Donizetti compositore e...patriota?

Sono consapevole che su questo argomento molto si è scritto e dibattuto. Le righe che seguono non apporteranno certo grandi novità a quanto ci è già noto, ma auspico che qualche ulteriore notizia, considerazione ed informazione, acquisita dalla lettura dell'epistolario donizettiano e di altre opere ove si parla del compositore, possano dare lo spunto a riflessioni e speriamo a future significative scoperte.

Magari, fra qualche tempo, si troverà qualche lettera o documento illuminante o la porta di qualche archivio - son propenso a credere d'oltralpe - finalmente si aprirà, per fornirci nuovi ragguagli sull'intensa vita e sulla sfaccettata personalità del grande compositore di Bergamo.

Le lettere di Donizetti, sia quelle riportate nel monumentale epistolario di Zavadini, sia quelle raccolte nei quattro volumi del Centro di Studi Donizettiani, confermerebbero la totale estraneità del musicista alle vicende politiche del suo tempo. Occupato totalmente dalla composizione della sua musica, egli sembra alieno da qualsiasi coinvolgimento nelle attività politico-rivoluzionarie e lontano dalle correnti di pensiero che, a quei tempi, agitavano mente e cuore di molti italiani, interessati a dare uno scossone definitivo alla situazione di precarietà che, per troppi secoli, aveva visto l'Italia solo come luogo di transito e di occupazione da parte di popoli stranieri.

Come prova inconfutabile del disinteresse donizettiano per tutto ciò che non aveva attinenza con la musica, si è sempre utilizzata la lettera al padre Andrea del 13 febbraio 1831 (Zavadini n° 64): "Vi scrivo acciocchè non crediate che fra le fucilate io sia morto. Io sono un uomo che di poche cose s'inquieta, anzi di una sola, cioè se l'opera mia va male. Del resto non mi curo...".

Non dubitiamo che essere italiano fosse per lui motivo di orgoglio. Quando Léon Pillet, direttore del Teatro Italiano di Parigi, gli prospetta la possibilità di venir ammesso all'Accademia di Francia, Donizetti cortesemente rifiuta, poiché accettare, con l'obbligo di rinunziare alla nazionalità italiana, sarebbe stato per lui un atto di mera ingratitudine verso il Paese che aveva visto nascere la sua fortuna artistica.

E la conferma viene da una lettera all'amico Dolci, del 13 novembre 1838 (Zavadini n° 316) dove, facendo il confronto con il fratello Giuseppe, Gaetano scrive: "Egli ama Costantinopoli, alla quale deve tutto, io invece amo l'Italia perchè a questa, dopo il mio Mayr devo l'esistenza e la riputazione".

Tuttavia "incaponirsi" a considerare Donizetti totalmente estraneo alle vicende politiche del suo tempo è un errore e molti studiosi, anche recentemente, si sono dimostrati convinti del contrario.

Guido Zavadini, in un suo splendido volumetto intitolato Donizetti l'Uomo, in cui pubblica i testi di tre sue conferenze sul compositore, tenute a Bergamo e dintorni dal 1946 al 1948, dice "peste e corna" di un film, girato in parte a Bergamo, con Amedeo Nazzari nei panni di Gaetano. Si tratta de "Il Cavaliere del Sogno". La pellicola narra la storia d'amore del compositore con la moglie di un Feldmaresciallo austriaco, odioso sbirro specializzato in impiccagioni di patrioti, ed ha pure risvolti risorgimentali, con tanto di riunioni notturne all'Osteria bergamasca Ai Tre Gobbi, trasformata in covo di settari e l'oste Bettinelli occupato non a preparare polenta e osei ("ma de quei pissini però", che tanto piacevano al Maestro), ma a spennare l'aquila imperiale austriaca di Ferdinando I. Attentati sventati, fine di un amore, conseguente pazzia e triste morte del protagonista seduto sulla poltrona che, già in casa Basoni, oggi vediamo al Museo donizettiano. Si sa, la fantasia corre veloce.

Tralasciamo pure queste amenità e non scomodiamo neppure troppo Piero Maroncelli. L'amicizia fra i due, nata e Bologna negli anni degli studi, non potè proseguire a lungo. Donizetti stava per iniziare la sua attività teatrale e Maroncelli, già nel 1817, cominciò i suoi guai giudiziari. Questa volta non per colpa dell'Austria ma del governo pontificio. Già noto come massone e carbonaro, era tenuto d'occhio dalle autorità. Il materiale compromettente che gli fu sequestrato, gli valse la prigione a Roma per parecchi mesi ed un processo sia da parte della magistratura che della S. Inquisizione. Liberato, forse su intercessione dello stesso Pontefice, proseguì le sue attività politiche

che successivamente, come si sa, lo portarono allo Spielberg e, dopo la grazia imperiale, all'esilio negli Stati Uniti.

In quei primi decenni de XIX secolo Parigi e Londra erano diventate la meta "preferita" di una legione di transfughi che, per sfuggire alle polizie di Re, Granduchi e Pontefici sparsi per la penisola, erano costretti a varcare le Alpi per mettersi al sicuro.

A Londra Mazzini insegnava l'italiano e tesseva la tela dei complotti. Parigi ospitava un nutrito manipolo di esuli che forse, quanto a numero, facevano invidia agli Ebrei di Mosé in Egitto.

Il primo che ci viene alla mente, per la sua lunga vicinanza a Donizetti è certo Michele Accursi. Di lui molto si è scritto anche se, come spesso accade in questi casi, è ancora difficile avere una visione definitiva e verosimilmente completa del personaggio che, probabilmente, ha ancora molto da raccontarci. Sulla rivista storica "Il Risorgimento Italiano", dal 1923 fino al 1928, padre Ilario Rinieri, attingendo ai documenti del Fondo Neri, custoditi presso l'Archivio Segreto Vaticano, pubblicò un nutrito "corpus" di lettere e relazioni di Accursi. In tempi più recenti, Giancarlo Parma gli ha dedicato uno studio, dal quale si evince che Accursi, nato a Roma nel 1802, qualificato come "curiale" del Tribunale della Segnatura di Giustizia, aderisce nel 1830 alle idee mazziniane. Affiliato alla Carboneria, poi seguace di Mazzini, nella corrispondenza intrattenuta con questi si firmava con lo pseudonimo di Michele Futuri. Incarcerato nel 1831, processato e condannato a 10 anni di carcere, fu graziato dal Papa. L'anno dopo fu incarcerato nuovamente e liberato nel marzo 1833, dopo aver dato la sua disponibilità a divenire informatore del Governo. Trasferitosi in seguito a Ginevra e poi a Parigi, esercitò la suddetta attività per conto del Governo pontificio, al quale trasmetteva notizie relative ai progetti mazziniani in Italia. Pare accertato che il suo intervento provocò più volte il fallimento delle iniziative insurrezionali. Riuscì comunque a mantenere i piedi su due staffe e, tutto sommato, a restare in buoni rapporti col Mazzini che, quantunque nutrisse qualche sospetto su di lui e seppur fra alti e bassi, non arrivò a considerarlo apertamente un traditore. Una bella fortuna, non c'è che dire.

Nell'epistolario donizettiano Accursi fa la sua comparsa nel 1834. Siamo all'epoca dei primi "abboccamenti" per l'esordio del bergamasco sulle scene parigine, auspicato da Rossini e che, l'anno successivo, si materializzerà nel Marino Faliero. Il 15 aprile 1834, Gaetano scrive a Ricordi (Zavadini n° 132) a proposito dell'invio di alcune scritture firmate: "La soprascritta la farai a M.r Michel Accursi (Accursi, te lo replicai il cognome perchè è mal scritto il primo) poste restante, Paris".

A quell'epoca quindi Donizetti già conosceva Accursi, pur non essendosi ancora recato a Parigi. Qualcuno gliene aveva parlato? Forse Rossini? Oppure Donizetti aveva già avuto contatti con il curiale romano? La mia è solo una supposizione, ma nel rapporto che il tenente, poi capitano Filippo Nardoni della Polizia Pontificia, scrisse al suo Governo nel 1832, per segnalare i movimenti sospetti dei patrioti romani, si legge che"...(Accursi) è il Capo che riceve i viaggiatori, che comparisce sovventore e creditore di alcuni di loro, ch'è incaricato di andare a Napoli, che dà opera a stampare scritti sediziosi, che in ottobre è stato a Riofreddo, ad Arsoli e forse in Regno". Nardoni reputa opportuno l'arresto di Accursi, che effettivamente viene eseguito (1).

Com'è noto Riofreddo è il paese, nei pressi di Roma, dal quale sono originari i Vasselli. La notizia di un singolo viaggio di Michele in tale località può essere poco significativa, ma potrebbe darsi che per i Vasselli l'Accursi non fosse uno sconosciuto. Donizetti scrive da Milano a Toto il 10 vel 11 del 42 (per l'approssimazione nell'indicare le date Donizetti era unico!) - (Zavadini n° 392): "Michele sta infuriato pel successo, corre di quà, di là, conta, aggiunge, pubblica,....lo conosci e tanto basta". Toto conosceva Michele per quanto gli comunicava Gaetano o la conoscenza era personale, forse maturata nella comune attività in campo legale? In una lettera Donizetti lo menziona come Avvocato Accursi, anche se non risulta che il Nostro abbia mai esercitato l'attività forense. Tale appellativo però non deve considerarsi troppo significativo, poiché in altra lettera Michele viene indicato da Gaetano come...Impresario! Accursi era certo persona dalle molteplici capacità "trasformistiche".

