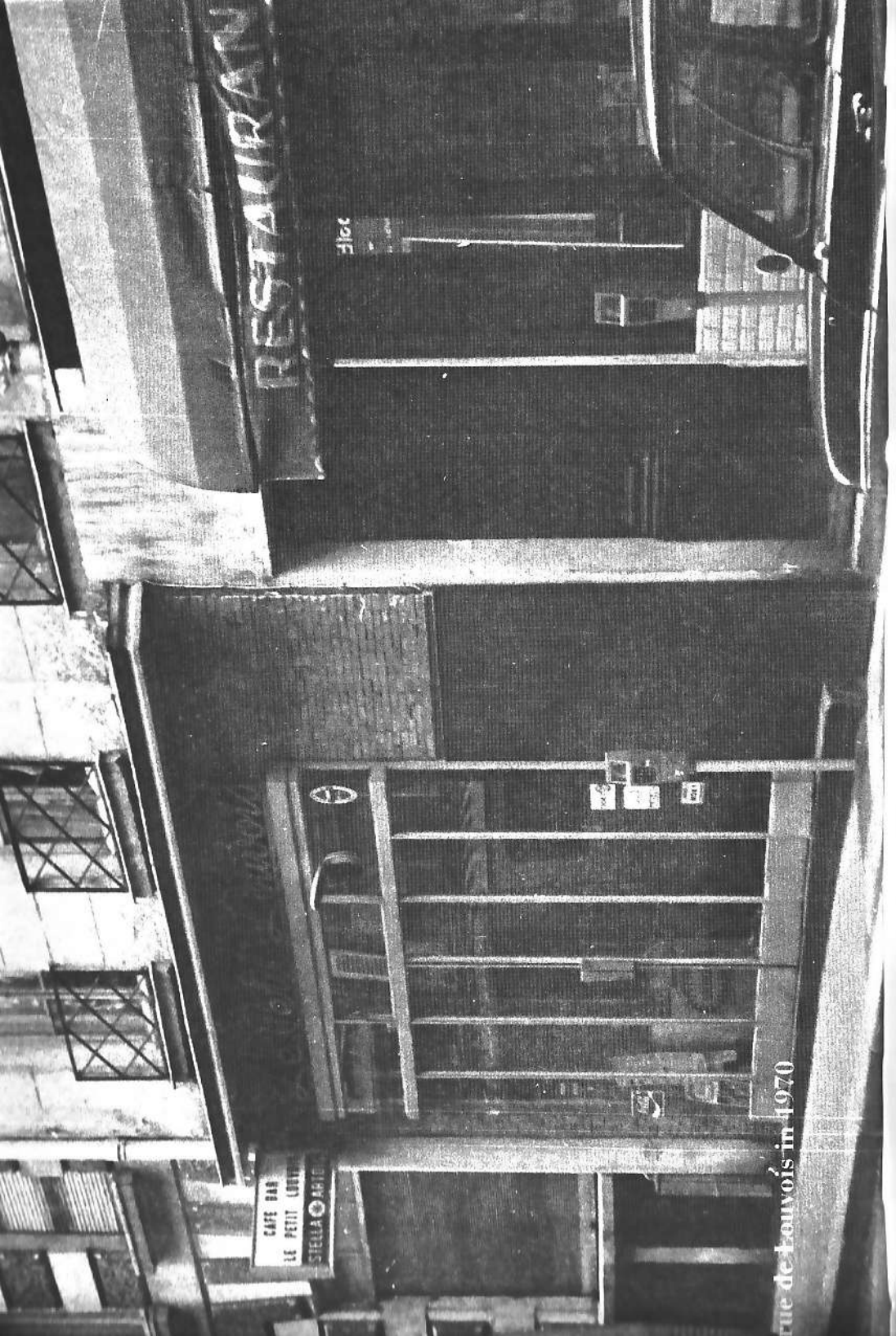


rue de Louvois in 1970

DONIZETTI IN PARIS

Alexander Weatherson

The letter inviting Donizetti to Paris in the first place did not mince words:

"...farete qui una bella e Rapida Fortuna... I Teatri Francese [*sic*] mancano di compositori, voi conoscete la Lingua, avrete molta facilità, e non dubito riuscirete meravigliosamente... Lablache, Tamburini, Rubini, la Grisi (che tanto è amata) sono per ora... cardinali della Compagnia, Ivanoff, Santini, ne fanno parte, non troverete facilmente più bella occasione per sviluppare il vostro bel Talento. Credetemi..."

