed by, and reported to, the *Ministro della Polizia Generale*. The two censors shared an office, and there is plenty of evidence that despite their different official affiliations they discussed their work together. The formal procedure for obtaining approval for a libretto began with the Impresa of the various theatres (there were 6 giving regular performances of opera in Naples at this time). The impresario of the Royal Theatres was Domenico Barbaja, who would submit a libretto for approval, with a short covering note, to the *Sopraintendente*. He, in turn, transmitted it under formal cover to the *Revisione*, usually on the same, or the next, day, at the same time writing a brief formal note to the impresario that he had done so. In due course (typically 6 to 8 weeks later) each censor reported separately, in writing, to his minister. If these reports were favourable, the next step was for the *Ministro della Polizia* (himself) to write to the *Ministro degli Affari Interni*, confirming that as far as he was concerned there was no obstacle to performance. With the report from his own censor to hand, the *Ministro degli Affari Interni* could send his approval to the Sopraintendente who would inform the impresario accordingly. This may seem a convoluted and burdensome procedure, but given the outstanding administrative efficiency of the Neapolitan bureaucracy it worked smoothly and, if time was short, could process a request quite quickly.

While in general the ministers took careful note of the views of their civil servants, rarely questioning the reports of the censors, the King did not consider himself bound by the advice of his ministers and reached his own decisions, if necessary in the face of his minister's advice.

Before Donizetti could shake the dust of Naples off his shoes, he had to satisfy two distinct and different requirements. First, he had to fulfil his contract with the S. Carlo theatre for a new opera; second, he had to obtain a release from his post at the Conservatorio, either permanent or

temporary. Until these requirements were satisfied, he could not obtain a passport, without which he could not leave the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

As the years went by, Donizetti became increasingly dissatisfied with his position in Naples. Some of the reasons for this were of long standing – the low regard in which musicians were held; the shortage of time for adequate preparation and rehearsal of his operas; the almost insuperable difficulties caused by the theatrical administration and the policies of the *Revisione*; the activities of dishonest copyists and forgers. To these must be added matters which caused him increasing, cumulative bitterness: the empty duties of the Directorship of Music for the Royal Theatres, and in particular, the way he was treated by the theatre at the time of Virginia's death; the King's refusal to appoint him to the Directorship of the Conservatorio S. Pietro a Majella following the death of Zingarelli, a post which he believed that the Minister for Internal Affairs had promised him at the time of his appointment as Professor of Composition in 1834; the paralysing grief he suffered on the death of Virginia in 1837.
A factor of possibly over-riding importance to Donizetti was the failure to establish a hearing for his great tragic romantic operas in Naples. Consider the Neapolitan fate of his most important operas in this genre, written between 1830 and 1838:

Opera	First performed	Performance history in Naples
Anna Bolena	Milan, 1830	Performed at the Royal Theatres, with declining frequency, 1832-34; Fenice Theatre, 1836. (Eventually prohibited in 1840)
Fausta	Naples, 1832	9 performances in 1832. (Prohibited in 1835)
Ugo, Conte di Parigi	Milan, 1832	Never performed. (Eventually prohibited in 1845).

Parisina	Florence, 1833	Regularly performed by the Royal Theatres, 1834-36; a few times at Fenice Theatre in 1838.
Lucrezia Borgia	Milan, 1833	Regularly prohibited under various titles.
Rosmonda d'Inghilterra	Florence, 1834	Prohibited in 1837, again in 1838.
Maria Stuarda	(Milan, 1835)	Prohibited in 1834.
Gemma di Vergy	Milan, 1834	Performed regularly from 1837.
Marino Faliero	Paris, 1835	Never performed. (Eventually prohibited in 1839, annually thereafter).
Lucia di Lammermoor	Naples, 1835	Performed regularly, after a slow start.
Belisario	Venice, 1836	Performed at the Royal Theatres in 1837/8. Occasional late revivals.
L'assedio di Calais	Naples, 1836	Soon dropped out of sight.
Pia de' Tolomei	Venice, 1837	Performed in 1838 with an anti-climactic happy ending.
Roberto Devereux	Naples, 1837	Very popular.
Maria de Rudenz	Venice, 1838	(Eventually prohibited in 1841)
Poliuto	(Naples, 1848)	Prohibited in 1838

Thus, to a variety of personal reasons why life in Naples was becoming increasingly intolerable, was to be added artistic failure – a failure to obtain a hearing for his greatest and most innovative work. This reached a climax with the prohibition of *Poliuto* in 1838 though by that time the decision to leave Naples for Paris had already been taken, and a date for departure fixed.