A Parigi Accursi non era solo. Donizetti nelle sue lettere gli chiede spesso di salutare Mad.me, Lisa (talvolta scritto Lise), forse la moglie, o la cognata dell'amico, come vedremo poi e sempre tale

Memè, del quale non conosciamo l'identità. Il factotum parigino di Gaetano, malgrado sia lecito credere "foraggiato" economicamente da Roma per i suoi servizi, non doveva passarsela molto bene, visto che la fame di denaro era sempre grande e molto graditi i proventi delle senserie. Gaetano scrive a Toto il 30 gennaio 1843 (Zavadini n° 470): "Michele [Accursi] sta bene (di salute). Al principiar dell'anno gli offersi 40 scudi, che non ti so dire se accettò o divorò. Non dirlo però a chicchessia. Diedi alla sua cognata, in differenti epoche, pure piccole somme, poiché egli è ben montato in sacche vuote, ma il poveretto si dà gran pena per me ed affar miei, e lo merita".
La data di morte di Accursi è tuttora sconosciuta ma, sulla scorta delle ultime sue lettere a noi pervenute, scritte nel 1872, al momento della morte di Mazzini, biografi ed enciclopedie fissano il momento della sua dipartita ad un generico (? dopo il 1872).
In verità Michele Accursi deve al Padreterno alcuni anni in più, poiché risulta che nel 1876 egli era ancora vivo e vegeto.
Antonino Amore, nel suo volume Vincenzo Bellini (Vita), pubblicato a Catania nel 1894, a pagina 248, a proposito della cerimonia per l'esumazione dei resti di Bellini e della loro traslazione dal cimitero parigino del Père-Lachaise a Catania, avvenuta alle 11 del mattino del 15 settembre 1876, riporta quanto scritto in quell'occasione dal sig. Caponi, corrispondente del Fanfulla, riguardo le persone presenti alla mesta cerimonia. Fra queste notiamo "Accursi, un superstite della repubblica romana". Come si vede, la data certa di morte di Accursi continua ad essere sconosciuta ma, buon per lui, il suo cammino terreno non si fermò al 1872.
Oltre ad Accursi, le frequentazioni donizettiane, fra i fuorusciti italiani a Parigi, annoveravano certo molte altre persone. Ricordiamo Giovanni Ruffini, del quale è arcinoto il rifiuto di apporre la firma al libretto del Don Pasquale, per le troppe "ingerenze" del musicista nella stesura del testo.
Uno di loro tuttavia non ha destato molta attenzione fra i biografi donizettiani, anche se la sua vita fu altrettanto "variegata" quanto quella di Accursi. Parlo di Gaetano Cobianchi, presente varie volte nell'epistolario del Maestro.
Nato ad Intra, presso Verbania, il 6 agosto 1794, Cobianchi, funzionario della banca Hagermann, fu coinvolto nei moti napoletani del 1820-21, combattè con le truppe del Generale Guglielmo Pepe, fu ferito e fatto prigioniero dagli Austriaci. Dopo la sua liberazione si trasferì a Parigi ed ivi rimase fino alla morte, nel 1866.
In Francia la schiera dei suoi conoscenti, patrioti e no, si allargò parecchio, poiché fu in contatto con il summenzionato Guglielmo Pepe, con Alessandro Poerio e Niccolò Tommaseo, ma anche con La Fayette e Stendhal. Pare frequentasse il bel mondo parigino, con una spiccata predilezione per gli inglesi (o meglio le inglesi) che vivevano sulle rive della Senna. E infatti nel 1832 sposò una facoltosa figlia di Albione, tale Mary Bourdon che, insieme all'amore, gli portò in dote la tranquillità economica.
Fu agente del governo sardo fra il 1847 ed il '48 e visse gli ultimi anni della vita in povertà, visto che la consorte, osservando il progressivo prosciugamento del patrimonio di famiglia, da lui operato, lo aveva lasciato. Nel 1843 ebbe pure la sfortuna di venir diseredato dalla madre che, sul letto di morte, non gli volle perdonare il rifiuto di accettare l'amnistia che, nel 1838, l'Imperatore d'Austria aveva concesso a quanti, coinvolti nei fatti del 1820-21, avessero chiesto il favore imperiale.
Tommaseo lo stronca con un acerbo commento: "Il Cobianchi, milanese (sic), galante e un po' avventuriere, mezzo liberale e mezzo diplomatico, impoverito sposò in età matura una giovanetta inglese, la cui dote servì parecchi anni a tenere casa aperta e spendere oltre il bisogno: ma la dote sfumando e l'uomo invecchiando, la giovine moglie, per queste due ragioni insieme unite, deliberò di piantarlo; e lo piantò. Il Cobianchi si diede tutto a Carlo Alberto, e fin qui non c'è male: ma per puntellare il seggio vacillante del re, scriveva ne' giornali francesi cose da diffamare la Nazione. Uomo di società corrotta, e corrotto nell'intime viscere, però cieco al bene dell'umana natura, credulo del male e d'ogni abbiettezza" (²).
Che bel ritratto! Non c'è male davvero!
Nell'epistolario di Donizetti Cobianchi pare un'altra persona. Probabilmente conosciuto ai tempi di Marino Faliero, Donizetti gli scrive da Napoli il 16 luglio 1835 (Zavadini n° 170): "La sposa che

fa? La mamà...?....E tutti que' vagabondi amici che raccogli in casa tua vuoi salutarmeli? te ne sarò gratissimo". E ancora nello stesso periodo (Studi Donizettiani 4 – Z. 170a): "In casa tua vi è il ricetto degli italiani e fra loro può anche starci il mio Nigri che viene per trovar lezioni...". A casa Cobianchi, dove non mancava neppure la suocera inglese, c'era davvero un bel traffico.
Nel 1843 Cobianchi aiutò l'amico napoletano Alessandro Poerio, suo compagno d'armi nel 1820-21 ed esule lui pure, a pubblicare a Parigi un volume di poesie curando la distribuzione di alcune copie dello stesso fra gli amici. Nell'elenco di questi notiamo: Le Professeur Donizetti partant pour Vienne e certo Docteur Montallegri, forse lo stesso che, nel 1835, era al capezzale di Bellini, durante la fatale malattia a Puteaux.
E allora: Donizetti fu al corrente delle attività degli esuli italiani dei quali fu amico? Ne prese parte?
Più volte è stato riportato il testo di una lettera del segretario della sezione parigina della Giovane Italia, Lamberti, che scrive a Mazzini: "Invii lettera a Mr. G.no Doniz., Maitre de Chapelle de Sa Majesté Apostolique L'Empereur d'Autriche. Quel "no" nel G[aetano] indicherà a Mich[ele Accursi] ricevente, che son per noi". Da ciò si potrebbe arguire che, con tal mezzo, Accursi poteva intercettare le lettere di carattere politico fra la corrispondenza del Maestro.
Tuttavia, se ammettiamo che Donizetti chiudesse un occhio, o magari entrambi, sulle azioni intraprese dai suoi conoscenti patrioti, dobbiamo pensare che egli avesse adottato le necessarie precauzioni, per non correre il rischio di essere coinvolto in uno scandalo che avrebbe messo a repentaglio per lui, personalità nota a livello internazionale, libertà e carriera.
Sembra poco probabile che l'Imperatore d'Austria, in presenza di un minimo sospetto, abbia pensato di nominare proprio lui Compositore di Corte a Vienna. L'occhio vigile di Metternich e il collaudato meccanismo della polizia asburgica non avrebbero certo mancato di scoprire eventuali coinvolgimenti donizettiani in attività sovversive, anche se di minima importanza.
La Francia di Luigi Filippo poteva sembrare più "liberale" rispetto a Vienna, ma è logico supporre che la Corona e le strutture di polizia da essa dipendenti, esercitavano un controllo sugli esuli stranieri presenti sul territorio. Ed è probabile che anche Donizetti sia stato "discretamente" tenuto sotto osservazione.
Se nulla si scoprì, se dalle lettere donizettiane nulla traspare, le precauzioni del musicista funzionarono in pieno e la copertura fu ottimale.
Infine lasciamo la parola a Guido Zavadini, che nel summenzionato volume Donizetti l'Uomo così si pronuncia, valutando l'amicizia che legava Il Maestro a Michele Accursi: "Incuriosito da tale coincidenza, volli consultare i volumi dei "Protocolli della Giovane Italia" e con mia grande sorpresa trovai il nome di Donizetti varie volte citato per quanto qualche volta abbreviato; e così il 27 marzo 1845: "Si serva parcamente indirizzo Doniz.". Eppoi ancora il 17 luglio dello stesso anno: "Non si serva più indirizzo Donizetti. E' qui – gli inviamo, unitamente a Spagni, bottiglie di nostra fabbrica d'acqua di Colonia, poi io manderò poesie di Giusti, Foscolo e opuscoli Bandiera". Rimane quindi a chiedersi che cosa si nascondesse sotto quel linguaggio, forse convenzionale, circa le bottiglie d'acqua di Colonia fabbricata dagli affigliati alla Giovane Italia. In quanto poi alle lettere da indirizzare al suo recapito, vi sarebbe da pensare che si profittasse del fatto che il Maestro viaggiando con passaporto rilasciatogli dalla Casa imperiale di Vienna, egli fruisse della inviolabilità diplomatica. Nulla più di questo per ora si sa, ma è pensabile che il Donizetti anche se non proprio un affigliato, poteva essere tuttavia un simpatizzante molto prezioso per quei patrioti i quali preparavano l'avvento di una Italia libera, unita, indipendente".
Forse Zavadini, nel 1947, aveva già compreso tutto.

Mario Villani

(¹) Cfr: Giancarlo Parma: "Michele Accursi. Spia o doppiogiochista mazziniano?". Effeelle Editori, 2007;
(²) Cfr: Mario Nagari: "Gaetano Cobianchi. Una vicenda risorgimentale". Società Storica Novarese, 1982.