In these irresistible terms, on 10 February 1834, Gioachino Rossini made overtures to his younger contemporary. Donizetti duly arrived in 1835 with a score of *Marino Faliero* under his arm as the manuscript score at Naples confirms, it was a success – whatever has been misreported since – but was not quite the score that Rossini had been expecting: "...bisogna venire a Parigi e comporre una bell'opera semiseria la Stagione p[a]..."[1]

How tempting it must have been to receive this missive – the Bergamasc – already restless in a Naples where he knew himself to be a stranger must have been beside himself with joy. A rapid fortune? Ah! Rossini knew all about *that*. And yes, he did speak French having been educated by Mayr. Could anyone have resisted that list of singers?

And did it all materialise? In great part it did, together with a compositional burden that left him grey and exhausted; together with the unspeakable opposition, resentment and harrassment of Parisian rivals; and together with the garnering of the disease that led to paralysis and an early death.

When did Donizetti begin to look towards France? This is not easy to answer. Operas like *Gianni da Calais*, *Gianni di Parigi* and *L'assedio di Calais* as well as albums of songs like *Nuits d'été à Pausilippe* clearly were milestones on the way; Neapolitan friends like Guillaume Cottrau spoke constantly of Paris; stars like Henriette Méric-Lalande, Gilbert-Louis Duprez and Adolphe Nourrit must have reminded him daily of the musical treasures that awaited him there; Rossini himself, Bellini, Nicola Vaccai, Vincenzo Gabussi and Giovanni Tadolini were Frenchified or semi-Frenchified exiles, not to mention Spontini, Cherubini and Michele Carafa who were perfectly assimilated; and the melodies of all of these were being sustained by the operatic divinities above.

The actual reasons for Rossini's invitation are enigmatic as always, apart from a natural desire to have his fellow countrymen around him we have only Bellini's jealous commentary: "...il più che ha genio in Italia è Pacini, e per la tiratura dei pezzi Donizetti",[2] which remark he attributed to the older composer.

It may not have been wholly a paranoid fantasy, Rossini's good opinion of Pacini is confirmed in several later ways and for many decades, while that of Donizetti may have been endorsed by a distaste for the increasingly pessimistic romanticism which his own *Guillaume Tell* had done so little to disperse. But he was not so well informed, it would appear, the Bergamasc composer's interest in comedy and even in *opera semiseria* was on the wane and *Marino Faliero* was the harbinger of some of the gloomiest plots that Donizetti ever set to music.

It would not be true either to say that Donizetti was enchanted by Paris. Much more evident is a kind of disappointment mixed at times with real anger or desperation: "Je n'ai nullement envie de venir à Paris, non - j'y ai trop d'ennemis...c'est ennuyeux pour moi, à mon âge, de faire des intrigues pour exceller..."[3]

Italian composers, alas, were often resident in the beautiful city without either belonging or relishing its social life. It is possible, indeed, that this maestro actually preferred Vienna where he was fêted and flattered: "Qual differenza da Parigi a Vienna: là tutto è agitazione, qui tutto è calma. T'accordo che dopo si forti emozioni la quiete germanica è un ristoro per me."[4]

He had French friends, many in fact, and loyal and gifted ones. The *successful* composers welcomed him in their midst with warmth and sympathy if not quite with open arms, in the forefront Adam and Auber – to make only a start on an operatic alphabet, he was resented more emphatically by compatriots like Spontini and Carafa. His relationship with the Académie Royale de Musique (the *Opéra*), that bastion of chauvinistic culture, was cordial on the whole and he never lacked either commissions or publishers or official championship. Only, however, when he was elsewhere, did its charms assert themselves in full: "Paris est toujours une Syrène"[5] he could say when well out of reach.

Nor has Paris relished his souvenir. There is a *Rue Donizetti* (1864) that manages to be slightly longer than the *Rue Bellini* in the same XVI Arrondissement, a chic area no doubt but one that has nothing whatsoever to do with the careers of either composer. The *Monnaie* in Paris sells no medal of the Bergamasc composer who lived longer in the city than many others so honoured and despite the fact that his *La Fille du régiment* is not much less than a national treasure. There is no twentieth-century biography of Donizetti in French and not one of the houses he lived in bears a plaque. In 1835 he was living at 32 Rue Taitbout; in 1839 at 5 Rue de Louvois; in 1840 he wrote from Michele Accursi's house at 1 Rue Marivaux (Accursi was there until the summer of 1842 when he moved to 19 Rue d'Antin at which address Donizetti also stayed briefly); in the last glorious and tragic years he usually lodged at the Hotel Manchester, 1 Rue de Gramont.[6] He passed many sunny hours at 15 Rue Grange Batelière (1835) and at 8 Rue Michodière (1845), successive residences of Madame de Coussy; 31 Rue de Londres knew him well at the time of *Don Pasquale* (home of the Ruffini brothers); also the rather more up-market 1 Place de la Madeleine – an appartment with many fleeting musical tenants (in 1840 it was G. Cobianchi).