Donizetti's operas – some of them, at least – had certainly been heard in Paris, as the following table, using the data provided by Soubies, shows:

Opera	Number of performances in Paris							
	1831	**1832**	**1833**	**1834**	**1835**	**1836**	**1837**	**1838**
L'ajo nell'imbarazzo		2						
Gianni da Calais			1	1				
Anna Bolena	9	7	5	4	6	7	6	2
Parisina								7
Marino Faliero					5	3		
Lucia di Lammermoor							4	17
Roberto Devereux								2

The number of performances are given up to the end of 1838, when Donizetti left Naples. But these performances were all at the Théâtre-Italien, and to establish himself in Paris he needed an invitation to write for the Opéra; with this in his pocket he would be in a position to begin the careful negotiations which would be necessary if he were to extricate himself successfully from his responsibilities in Naples.

Thus Donizetti was faced with two tasks; first, to obtain a contract – or, at least, the promise of one – from the Opéra in Paris; second to obtain his release from his positions and responsibilities in Naples, a procedure which required him to keep his cards very close to his chest lest his plans reached the ears of a notoriously unsympathetic bureaucracy. Only his closest friends were privy to what was in his mind.

Digest of Correspondence

B: Barbaja, impresario of Royal Theatres; S: Sovraintendente dei Teatri (Spinelli); AI: Ministro di Stato degli Affari Interni (Santangelo); p: Ministro della Polizia Generale (Del Carretto); R/AI: Revisore, Affari Interni (Royer); R/P: Revisore, Polizia (Ruffa); R: Revisione (individual Revisore not specified); D: Donizetti to Dolci

1838

8 July	B to S	Submits libretto of *Poliuto* for approval.[13]
10 July	S to R	Transmits libretto of *Poliuto* for review.[12]
15 July		[Donizetti had an audience of the Ministro degli Affari Interni and pressed on him his resignation from his post at the Conservatorio. The minister thought he was playing politics in order to obtain the Directorship for himself, and gave him a frosty reception.][14]
1 August	S to R/AI	Libretto of *Poliuto* to be sent to the Ministro della Polizia who wished to see it himself.[13] [The first official sign of trouble, though in June Donizetti had foreseen it, following a performance, immediately prohibited, of a ballet based on Goethe's *Faust*][15]
7 August	S to B	Reassures him that R/AI (Royer) had submitted a favourable report on *Poliuto*.[13]
11 August	AI to S	The King himself refuses approval of *Poliuto* on grounds of its sacred character (quoted by J. Commons)[16]
12 August	S to B	Transmits prohibition of *Poliuto*.[13] [The effect of this prohibition was to leave Barbaja without an opera, and Donizetti in breach of his contract. Barbaja and Donizetti suggest a substitute libretto be prepared for *Poliuto*, *I Guebri*, or that they seek approval for *Elisa Fosco (i.e. Lucrezia Borgia*, previously prohibited in 1834[11] and 1837[18]]
c20 August	B to S	Submits libretti of *I Guebri and Elisa Fosco.* [Presumed: no trace in files.]
21 August	S to R	Transmits libretto of *Elisa da Fosco* (*sic*). No mention of *I Guebri* at this stage. (Adds comment that with the prohibition of *Poliuto*, Barbaja was in a position of great embarrassment. S was presumably echoing Barbaja's letter to him).[17]
25 August		Donizetti to his lawyer, Aniello Benevento. Questioning his contractual position with the prohibition of *Poliuto;* his contract had stated that responsibility for the libretto was to be the librettist's; could he himself be in breach of contract as it was the libretto which had been faulted?[18]
c20 August	B to S	Submitting libretto of *Pia de' Tolomei.* Apparently unrelated to the prohibition of *Poliuto* at this stage. [Presumed: no trace in files.]
27 August	S to R	Transmitting libretto of *Pia de' Tolomei.*[13]
1 September	B to S	Donizetti has suggested that *Pia de' Tolomei*, not previously performed in Naples, might be accepted as fulfilling the requirements of his contract.[17]
1 September	S to B	Prepared to consider this suggestion, but acceptance would depend on review of the libretto.[13]
10 September	AI to S	*Pia de' Tolomei* approved for performance, subject to modifications to the text.[17]
11 September	S to B	Transmits approval of *Pia de' Tolomei.*[13]
14 September	S to B	Reminding him that the libretto of *Poliuto* had been returned to him on 12 August, but that of *Elisabetta (sic) Fosco* was with the Revisione.[13]
15 September	B to S	What is the position of *Elisa Fosco* now that *Poliuto* and *I Guebri* are both prohibited?[17]