Une ténébreuse affaire or worse: the fate of an opera by Costantino Palumbo

Alexander Weatherson

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Intended for Rome, *Pier Luigi Farnese* was despatched to a limbo only conceivable in the lee of the Vatican. *Spartito* and libretto printed, it's cast assembled on stage, rehearsals begun, costumes and sets almost ready, it vanished from the radar. This ambitious Dramma lirico in quattro atti with a bold text by "Tobia Gorrio" (ie Arrigo Boito), with a hyper-elaborate score by the celebrated Neapolitan pianist-composer "Costi" Palumbo (1843-1926), proposed for the Teatro Costanzi in the brand new capital of Italy, endorsed and encouraged by the radical publisher Edoardo Sonzogno of Milan and with the baton of the famous conductor Leopoldo Mugnone still poised in the air it simply disappeared across a musical Styx never to be heard of again.

Whatever could have been the reason? Who or what could have invoked such an interdiction?



The date was 1891. It was the year after Sonzogno's momentous competition for operatic advance had come to fruition with *Cavalleria rusticana* and the arrival of that which became known as Verismo. It was a year of great import for Leo XIII - the liberal pontiff self-imprisoned in the city over which his predecessors had once presided and who had just issued his encyclical *Rerum novarum* which addressed for the first time social inequality and injustice, issues with which Papal authority now took a turn. It was a moment, in fact, when liberal aspiration, political emancipation and artistic freedom found themselves in anachronistic conflict. What is it the history books say?

> *"Scheduled for the autumn of 1891 at the Teatro Costanzi, Rome, Palumbo's opera never got beyond the dress rehearsal because of a dispute between the composer and the publisher Sonzogno...," "Nor was it ever staged:"* [Nardi p376] The net informs us that:
>
> "l'anno successivo Palumbo intraprese un nuovo ambizioso progetto operistico, ottenendo la collaborazione di Arrigo Boito per il dramma lirico in quattro atti Pier Luigi Farnese; dopo una travagliata gestazione, durata circa quindici anni, nel 1891 l'opera venne messa in cartellone dal teatro Costanzi di Roma, ma non andò mai in scena per motivi mai chiariti."

The material evidence, however, suggests a quite specific scenario of another kind.

The *dramatis personæ* of this distinguished non-event is as follows:

1. **Pier Luigi Farnese** (1503-1547) Scion of a distinguished Roman dynasty, a violent and aggressive soldier with a dubious reputation now become first Duke of Parma and Piacenza, the legitimised son of Alessandro Farnese, Pope Paul III he was assassinated at Piacenza one year after he took possession of the city.
2. **Costantino Palumbo** (1843-1926) Renowned pianist who had composed one only opera, a *Maria Stuarda* (1876) with a libretto by Enrico Golisciani that had been received cautiously at the S. Carlo in Naples but was far from a failure.
3. **Arrigo Boito** (1842-1918) Verdian librettist *par excellence*, the Palumbo text was begun in 1875, the year of the final realisation of his own *Mefistofele,* but taking advantage of the "poetic" pseudonym "Tobia Gorrio" that he used again the following year for the libretto of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda.*
4. **Leopoldo Mugnone** (1858-1941) Fêted conductor, studied at Naples Conservatorio and had links with Enrico Golisciani (librettist of Palumbo's *Stuarda*) he was a noted maestro concertatore as well as orchestral director and concerned at the Costanzi in Rome on the eve of *Pier Luigi Farnese* with reviving Gluck's *Orfeo.*
5. **Alessandro Longo** (1864-1945) Responsible for the vocal score. of Palumbo's opera. Professor of pianoforte at the Conservatorio di S. Pietro a Majella of which later he became Director. Founded the Rivista "L'arte pianistica"

6. **Comparse and extras:** The Royal families of Spain, and of Bourbon Two-Sicilies (Farnese heirs, legatees and descendents); Margherita of Savoy, Queen of Italy; Edoardo Sonzogno; Pius IX; Leo XIII.

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Palumbo's score is of long genesis and is notable for an ambition and force that presents a real challenge to performance. In 1891 as now. Such a factor would indeed have been a tangible deterrent to any realisation - in Rome or anywhere else. The suave pianist had been a very late pupil of Saverio Mercadante in his declining years at the Naples Conservatorio and belcantist echoes are not rare in the music he offered to the savage historical drama master-minded with Boito. The music is often very fresh, energetic and rhythmically engaging but it readily displays a fustian affiliation, nearer, in fact, to a Neapolitan heritage than might have been expected from a composer of this date and sophistication at the dawn of Verismo. There are Mercadantian operatic tricks and quirks here and there - not disguised but almost outrageously exploited as if a figure from an historical past should be entitled to antique musical gestures however absurd this might appear.

Questions about its genesis are legion. Who suggested the Farnese plot in the first place? Was it Boito in an access of modish anti-pontifical fervour? Begun in 1875 its plot would have been regarded as hot off the press. There were scores to be settled, revenge was in the air. Was there an anti-Bourbon recipe in the mix? Palumbo may or may not have been a fervent supporter of the extant régime - his patriotism in no way indifferent to a Neapolitan upbringing (he may or may not have been aware that his teacher had composed an honorific cantata for the wedding of the deposed sovereigns of the Two-Sicilies *l'Olimpio ed il Walhalla* with a feisty reception at the S.Carlo). The recent Bourbon presence in the celebrated Palazzo Farnese - in our day the French Embassy - in Rome may have contributed at least something to Boito's plot.

All such factors are relevant to the surviving sources. These consist of the composer's autograph manuscript full score now held in the library of S. Pietro a Majella; the published vocal score created by his friend and colleague the pianist Alessandro Longo and widely distributed; and the Sonzogno printed libretto with its list of artists fated never to be heard in their roles.

All three items are pertinent to the mechanics of the disaster: Mugnone's performance marks and signs on the full score (in blue crayon) stop abruptly at one precise moment at the climax of the first act finale: at the very moment when a furious Pier Luigi Farnese confronts the monks who are conducting Donata to the altar to take the veil.

Such is the fatal text:

Farnese **Tal beltà seppellita saria nel chiostro? Ah! no! In nome di Paolo terzo, m'ubbidite!**

Avanti le mie Lancie spezzate! L'adducete al castel!

Donata **Soccorso! Soccorso!**
Salvami, o croce!

Cappuccino **Sposa è di Dio... sposa è di Dio!**

Farnese (*furibondo*) **Di Dio rival sarrò!**

Can it ever be imagined that such a scabrous confrontation could be enacted within sight and sound of the Vatican? Invoking a Pope in an abduction scenario? With a papal offspring declaring himself the rival of God?

Clearly someone thought otherwise. Censorship struck, in the printed libretto the page that should have contained almost all this text is blank (the text on page 24 is extant, so is page 26, but page 25 is without text).

All the material evidence is that this finale put an end to the rehearsals (and to the performance too). Sale of the vocal score was abandoned. To whom can this embargo be ascribed? The anti-pontifical movement - at its apex in 1875 - had been defused somewhat by 1891. Pope Pius IX, whose corpse had barely escaped being thrown in the River Tiber (in 1881) had been replaced on the triple throne by the far more adroit Leo XIII who promptly re-asserted the international nature of his reign, energetic contacts with Russia, Prussia, Germany, France, England etc., and an open negotiation with Vienna upon the possibility of removing the Catholic Establishment to an Austrian city by the new pope proposed a body-blow to the fledgling prestige of the Kingdom of Italy. Its monarchy, in the Pope's ex-palace, could only have raised its hands in horror at such a noxious confabulation in the opera house - Italy's most vociferous export. The Farnese royal descendents, entirely hostile to the Savoyard régime, would have been incensed, indeed up in arms.

Who took the blame? No one it seems. Who spoke-up in defence of the abandoned score? No public statement was ever issued. Palumbo never wrote another opera, Sonzogno went on to other things, so did Leopoldo Mugnone.

In 1891 Boito may have regretted this belated witness to his dishevelled (*Scapigliatura*) past. Who knows? As early as 1882 he had transferred his muse to Verdi and to international laurels. The composer remained silent. And so did the music. The provocations and challenges of the mischievous saltimbanco Grillo would fall on deaf ears for an indefinite future.



Costantino Palumbo

Friday 23 october 2015
Convegno attorno all'opera
PIER LUIGI FARNESE di Costantino Palumbo
(Morning and early Afternoon sessions)
Palazzo Rota Pisaroni, Via Sant'Eufemia, Piacenza
Late Afternoon: Piano-vocal Concert, music by Palumbo (excerpts from PIER LUIGI FARNESE), Boito, Sgambati, Martucci

Alto: The Voice of Bel Canto
History and Technique

Dan H. Marek

Part II

Maria Stuarda was given a production under its original title for the first time at La Scala on December 30, 1835. Maria Malibran, who was ill, took on the title role while Giacinta Puzzi-Toso (1807-89) sang Elisabetta - Alexander Weatherson informs me that Toso was very tall and made Malibran look like a dwarf! Toso, married to the great hornist Giovanni Puzzi (1792-1876), was a mezzo-soprano who had an important career in London in the 20s and 30s. In 1827 she appeared in the *musico* role of Aeneas opposite Pasta in Mercadante's *Didone abbandonata* (1823) and as Elisabetta in Carlo Coccia's opera *Maria Stuarda, regina di Scozia,* with Pasta as Maria. There seems to be quite a divergence of opinion about Puzzi-Toso, a London student of Coccia she was only twenty years old and must have been thoroughly frightened to be singing opposite the great Pasta. Lord Mount Edgcumbe stated that she *"has the recommendation not only of a brilliant voice, but of extraordinary beauty: but this was her first appearance on any stage, and she is extremely young; consequently she cannot yet be a finished prima donna, whatever promise of future excellence she may hold out."*[1]

On the other hand, Stern quotes a review of Coccia's *Maria Stuarda* which *"found her exceedingly stupid and inanimate"*.[2] Maria Malibran could always be counted on to deliver excitement whenever she sang, be it positive or negative. While she was in Naples, she had heard of the "debacle" of *Buondelmonte,* and *"developed a passionate desire to perform it [Maria Stuarda] in its original form."*[3] When Donizetti arrived in Milan in early December of 1835, he found chaos of a different order than the one in Naples. The censors had approved the libretto all right, but the Elisabetta, Sophia dall' Occa Schoberlechner (1807-64) refused to sing her truncated part, which was the reason Puzzi-Toso was engaged. In the première on December 30, Donizetti reported that Malibran was *"voiceless"* and the evening was *"painful from start to finish"*. [4] Maria improved in later performances but after the third, the censors demanded changes

They would not tolerate the word "bastard" or kneeling in the confession scene. Maria refused to perform this watered down version, rightly believing that the changes weakened the drama. Consequently, on four additional evenings, the first act of *Stuarda,* in which Mary Stuart does not appear, was followed by the last two acts of *Otello,* in which La Malibran scored further triumphs. And thus ended the history of *Maria Stuarda* at La Scala for 130 years. [5]

Eugène Delacroix, a great painter, but a pedantic critic, in a conversation with Manuel Garcia II, described in his journal, left an indelible impression of the kind of performance that Maria Malibran gave. It sounded remarkably modern.