Only a few of these Donizettian havens are still as he knew them. The theatres of his day have mostly vanished: the Théâtre-Italien has been rebuilt; the Académie too and elsewhere; the Renaissance is long gone; the Opéra-Comique moved twice even in his own day, but his houses – grouped, in general, not so very far from the musical hub of the

Boulevard des Italiens – are a dignified if decrepit witness to his great days, their façades eroded by commerce but with the same battered doorways and worn paving, sheltering in corners of the newly commercialised streets, a faded witness to the striving days in the 1830's and 40's. A Sunday afternoon given over to sudden silence, stray cats and the occasional lurch of a cruising taxi still encapsulates part of the mood – the provincial remoteness that modern Paris can still offer in its obscurer reaches – once a refuge for musical expatriates bent on the conquest of the city.

No 5 Rue de Louvois (listed) survives; an operatic caravanserai it also sheltered Adolphe Adam for a time, equally fecund and not yet bankrupted by ill-advised impresarial adventures and whose *Longjumeau* and *Le Chalet* were applauded (and, a little, emulated) by his Italian neighbour (that this same street shelters the music section of the Bibliothèque Nationale is an added attraction). The Hotel Manchester has only recently gone, it *was* a moving experience to examine the very paving stones upon which the stricken composer had collapsed in the dark days of 1845, but the actual edifice probably did not in any way resemble the building inhabited by the composer and which had once housed the Earl of Manchester in his role of English Ambassador to the Court of France; on the corner of the Rue de Gramont and the Rue Saint-Augustin, it was, in 1991, replaced by the breezeblock and cement headquarters of an Insurance Company. (The Earl of Manchester had been one of the many lovers of Marie de Rohan – the heroine of his last great success in Paris – could his own residence there have been instrumental in his choice of plot?)

More poignant, certainly, is 6 Avenue de Chateaubriand, to which house the maestro was carried after the dreadful sojourn in the asylum at Ivry, it too is no longer extant, but then neither is the Avenue de Chateaubriand itself. There is a picture of this house in *Numero Unico*, the commemorative volume published in Bergamo in 1897 to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth as it was in his lifetime and the entry in the *Dictionnaire des Rues de Paris* is sadly representative of the distinction of this site – as well as of the memoir of the composer as it is preserved in present day Paris:



Gioachino Rossini
(Collezione F. S. Lo Presti, Bruxelles)



Louis Philippe D'Orléans re dei francesi (1830-1848)
(Collezione F. S. Lo Presti, Bruxelles)

"Rue Chateaubriand 8th Arr.
Avec les rues Lord-Byron et Balzac, cette rue fait partie de celles qui furent ouvertes, en 1825, sur l'emplacement du jardin Beaujon (cf rue Balzac). Propriété particulière, elle portait alors le nom d'avenue de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) alors encore vivant. Elle reçut en 1852 son appellation actuelle. No. 5 le chansonnier Béranger (1780-1857). No. 25 était l'Hotel de Broglie."

The sum total of the above is as follows: the Avenue de Chateaubriand no longer exists; only the house next door – that of the "*chansonnier Béranger*" – is dutifully recorded: No 6 has been rebuilt, and the brief but tragic residence of the Italian maestro in the street has not even been worthy of mention.

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1. Rossini to Donizetti; letter of 10 February 1834. Autograph sold at Sotheby's, London 19 May 1989.
2. Reported in a letter to Francesco Florimo of 4 October 1834 (in) Carmelo Neri *Lettere di Vincenzo Bellini (1819-1835)* (Palermo 1991), p. 306.
3. Donizetti to Michele Accursi; letter of 30 April 1842 (in) *Studi Donizettiani 1* (Bergamo 1962), p. 90.
4. Donizetti to Toto Vasselli; letter of 6 January 1844 (in) Guido Zavadini Donizetti: *Vita Musiche- Epistolario* (Bergamo 1948), pp. 715-6.
5. Donizetti to Tommaso Persico; letter of 21 January 1843 (in) *Studi Donizettiani 1* (Bergamo 1962), p. 97.
6. Donizetti was not wrong in calling it "*Rue de Grammont*", this was the correct spelling until 1930.