		[Note that this is the first mention of the fate of *I Guebri.* This is often the case with works when prohibited – they simply disappear from the files.]
15 September	S to AI	Proposing that Donizetti be allowed to meet his contractual obligations with performances of *Pia de' Tolomei* and another opera not yet heard in Naples, either *Leonora* or *Dalinda*.[17] [There is evidence that this suggestion came from Barbaja and Donizetti. It was very disingenuous: "*Leonora*" was *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra*, prohibited in June 1837. *Dalinda* was *Lucrezia Borgia*, prohibited under the proper title in May 1834 and in June 1837, and as *Elisa Fosco* was still with the Revisione]
17 September	AI to S	This proposal is approved.[13]
17 September	S to B	Transmitting approval of this proposal.[13]
c 18 September	B to S	Submitting libretti of *Leonora* and *Dalinda* for approval. [Presumed – no trace in files.]
19 September	S to R	Transmitting libretti of *Leonora* and *Dalinda*.[13]
19 September	S to B	"Your request for a passport for Donizetti: there will be no obstacle to his departure once his contractual obligations have been fulfilled".[13] [Note that the issue of a passport depended on Donizetti's S. Carlo contract, not his position at the Conservatorio, from which it was presumably possible to be granted leave of absence.]
22 September	AI to S	Performance of *Elisa Fosco* prohibited.[17]
24 September	S to B	Transmitting prohibition of *Elisa Fosco*.[17]
[30 September		Performance of *Pia de' Tolomei* at S. Carlo.]
2 October	S to B	Replying to B's letter of previous day, and reminding him that he remained responsible for the two scores given to him by Donizetti.[13]
3 October	S to B	Issuing a certificate for a passport for Donizetti, against confirmation from Barbaja that Donizetti had deposited the scores of *Leonora and Dalinda*.[13]

4 October	S-File note	Certification received from Barbaja.[13] [c 8 October Donizetti leaves for Paris.]
13 November		He has proffered his resignation (from the Conservatorio) to the King, who did not reply. He then asked for 3 months leave of absence, to expire in December; he had now sought another 3 months. The King would then accept his resignation. In March he returned to Italy for a short visit, then back to Paris for 3 months; thereafter "*je quitte à jamais la France*".[19]
1839		
23 February	S to B	*Leonora* and *Dalinda* prohibited.

The conclusion to be drawn from this correspondence is that Donizetti's passport – the essential element in his departure from Naples – was obtained by what may generously be described as sleight-of-hand. Donizetti must have known perfectly well that the two operas he submitted to support *Pia de' Tolomei* for his contract had already been prohibited under different names, and were most unlikely to be treated differently on this occasion. Whether Barbaja knew is another matter: he may have been misled by the new titles, but from what we know of him it is not unreasonable to conclude that he was conspiring with Donizetti in a cynical ploy to delude the theatrical administration. It is unlikely that the *Revisione* would have been deceived: from the speed with which they detected works like *Marino Faliero* and, indeed, *Lucrezia Borgia* when presented in new guises, they may be expected to have seen through the plan as soon as they got round to reading the librettos. In the total absence of evidence, speculation is dangerous and possibly unjustified; but it is tempting to wonder how far up the administrative hierarchy a tacit agreement to help Donizetti on his way had been reached. For

Donizetti, normally truthful in his dealings, the end perhaps justified the means. But he got his passport, and left for Paris a few days later.

REFERENCES

COMMONS JEREMY, *Atti del I Convegno Internazionale di Studi Donizettiani*, (Bergamo 1983) *vol.* 1., pp. 65-102.

Naples, Archivio di Stato, Sezione Teatri.

SOUBIES ALBERT, *Le Théâtre-Italien de 1801 à 1913*, Paris, 1913.

Studi Donizettiani 1, (Bergamo 1962)

ZAVADINI GUIDO, *Donizetti: Vita, Musiche, Epistolario*, (Bergamo, 1948).

NOTES

1. Z. 236a, *Studi Donizettiani 1*, p. 39.
2. Z. 287, ZAVADINI, p. 466.
3. Z. 289, ZAVADINI, p. 468.
4. Z. 290, ZAVADINI, p. 468.
5. Z. 291, ZAVADINI, p. 469.
6. Z. 293, ZAVADINI, p. 471.
7. Z. 294, ZAVADINI, p. 472.
8. Z. 299, ZAVADINI, pp. 477-478.
9. Z. 300a, *Studi Donizettiani 1*, p. 51.
10. Z. 301, 303, 305, ZAVADINI, p. 479-481.
11. Z. 310, ZAVADINI, p. 485.
12. Archivio di Stato, Fasc. 40.
13. Archivio di Stato, Fasc. 1.
14. Letter to Antonio Vasselli, 15 July 1838, Z. 305, *cit.*
15. Donizetti to Vasselli, June 1838, Z. 296, ZAVADINI, p. 474.
16. COMMONS, *Atti*, pp. 65-102.
17. Archivio di Stato, Fasc. 40.
18. Z. 311, ZAVADINI, p. 486.
19. Donizetti to Dolci, 13 November 1836, Z. 316, ZAVADINI, p. 491.