"Madame Malibran, in Maria Stuarda, was brought before her rival, Elizabeth, by Leicester, who implored her to humiliate herself before her rival. She finally consented to do so and, falling to her knees, gave way to the most profound supplication. But, outraged by Elizabeth's inflexible hardness, she would rise up impetuously and fly into a rage that, he said, produced the greatest effect. She ripped her handkerchief, and even her gloves, to tatters. That, again, is one of those effects to which a great artist never will descend; they are of the sort that delights people in the

loges and wins an ephemeral reputation for those willing to indulge themselves that way... People whose minds do not rise very high, and who are not at all demanding in matters of taste – that is to say, unfortunately the majority -- always will prefer [to Pasta] talents of the sort possessed by La Malibran ".[6]

One of Donizetti's favorite prima donnas, Carolina Ungher, created the part of Antonina in his next *tragedia, Belisario* on February 4, 1836 at the La Fenice in Venice. Donizetti described the mezzo-soprano Antonietta Vial, who was cast as Irene as "*both a bastard soprano and a veiled contralto*". He set to work to revise her part to such good effect that in her duet with the tenor in the second act, the audience was reduced to tears.[7] Ungher obviously scored a triumph judging from the following review from the *Gazzetta Privilegiata di Venezia*:

"*No first performance in memory has recorded a more splendid, fuller, more solemn success... The numbers that were most enthusiastically judge were the donna's* [Ungher's] *cavatina, with its sublime cabaletta, a tenor-bass duet. ...The handling of the finale and the scena and grand aria of the donna were other imaginative and graceful conceptions, and they will be enjoyed even more in time , when 'our ear, conquered by so much novelty, will have become a little accustomed [to it]. '*[8]

Belisario racked up a total of twenty-eight consecutive performances and Ashbrook states that there would have certainly been more, had the opening performance not occurred until late in the season".[9]

In the Naples of 1836, ravaged by an epidemic of cholera, the theaters, with the exception of the Nuovo, were shut down. The alto, Amalie Schütz-Oldosi, whom we last encountered in 1822 as an eighteen-year old beginner in Vienna, was the reigning prima donna. The one act *farsa, Il campanello,* was a welcome diversion from the devastation and political strife that enveloped the city. The opera, which starred Ronconi and Schütz-Oldosi, premiered June 1, 1836. The warm reception accorded *Il campanello* encouraged Donizetti to compose a *dramma giocoso, Betly o La capanna svizzera* to his own libretto, which he later revised to a two act version. The role of Betly was sung by Adelaide D'Anvers Toldi (*fl.* 1830s.) a soprano.

In May, 1836 Domenico Barbaja again assumed control of the Neapolitan theaters. He engaged Donizetti to compose a dramatic opera, *L'assedio di Calais. L'assedio* was the story of the attack on Calais during the Hundred Years War. Donizetti wrote the male lead role for a contralto, as would have been done in the 18th century. This was because Barbaja had been unable to produce a creditable tenor for Donizetti to work with – the composer described the three available tenors as "*almost useless*" The *musico* cast as Aurelio was Almerinda Manzzochi (1804-69), a contralto who had sung supporting roles in the premieres of *Elvida* (1826) and *Il Borgomastro di Saardam* (1827). The role of Eleonora was sung by soprano Caterina Barilli-Patti (d.1870), mother of the famous Adelina. Donizetti had hoped that *L'assedio* would be a suitable work for the Opéra in Paris and he wrote Duprez that he would write a new version for him to star in and would compose dances that would convince the Parisians that the opera had been written expressly for their city. Unfortunately, there were no performances outside Naples, which had .a total of thirty-eight repetitions after its *prima* on November 19, 1836. Both Weinstock and Ashbrook had high opinions of *L'assedio di Calais* and suggest that a modern staging would be repaid with success. Donizetti thought so too; his letter to Duprez contained the following line: "*And, by God, if it* [L'assedio] *does not produce an effect, I would give you leave to castrate me*".[11]

The composition of *Pia de'Tolomei,* Donizetti's next opera, a *tragedia lirica* based on a Canto V of Dante's *Purgatorio*, commenced before he was finished with *L'assedio*

di Calais. Intended to be produced at La Fenice in Venice, which had burned down, its *prima* was on February 18, 1837 at the Teatro Apollo. Originally conceived as a vehicle for Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani and the tenor Antonio Poggi (1808-75), Donizetti was coerced by the management into falling back on the old *musico* tradition by composing a part for the young inexperienced contralto, Rosina Mazzarelli (b. 1822). Mazzarelli created the role of Pia's brother, Rodrigo. In a short career, she stood out as Maffeo Orsini in *Lucrezia Borgia* and was engaged at La Scala in 1839. *Pia de' Tolomei* was revised twice and in the second revision, sung at the San Carlo in 1838, Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis assumed the role of Pia and contralto Eloisa Buccini (*fl.* 1837-47) sang Rodrigo. Buccini created parts in *Saffo* by Pacini and *La vestale* by Mercadante in 1840. She also participated in *Il dono a Partenope* (1840), a *pasticcio* based on the poetry of Giovanni Schmidt (c.1775-c.1855) for the name day of King Ferdinand II (1810-59) of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In 1841 she also sang the role of Cuniza in *Oberto*, Verdi's first opera, at the San Carlo.

In the summer of 1837, Donizetti's wife Virginia died soon after the death of their infant son. The young composer was devastated. He was bed-ridden for a time and could not bring himself to mention or write Virginia's name again. Gradually he pulled himself together and in August began to work again. He was contracted for two operas – one for Barbaja in Naples in October - and the other for La Fenice in January, 1838. The Neapolitan opera was *Roberto Devereux* with one of Donizetti's favorite singers, Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis, in the role of Elisabetta, which opened on October 28, 1837. *Roberto Devereux* is the third opera, along with *Anna Bolena* and *Maria Stuarda* of the trio sometimes called "The Three Queens" which represent the apex of Donizetti's development as a dramatic composer. In 1845 in St. Petersburg, an alto Pauline Viardot, along with Rubini, presented *Roberto Devereux,* but the opera failed to please. In the 1970s Beverly Sills undertook the roles of the three Queens on stage and in the recording studio. While Sills was a consummate artist and musician, her assumption of these roles aroused a controversy which persists to this day. Some critics suggest that these parts, written for the sumptuous voices of Pasta and Ronzi-de Begnis, were too dramatic for the light voiced Sills and led to the shortening of her career.

"*I read the newspapers*," said Sills, whose husband, Peter Greenough, was associate editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. "*All singers read their reviews, whether they say so or not. And of course it hurts when they say something cruel. But I knew my voice better than anyone, and 'Devereux' was Donizetti, the orchestration was light. It was exactly right for my voice. Did it take a toll? Sure. But that was because dramatically "the role called for me to push down the voice a lot".* [these last Italics mine.] *That was my choice. I went into it with eyes wide open. I would do it all over again."*[12]

Sill's statement reveals the difficulty a lyric soprano has in taking on roles composed for wide ranging alto (Riggs calls them *assolute*) voices like Ronzi's or Pasta's. Even Monserrat Caballé, whose opulent sound was more appropriate to these roles, had some deficiency in the lower reaches of these wide ranging parts. The voice of the late Leyla Gencer (1928-2008) was most probably the most like Pasta's or Ronzi's. Her 1965 recording of "Vive ingrato" with the Rai orchestra of Milan is truly outstanding. Gencer was often associated with Donizetti's music and several little performed Donizetti masterpieces such as *Belisario, Lucrezia Borgia*, and *Les Martyrs* were revived for her. Gencer had a repertoire of over seventy operas.

Donizetti's other commission, a *dramma tragico* for La Fenice, was *Maria de Rudenz.* The librettist was Salvadore Cammarano (1801-52) who based the book on a

French gothic horror story, *La Nonne sanglante.* Carolina Ungher created the title role and Georgio Ronconi, baritone, sang the part of Corrado Waldorf. The usually fast-working Donizetti was drowning in depression because of the recent loss of his family. Nevertheless, he finished it on time and the première came on January 30, 1838. The Venetians loved Ungher but hated the violence of the plot in which Maria kills her rival in love and then dies. The opera was withdrawn after only two repetitions but received sporadic performances over the next thirty years.

After *Roberto Devereux* in 1837, the tide of the casting in Italian opera began to float upward. Altos who could handle both mezzo and soprano parts began to be replaced by high sopranos whose middle and lower voices were significantly weaker. In the forefront of this trend were Giulia Grisi and Eugenia Tadolini, Grisi attempted to vanquish Pauline Viardot several times and Verdi rejected Tadolini as Lady Macbeth. Both were beautiful women and no doubt great artists, but neither had the vocal heft in the middle and bottom necessary for some of these roles. Grisi's most conspicuous failure was when she tried to sing Fidès in *Le prophète* in 1852.[13] Tadolini was cast as Paolina in the first Italian performance of *Poliuto* on November 30, 1848 at the San Carlo, a few months after Donizetti's death. The original production, scheduled for September, 1838, was prohibited by the king on religious grounds. Disgusted, Donizetti then left Naples for Paris and *Poliuto* was produced under the title of *Les Martyrs* on April 10, 1840 with soprano Julie Dorus-Gras (1805-96) as Pauline. *La Fille du regiment* (1840), *Rita* and *Maria Padilla* (1841), *Linda di Chamounix* (1842), *Don Pasquale* and *Maria di Rohan* (1843) were all written for lyric sopranos and premiered by such as Tadolini and Grisi. *Adelia,* written for the Teatro Apollo in Rome in 1841 is notable because it was written for Giuseppina Strepponi (1815-97), a renowned soprano who became the second wife of Giuseppe Verdi. Strepponi helped establish the composer's early career and was the first Abigialle in *Nabucco* in 1842. Hélène in *Le duc d'Albe* was written for alto Rosine Stoltz (1815-1903) in 1840, but she refused to sing it, so Donizetti put it aside to revise *L'Ange de Nisida* into *La Favorite* for her. The grand opera was premiered on December 2, 1840 at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris with Stoltz as Léonor.

One of the most extraordinary stories in the history of opera was the reign of Rosine Stoltz as the Queen of the Paris Opéra between the years of 1838 to 1847. The story of Stoltz is a complicated stew of legend, fabrication, malicious gossip, and vehicle for revisionist history. For example, Léon Escudier blamed Stoltz's capriciousness at the première of *La Favorite* for Donizetti's subsequent descent into madness (when he was actually a victim of syphillis).[14] Stoltz was probably an accomplished singer, as witness the vocal challenges of parts she sang, such as Léonor in *La Favorite,* but as an example of the corruption of the operatic scene in Paris in the 30's and 40's, she was the mistress of Leon Pillet and may have borne him a child to earn her stardom. Born Victoire Noël in Montparnasse she became quite a slippery character. After an unsuccessful foray into vaudeville, she showed up in Antwerp and Amsterdam as Mlle. Héloise. She then migrated to La Monnaie under the name of Mlle. Ternaux in 1832, starting in secondary roles. She graduated to leads in Rossini's *Il barbiere, Tancredi* and *Otello* in Lille in 1833 and in 1834 sang Alice in *Robert le diable* in Antwerp. In 1835 she returned to La Monnaie as Mme. Stoltz (her mother's maiden name) where she reprised Alice. The name Rosine was probably appropriated because of her success as in *IL barbiere.* She then appeared as Rachel in the Brussels's premiere of *La Juive.*[15]

At the Monnaie 1836-37 season, the principal attraction was the great Adolphe

Nourrit, the leading tenor of the Paris Opéra who appeared in many of the grand opera roles he had created there. He also sang the role of Cavatini in Pierre Gaveaux's (1760-1825) *Le bouffe et le tailleur* (1804) while Stoltz sang Célestine, as well as Rachel in *La Juive.* Nourrit was moved by Stoltz's performances and offered to recommend her to the Paris Opéra. Her début there was delayed because she bore a child to the director of the Monnaie, Alphonse Lescuyer in September 1836, and whom she married in March 1837. Rosine Stoltz never sang with Nourrit in Paris because, having been displaced by Gilbert-Louis Duprez and his "chest" High C, in 1838 the despondent Nourrit plunged to his death from the top floor of the Villa Barbaja in Naples. He was only thirty-seven years old.

When Rosine Stoltz did make her debut at the Paris Opéra on August 25, 1837 in *La Juive*, her partner was the redoubtable Gilbert-Louis Duprez, who detested her. It would not be the first or the last time that artists who hated each other would translate their enmity into performance excitement. Duprez wrote about Stoltz in his *Souvenirs d'un Chanteur*: *"With the leadership of Leon Pillet, there began at the Opéra the domination, or rather the reign, of Madame Stoltz, a reign absolute and despotic, if ever there was one. Until this time, this artist had appeared very little and in roles of mediocre importance. The creation of La Favorite put in evidence her energy, her dramatic fire, she was noticed but, not content with her share of public favor, Madame Stoltz could soon not bear for any other than herself to get the limelight, and she used her influence more day by day on the mind of the new director, to mitigate the success of those whose talent and beauty put her in the shade. So she was not exactly adored by the staff of the Opéra. The strongest and boldest openly hated her; the small and fearful dreaded her and murmured softly. I remember that I was walking down the rue Saint-Lazare with Meyerbeer, we were suddenly accosted by the great S ..., this beautiful ballet-dancer who had found me so ugly at my entrée at the Opéra. She was exasperated and she told us the reason for her anger with the familiarity of people in her condition. "Oh, she says, dear Meyerbeer, oh my dear Duprez, if you knew that Madame Stoltz, it just made me want revenge. If I meet her, I will fight." Among opponents of the "favorite" as we called her, was Barroilhet who was scandalized when told by Pillet, "Madame Stoltz is a Malibran, without the defects." Our bass Alizard never lost an opportunity to express his dislike for our star. One day Madame Stoltz went into the courtyard where we were all gathered, at the end of rehearsal: "And to think", said Alizard in his big Picardy voice, "that the destiny of this woman in her old days is to keep house for a bachelor... maybe mine."*

Following this joke, Alizard's contract was not renewed but at least he had the consolation of seeing his prophecy come true.[16]

Rosine Stoltz was probably a better actress than she was a singer and excelled in declamation. Mary Ann Smart attempts to cut through the myths and misconceptions about this singer in her article for the *Cambridge Opera Journal* and cites the following by François-Joseph Fétis:

"A woman of talent counts among the singers at the Opéra. Although her voice is mediocre and her musical training no more than sketchy, she compensates for these deficiencies with a lively dramatic sense and an unusual intelligence. Well placed, and confined within the limits of her specialty, this actress could be very useful, but [because she is] ambitious far beyond the limits within which an artist should sensibly confine herself, she wanted to invade everything, to dominate everything, and M. Pillet's naïve admiration has not left her to desire in vain the sacrifices demanded by her amour-propre".[17]

This seems to me to be a fair assessment of Stoltz's ability but she must have had

enough vocal resources to cope with the demands of the repertoire written for her. Smart describes her voice this way:

"Voice, after all, is only a little more ephemeral than other 'realities' of a life, and many descriptions of Stoltz the singer survive. They tell of power, sometimes stridency, a range of only about two octaves, very good low notes, a strong but harsh upper register.

Certain common compliments and criticisms emerge: she often sang out of tune and lacked agility and technical control but her timbre and extensive range of nuance are praised almost unanimously. All agree that her greatest strength was as an actress, that the intensity of her gestures and her tragic declamation were unequalled".[18]

A list of Stoltz's creations at the Paris Opéra from 1838 is impressive, but since she had little competition during this time, it is understandable.

- Ricciarda in Halévy's *Guido et Ginevra* on March 5, 1838.
- Ascanio* in Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* on September 10, 1838.
- Marguerite in Halévy's *Le Lac des fées* on April 1, 1839.
- Lazarillo* in Marco Aurelio Marliani's (1805-49) *La xacarilla* on October 28, 1839.
- Loyse in François Bazin's (1816-78) cantata *Loyse de Montfort* on October 7, 1840.
- Léonor de Guzman in Donizetti's *La Favorite* (*La favorita, It.*) on December 2, 1840.
- Agathe in Weber's *Le freischütz* (French adaptation of *Der Freischütz*) on June 7, 1841.
- Catarina in Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* on December 22, 1841.
- Odette in Halévy's *Charles VI* on March 15, 1843.
- Zaïda in Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* on November 13, 1843.
- Beppo* in Halévy's *Le Lazzarone* on March 29, 1844.
- Desdémone in Rossini's *Othello* (French adaptation of *Otello*) on September 2, 1844.
- Marie Stuart in Louis Niedermeyer's (1802-61) *Marie Stuart* on December 6, 1844.
- Estrelle in Balfe's *L'Étoile de Séville* on December 17, 1845.
- David* in August Mermet's (1810-89) *David* on June 3, 1846.
- Marie in the Rossini pastiche (by Niedermeyer) *Robert Bruce* on December 30, 1846.[19]

(* Trouser roles)

Smart quotes Gustave Bord (1852-1934), Stoltz's early biographer claiming that Rosine sang Léonor de Guzman in *La Favorite* 481 times, Caterina in *La Reine de Chypre* 118 repetitions, and Lazarillo in *La xacarilla* 100 performances. *Benvenuto Cellini* was Berlioz's first opera and was accepted for production by Pillet's predecessor, Henri Duponchel (1794-1868), in 1835. The première with Duprez in the title role was a fiasco when the audience erupted in riots and the orchestral musicians judged it too difficult to play! *La Favorite* was Stoltz's signature role and some critics speculated that the libretto was biographical based on her relationship with Pillet. Donizetti originally planned to compose *Le Duc d'Albe* as his second opera for Paris, but Pillet objected on the grounds that there was not a starring role for Rosine Stoltz. He then revised *L'Ange de Nisida*, and added the required fourth act, which the librettist Alphonse Royer (1803-75) declared that Donizetti had written in three or

four hours after dinner.[20] The reception for *La Favorite* was lukewarm but gradually began to gain favor. Some critics felt that its success would have been immediate had the title role been sung by Cornélie Falcon instead of Stoltz.

As for *Dom Sébastien*, this is where the mental illness that overtook Donizetti first manifested itself. Some of Donizetti's more volatile friends accused Stoltz of being the cause of his decline but most people considered such an assessment ridiculous. Nevertheless, she must have been very venal and temperamental.

The climax of the difficulties during the rehearsals of *Dom Sébastien* had come when Rosine Stoltz had refused to remain on stage when Paolo Barroilhet [1810-71], in the role of Camões [Camoëns], sang a barcarolle. When Donizetti strongly objected to her absence during that part of the scene, Stoltz consented to remain – if the second verse of the barcarolle was deleted. That compromise was agreed by the direction, and at that point, Donizetti's anger got the better of him. He threw down the score, denounced Stoltz for having wounded his artistic dignity, and walked out of the theater. "Three friends," Léon Escudier wrote, "and we among them, followed him home. He said nothing more. He gave vent to rattling sounds of rage. His mind was confused."[21]

Stoltz was finally driven off the stage of the Opéra in 1847 by the mounting criticism of her relationship with Pillet and he followed soon after. Mary Ann Smart states that after 1840, the Opéra entered a period of decadence. Pillet's advent of superintendent in 1840 saw the Opéra's fortunes decline rapidly. After the triumph of *La Favorite*, Paris's first theater slipped into disappointing premières and lackluster revivals with singers often past their prime. Stoltz's tenure coincided with the departure of many popular artists including the leading tenor and pioneer of the famous high C 'from the chest', Gilbert Duprez. Of course laments about vocal decline and departed great singers are a commonplace of any opera house in any season, but they had greater polemic urgency in Paris, becoming the basis for an aesthetic debate about the relative merits of the spectacular scenic effects of French grand opera and the Italian style emphasis on voice and melody....

As the unpopular superintendent's 'favourite', Stoltz was a convenient symbol: since the aesthetic and political problems that haunted the Opéra were too sweeping to be confronted directly, attention could be diverted toward the smaller conflicts and disasters that could plausibly be blamed on her vanity and ambition. She was accused of sabotaging the sopranos already at the Opera by preventing Pillet from giving them starring roles, and of forbidding him to invite rivals to Paris.[22]

Rosine Stoltz may not have been the sole cause of the Opéra's decline, but she certainly had a hand in it, an opinion shared by many separate witnesses. Her later life was as flamboyant as her singing career. Her need to mythologise herself, to embroider and fabricate a persona, enlivens her narrative, but it also creates a need for theories – explanations of her unreliability as a chronicler of her own life. Take, for example, her kaleidoscope of names. With every twist and turn of her career or personal life, Rosine took a new name, at first simply discarding the old, later accumulating them, hoarding assumed personae. By the end of her life the woman born Victoire Noël was signing her letters *"Rosa Carolina, comtesse de Ketschendorf, baronesse de Stoltzenau, princesse de Lesignano, duchesse de Bassano, princesse de Paix, née d'Altavilla (Rosine Stoltz)"* [23]

Some of these titles were based on actual marriages and some were appropriated from various assignations. She died in Paris on July 30, 1903 at the age of 88.

Caterina Cornaro, the last opera that Donizetti completed, had its première at the San Carlo on January 12, 1844. Donizetti did not prepare the staging of *Caterina*

himself or attend the first performance which proved to be a fiasco. An interesting point to our study is contained in a letter Donizetti wrote to his brother-in-law:
"I am awaiting with anxiety the news of the fiasco of Caterina Cornaro at Naples. La [Fanny] *Goldberg* [b. ca. 1820] *as the prima donna is, without being aware of it, my first ruination. I wrote for a soprano – they give me a mezzo."* [24]

*

[1] Richard Edgcumbe, Mount Edgcumbe (Earl of), *Musical Reminiscences of an Old Amateur Chiefly Respecting Italian Opera in England for Fifty Years, from 1773-1823.* (London: John Andrews, 1834), 174
[2] Stern, *Giuditta Pasta*, 246 The quote is from *The Examiner*, June 17. 1827.
[3] Bushnell, *Maria Malibran*, 203 Bushnell bases this opinion on Guillaume Cottrau, *Lettres d'un Mélomane*, (Naples, 1885) 30.
[4] Bushnell ibid 203 From Guido Zavadini, *Donizetti,* (Bergamo. 1948).
[5] Bushnell ibid 203-204 The opera had a few nineteenth-century revivals elsewhere.
[6] Weinstock, *Donizetti and the World of Opera,* 117
[7] Ashbrook ibid 106. From a letter to Giulio Recordi on January 14, 1836.
[8] Weinstock ibid 350
[9] Ashbrook ibid n.637
[10] Philip Eisenbeiss, *Bel Canto Bully* (London: Haus Publishing, Ltd., 2013), 207
[11] Ashbrook op cit 112.
[12] Octavia Roco, "Sills Relives Her Finest Hour", *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 2000
[13] Elizabeth Forbes, *Mario and Grisi, A Biography* (London: Victor Gollanz Ltd), 118
[14] Mary Ann Smart, "The Lost Voice of Rosine Stoltz" *Cambridge Opera Journal,* Vol. 6, No.1 (Mar. 1994), 34
[15] Jean-Louis Tamvaco *Les cancans de l'Opéra: chroniques de l'Académie royale de musique et du théâtre, à Paris sous les deux Restaurations,* 2 Vols. (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2000), 1074
[16] Gilbert-Louis *Duprez, Souvenirs d'un Chanteur,* (Paris: Ancienne Maison Michel Levy Frères, 1880), 159-61 (Translation by the author)
[17] Smart op cit 39
[18] Smart op cit 48
[19] Spire Pitou, *The Paris Opéra: An Encyclopedia of Operas, Ballets, Composers, and Performers. Growth and Grandeur, 1815-1914,* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 1265-66
The pasticcio *Robert the Bruce* was cobbled up from Rossini's *La donna del lago.*
[20] Herbert Weinstock, *Donizetti and the World of Opera in Italy, Paris, and Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,* (New York: Pantheon Books 1963), 157
[21] Weinstock ibid 209
[22] Smart op cit 38-39
[23] Smart ibid 41
[24] Weinstock op cit, 213

THE FREE OPERA COMPANY OF ZÜRICH

Among the very few serious opera companies in terms of selection of repertoire, research, scrupulous preparation and long rehearsal is this high profile company to whom we owe - among many others - memorable performances of Pacini's *Il convitato di pietra,* Carafa's *I due Figaro* and, last year, Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche*, all of them in modern dress, intended for a modern audience and brushing-off intimidating scenic obstacles with a skill and conviction that eludes their rivals. This company is the one hope of all those despairing of ever being present at a stage revival of a cherished lost masterpiece to be unearthed from under a heap of tourist rubble elsewhere. Its Intendant Bruno Rauch and resident conductor Emmanuel Siffert, together with brilliant casts, have succeeded in curbing the extravagant demands of tradition in order to supply a vocal, visual and orchestral experience fully in accordance with the original intentions of the author. The photographs below display the Boieldieu and Carafa productions while Dr. Rauch's introductory articles that follow reveal their extent of commitment. At the moment of writing such audacious operas as those of Balfe, Errico Petrella and E.T.A Hoffmann are in the air.



Ein unbekannter Komponist und eine bekannte Opernfigur
Michele Carafa und seine «beiden Figaro»

*

Die Free Opera Company Zürich, eine professionelle Operntruppe, die mit jungen Sängerinnen und Sängern arbeitet, nimmt sich eines vergessenen Stücks an: eine Art Sequel der berühmten Trilogie von Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais um den legendären Barbier, dessen Namen sozusagen zum Markenzeichen für einen liebenswürdiges, aufmüpfiges Schlitzohr geworden ist: Figaro.

Das 1777 publizierte Theaterstück «La précaution inutile ou le barbier de Séville» erzählt die Geschichte eines kleinbürgerlichen Machers, der nicht auf seine Herkunft pochen kann (er ist ein Findelkind!) und sich dafür mit Scharfsinn und Witz gegen Standesdünkel und Konvention auflehnt.

Zwar muss sein Schöpfer Beaumarchais unmittelbar nach der Premiere eiligst allzu deutliche politische Anspielungen entschärfen, aber schon bald wird das Stück auf allen Bühnen Europas bejubelt. Überall will man die Machenschaften dieses Figaro (Barbier, Faktotum, *Entrepreneur* im eigentlichen Wortsinn) erleben, der dem jungen Grafen Almaviva hilft, einen ältlichen Rivalen auszutricksen, um die geliebte Rosina heimzuführen. Selbst der Name des Protagonisten als Bezeichnung eines Friseurs etabliert sich. Die Gestalt selbst wird zum Prototyp eines Menschen, der sich seines Rechts als Individuum bewusst ist. Die 1826 gegründete, damals satirische Zeitschrift und heutige Tageszeitung «Le Figaro» trägt seinen Namen. Paisiello (St. Petersburg, 1782) und Rossini (Rom, 1816) haben diesen Stoff vertont.

1783 schiebt Beaumarchais eine noch turbulentere Fortsetzung nach: «La folle journée ou le mariage de Figaro». Dieser ist inzwischen fest am Hof des Grafen als Verwalter angestellt. In seinem berühmt gewordenen Monolog resümiert er seine abenteuerliche Biografie (nicht unähnlich derjenigen des Autors selbst) und rechnet mit dem Grafen ab, indem er die lediglich durch die Geburt legitimierten Privilegien des Adels anprangert. Der Graf, dessen Liebe zu Rosina erkaltet ist, hat ein Auge auf Susanna, die kecke Zofe der Gräfin geworfen. Er beabsichtigt, das mittelalterliche *ius primae noctis*, das Recht der ersten Nacht der Feudalherren mit ihren (weiblichen) Dienstboten, einzufordern. Figaro weiss das mit Hilfe der unerschrockenen Frauen, Susanna und Gräfin, zu hintertreiben. Der Graf muss die Hochzeit seiner Untergebenen grollend besiegeln. Durch alle Intrigen wirbelt auch der Page Cherubino. Mit ihm hat Mozart in «Le nozze di Figaro» (Wien, 1786) das unvergleichliche Porträt eines pubertierenden Jünglings für einen quirligen Mezzosopran, eine Hosenrolle, geschaffen.

«La mère coupable», dem dritten Teil, den Beaumarchais 1792 seinen beiden Rennern folgen lässt, bleibt der durchschlagende Erfolg versagt. Rosina hat einen Sohn von Cherubino, der im Krieg gefallen ist. Nach mancherlei Verwirrung kann der unehliche Sohn Rosinas das Mündel und die (heimliche) Tochter des Grafen heiraten, da sie nicht biologische Geschwister sind. 1966 hat es auch diese konstruierte Geschichte auf die Opernbühne geschafft, in der Vertonung von Darius Milhaud.

1790 lässt sich der Schauspieler Honoré-François Richaud Martelly von den Revolutions-Stücken Beaumarchais' zu einer weiteren Komödie inspirieren: «Les deux Figaro», die bereits 1804 als «Die beyden Figaro» in Wien gegeben wird. Das Personal ist bekannt, aber alle sind älter, zynischer und illusionsloser geworden. Die Almavivas haben jetzt, zwölf Jahre später, eine heiratsfähige Tochter, Inez, die Figaro einem seiner Kumpel Alvaro zuschachern will, um mit diesem die gräfliche Mitgift zu teilen. Doch er hat die Rechnung ohne – inzwischen Bariton! – Cherubino gemacht, der letzten Endes Inez bekommen wird. Carafa hat das Stück wohl in Paris kennengelernt und den renommierten Autor Felice Romani, der auch für Bellini, Donizetti und den jungen Verdi schrieb, mit einem Libretto beauftragt; 1820 bringt er seine Oper in Mailand auf die Bühne.

1827 nimmt sich Saverio Mercadante, damals in Madrid lebend, erneut, des Stoffes an. Er vertont das identische Libretto, bleibt aber der traditionellen Nummernoper verpflichtet, die er mit spanischem Kolorit anreichert. Interne Querelen vereiteln die Aufführung, die in Madrid erst 1835 erfolgt, als der Komponist längst wieder in Italien lebt.

Figaro ist nicht mehr der sympathische Schelm von einst, sondern ein echter Schurke. Die Charakterisierung des Grafen als in die Jahre gekommener, dümmlicher Schürzenjäger stellt jetzt kein Problem mehr dar; das revolutionäre Stück ist zur bürgerlichen Komödie geworden. Ihr Witz liegt jedoch nicht primär in der Intrige, sondern im Changieren zwischen Fiktion und Wirklichkeit, was sich im Untertitel abzeichnet: «Il soggetto di una commedia». Gleiches ist auch von der Musik Carafas zu sagen, die sich mit rossinischem Brio und belcantistischem Wohlklang präsentiert, aber immer wieder mit überraschenden harmonischen Wendungen und einer meisterlichen Eloquenz für die unterschiedliche Tonalität der Figuren aufwartet. Hervorzuheben ist der fast vollständige Verzicht auf Arien, das Gewicht liegt auf den Ensembleszenen und den kettenartigen Finali, die den theatralen Impetus des Stoffs musikalisch unterstreichen und für Tempo sorgen.

Diese Qualitäten machte ich mich für meine Inszenierung der Free Opera Company zunutze. Das Bühnenbild bestand aus vier simplen weissen Schränken, wie sie in der Selbstbau-Abteilung eines schwedischen Möbelhauses für wenig Geld zu haben sind. Ihre Türen wurden mit echten Klinken versehen und die Rückwände herausgenommen, sodass man durch die Schränke hindurchgehen konnte, deren Böden mit Filzunterlagen beschichtet beschichtet waren, sodass sie von den Spielern leicht verschoben und gedreht werden konnten und so immer wieder andere Raumsituationen ergaben. Dies entspricht dem turbulenten Charakter des Stücks in der Tradition der typisch französischen *comédie à portes*: Türen gehen auf und zu, mal knallend, mal vorsichtig, aber meistens im falschen Moment …

Dazu kamen ein paar schäbige Möbel und fertig war die Bude, wo sich eine Wohngemeinschaft von Musikstudenten breit machte. Diese nahmen sich dass Stück von Martelly-Carafa vor, um sich schrittweise mit den handelnden Figuren – Graf, Gräfin, Susanna, Cherubino usw. – zu identifizieren. Dieser Dreh entspricht auch durchaus der ironisierenden Distanz der originalen Theaterstücks. Dort ist es die Figur von Plagio, «un autore in cerca dei suoi personnaggi» (!). Er kommentiert, hinterfragt und ironisiert das Geschehen und verlagert es gleichsam auf eine Meta-Ebene. In unserer Inszenierung war er einer der Studenten, der seine Masterarbeit über «das Gefälle der maskulinen Dominanz zwischen Almaviva und Figaro» verfassen sollte und sich – begeiflicherweise! – damit sehr

schwer tut. Figaro will ihm dabei helfen und verheddert sich selbst immer stärker in seiner eigenen Geschichte und seiner gescheiterten Beziehung zu Susanna. Des weiteren erlaubte diese Aktualisierung, den jugendlichen Darstellern sich weit stärker in ihre Rollen einzufühlen und diese mit Elan und Spielwitz zu verkörpern, als wenn sie in Krinoline und Gehrock *à l'époque* auftreten müssten. Die Verlagerung ins Hier und Heute war also keineswegs modischer Selbstzweck, sondern diente vielmehr dem Zweck, auf ganz natürliche Weise in diese aus heutiger Sicht tatsächlich etwas obsolet gewordene Geschichte einzutauchen. Problemlos konnten so auch Aperçus und Anspielungen auf die einschlägigen Werke (Mozart, Rossini, Paesiello) und deren Rezeptionsgeschichte eingebracht werden, was für manchen Lacher sorgte. Ebenfalls auf ein doppeltes Ziel ausgerichtet waren die gesprochenen Dialoge in Deutsch zwischen den einzelnen Musiknummern. Sie passten sich einerseits der Sprache der jungen Akteure an und schufen so ein unmittelbare Nähe und Stringenz. Andererseits sie dienten dazu, wie es immer das Anliegen und das Markenzeichen der Free-Opera-Produktionen ist, den selbstverständlich italienischen gesungen Text und die etwas verwirrliche Geschichte verständlich zu machen. Das Publikum nahm's jedenfalls dankbar auf und quittierte das muntere Spiel mit riesigem Applaus.

Bruno Rauch, Leiter Free Opera Company Zurich



Ein charmantes Phantom of the Opera

Gedanken zum Kompoisten, seiner Musik und zur szenischen Umsetzung seines Geniestreichs.

Boieldieus erfolgreichste Oper «La dame blanche» ist zu Unrecht vergessen. Die Aufführung der Free Opera Company Zürich hat mit ihrer Aufführung jedenfalls eine höchst lebendiges und lebensfähiges Gespenst wiederbelebt.

Schumann, Liszt, Donizetti, Berlioz und Wagner zählten zu ihren Bewunderern. Weber, der Komponist des «Freischütz», meinte gar, «seit Mozarts ‹Figaro› ist keine komische Oper geschrieben worden wie diese». Rossini, der uneingeschränkte Beherrscher der Opernbühne und damals Boieldieus Nachbar an der Rue Montmartre, lobte die fulminante Versteigerungsszene, von der sich auch Offenbach ein halbes Jahrhundert später für seine «Voyage dans la lune» inspirieren liess. Und Reynaldo Hahn wies auf den geschickt angelegten Spannungsbogen sowie den «anmutigen Mozartismus» des Ganzen hin.

Tatsache ist ferner, dass es Boieldieus Geniestreich «Die Weisse Dame» in ihrer ersten Spielzeit an der Opéra Comique (1825) auf 129 Aufführungen brachte, 1862 bereits die tausendste Aufführung erlebte und auch ausserhalb Frankreichs auf unzähligen Bühnen nachgespielt wurde. Sogar eine Omnibus-Linie wurde nach der Oper benannt.

Umso erstaunlicher ist es, dass das Werk heute zwar noch durch sämtliche Musiklexika geistert, von den heutigen Opernintendanten jedoch fast völlig ignoriert wird. Selbst Berufsmusiker und Musikwissenschaftler wissen zwar um die Existenz der «Weissen Dame», die Musik selbst aber ist ihnen unbekannt. Für die Free Opera Company war dieser Umstand natürlich äusserst willkommen, konnte sie doch mit der Aufführung dieses Werks einmal mehr ihren Anspruch erfüllen, Opern abseits des gängigen Repertoires aufzuführen. Das Kriterium des Unbekannten allein darf allerdings nicht genügen; zur Rarität müssen sich auch inhaltliche und, vor allem, musikalische Qualitäten gesellen. Die eingangs erwähnten Einschätzungen aus berufenem Munde, lassen darüber keine Zweifel.

Dass das Libretto zur Geringschätzung der Oper beigetragen haben könnte, ist – mit einem Seitenblick auf unzählige andere Opernbücher – ebenfalls von der Hand zu weisen: Der Stoff ist nicht mehr und nicht weniger als andere Vorlagen in den Geschmack und den Geist ihrer Entstehungszeit eingebunden, aber äusserst konzis gefasst.

Der Textautor Eugène Scribe (1791–1861) war einer der gewieftesten Librettisten und Stückeschreiber seiner Zeit, der oft mit einem ganzen Stab von Schreibern arbeitete – nicht unähnlich den heutigen Drehbuchstudios –, um die Auftragsfülle zu bewältigen. Scribe weiss Pointen zu setzen, Handlungsstränge geschickt zu verknüpfen und Spannungsbögen aufzubauen – Stilmittel, die ein *pièce bien faite* auszeichnen und sich bis heute in der angelsächsischen Theaterkultur als *well made play* hoher Wertschätzung erfreuen, im Gegensatz etwa zum deutschen Sprachraum. Die Ingredienzien dazu sind das Exotische, das Geisterhafte, das Dezent-Anzügliche, der Schurke, das Schloss, der Zufall… Eine zeitgenössische Karikatur zeigt den Autor an seinem Pult umgeben von Karteischachteln, beschriftet mit «Komische Situationen», «Starke Situationen», «Wortspiele», «Calembour», «Couplets» usw. Alles kann nach

Bedarf zu einem effektvollen Ganzen kombiniert werden und so die geistvolle Balance zwischen dem niederem Vaudeville und der hochgestochenen Comédie Française halten.

Alle diese Zutaten finden sich auch in der «Dame blanche», für die sich Scribe aus zwei Romanen von Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) bedient: «Guy Mannering, or The Astrologer» (1815) und «The Monastery» (1820), beide schon aufgrund ihrer Titel unschwer als taugliche Fermente für eine Opernhandlung zu erahnen. Die Anbindung an den schottischen Dichter und der damit gepaarten *couleur locale* folgt der damals in Frankreich grassierenden Begeisterung für Scott und schlägt sich in zahlreichen «schottischen» Opernvorlagen jener Zeit nieder (Lucia di Lammermoor, La donna del lago, La muette de Portici, Ivanhoe u. a. m.) Zudem sind die «Gesänge des Ossian», ein angeblich auf altgälischer Mythologie beruhendes Versepos aus den 1760er Jahren, ein bis weit ins 19. Jahrhundert und europaweit beliebter Sagenstoff. Schliesslich bildet die Vorliebe der Frühromantik einen idealen Nährboden für Geschichten um verwunschene Schlösser, geheimnisvolle Erscheinungen, verschollene Erben und Helden, die eine Frau lieben, ohne deren Identität zu kennen. Gleichzeitig ist das restaurative Element, das angestammten Besitz dem ursprünglichen Eigner zurückerstattet, nicht zu übersehen – immerhin: der Graf von Avenel soll ein guter, mildtätiger Feudalherr gewesen sein…

Mein Regiekonzept dagegen legt das Augenmerk weniger auf die politischen und gesellschaftlichen Umstände (die ganz klar nicht die unsrigen sind) als vielmehr auf die Gestalt des Julien alias George. Er soll gezeigt werden als einer, der auf der Suche nach seiner Identität ist. Als einer, der nicht weiss, wer er ist, noch woher er kommt. So stürzt er zu Beginn der Oper buchstäblich auf die Bühne – willentlich oder von einem inneren Zwang getrieben? Schrittweise legt er Schicht für Schicht seines Wesens frei, bis er schliesslich seine Wurzeln erkennt: Er ist hier geboren, und die unbekannte Frau, die er liebt und die ihn gepflegt hat, ist die Gespielin seiner Jugendtage.

Dieser Moment gehört, obwohl mit einfachen musikalischen Mitteln gestaltet, zu den berührendsten im Werk. Die Weise der Landleute «Chantez, joyeux ménestrels», die er nachzusingen sucht, löst bei George eine Art Nachhallerinnerung oder Flashback aus, ein Phänomen, das in der Psychologie sehr wohl bekannt ist. Der Komponist setzt dazu die bekannte schottische Ballade «Robin Adair» ein. Diese simple Melodie – sie wird sogar in Jane Austins Roman «Emma» gesungen – soll angeblich bis ins Mittelalter zurückgehen, dürfte aber wohl eher um 1730 entstanden sein; jedenfalls demonstriert sie in diesem Kontext einmal mehr die Faszination des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts für alte Balladen und (pseudo-)historisches Lokalkolorit. Die aufsteigenden Intervallsprünge der Gesangslinie (Quarten und Terzen auf unbetonten Taktteilen) verleihen ihr wie auch dem Eingangschor der Landbevölkerung eine volkstümliche, fast alpenländische Färbung.

Von augenzwinkernder Ironie und umwerfendem Brio ist sodann George Browns Lob-preis des Soldatenlebens «Ah, quel plaisir d'être soldat». Brillante Spitzentöne, sekundiert von einem äusserst aparten Bläsersatz, kitzeln das Ohr der Zuhörer – seiner verblüfften Gastgeber auf der Bühne ebenso wie des Publikums im Saal. Inniger gestaltet sich seine Cavatine «Viens, gentille dame», wo mit sanften harmonischen Rückungen und dem Einsatz von Hörnern in den beiden Rahmenteilen eine somnambule, träumerische Stimmung heraufbeschworen wird, die im Allegro-Mittelteil mit einem drängenden 5/4-Metrum George's Ungeduld, die Weisse Dame endlich zu sehen, weicht. Eine besondere Rolle spielt hier auch die Harfe, die mit rauschenden Arpeggien nicht nur eine magische Atmosphäre – und einen harmlosen Schrecken – heraufbeschwört, sondern auch für die keltische Tradition schlechthin steht.

Jennys Ballade über die geheimnisvolle Erscheinung zeugt von der gleichen subtilen Instrumentierung, einem aparten *Clair-Obscur*, zwischen Moll und Dur changierend, das grelle Farben zugunsten einer raffinierten Schattierung vermeidet.

Geradezu grandiose Vielfalt prägt sodann das Terzett George-Jenny-Dickson, das sich aus dem vorangehen den tändelnden Liebesduett entwickelt und in einer grossen Gewitterszene mit zahlreichen chromatischen Verwerfungen endet. Auch sie ein Topos der Romantik, die häufig die Natur als Spiegel eines Seelenzustands heranzieht.

Gesteigerte Chromatik und durch alle Stimmen eilende Mikromotive charakterisieren schliesslich die grosse Versteigerungsszene, die schon Rossini beeindruckte. Im Gegensatz zu dessen effektvollen, mitunter jedoch etwas plakativen, scheinwerferartigen Ensembles besticht Boieldieu hier wiederum mit einer äusserst delikaten, flüssigen Kompositionstechnik, die dem Geschehen unerhörten Drive und eine sich bis zum Schluss steigernde Spannung verleiht.

Gewiss war Boieldieu kein Neuerer, seine Klangsprache bleibt seiner Zeit verpflichtet. Mit seiner melodischen Erfindungskraft, gepaart mit federnder Eleganz, feingliedriger Instrumentierung und exquisiter Harmonik, hat er aber sehr wohl zur Ausprägung eines musikalischen französischen Nationalstils beigetragen.

Für die schlanke, mit geringem Aufwand an Kulissen und Requisiten aufkommende Inszenierung, wie sie die Produktionen der Free Opera Company Zürich mittlerweile auszeichnen, habe ich die ganze hochromantische Szenerie mit Schloss, Nebelwallen, Wolken, Vogelschwärme, wechselnden Mond- und Lichtstimmungen und Gespenstererscheinung als filmische Kulisse konzipiert. In stundenlangen filmischen Takes haben wir die entsprechenden Örtlichkeiten inklusive die Erscheinung der Weissen Dame als Videosequenzen aufgenommen und sie dann auf einen durchlässigen Fadenvorhang projiziert. Entstanden ist so eben kein starrer Dekor, sondern ein diskret belebtes und bewegtes Bühnenbild, das sich perfekt ins lebhafte Geschehen auf der Bühne einfügte und sich diesem gleichzeitig unterordnete.

Durch die Reduktion auf Schwarz-Weiss-Projektionen ergab sich zudem der Eindruck eines gepflegten *Film noir* der Stummfilmzeit, was die eingeblendeten Vierzeiler, welche Situation und Handlung – gesunden wurde selbstverständlich auf Französisch! – ins Deutsche übersetzten und resümierten zusätzlich unterstrichen. Zudem erlaubte der Schnurvorhang einen buchstäblich gespensterhaften Auftritt der Weissen Dame durch die Wand hindurch.

Das Motiv des Films zog sich durch die ganze Aufführung, sodass auch die Akteure durch die durchlässige Projektionswand auf die Bühne traten und nach dem Finale wieder in der «Leinwand» verschwanden. Und dementsprechend übernahm das Instrumental-Ensemble der Chaarts gewissermassen die Funktion eine Lichtspiel-Ochesters, wie sie zur Stummfilmzeit übliche waren, was auch die erwähnten eingeblendeten Texte unterstrichen.

An die Stummfilmzeit erinnerten ebenso die Kostüme im Stil der1920er Jahre. Und ebenso das ironisch verfremdetet MGM-Signet im filmischen Vorspann, wo der bekannte brüllende Löwe durch ein schottisches Angus Rind ersetzt wurde.

Zudem konzipierte ich die Rolle des Dorfrichters MacIrton, der nur wenig zu singen hat, als Film-Operator, der mit witzige Kommentaren ins Geschehen eingriff, deutschsprachige Verständnishilfen für den französisch gesungen Text lieferte und mit Charme immer wieder auch für ironische Distanz sorgte. Ein derartiges Rollenprofil steht und fällt natürlich mit einem geeigneten Sänger-Schauspieler, der glücklicherweise im jungen Philipp Scherer zur Verfügung stand.

Eine weitere Herausforderung bietet für eine Realisation der «Dame blanche» auch die Partie des George Brown, die einen Tenor mit typisch französischer hoher Tessitura verlangt. Im Elsäßer André Gass fanden wir einen stimmlich wie schauspielerisch und optisch ansprechenden jungen Sänger.

Auch die Leistung des übrigen Teams von jungen, spielfreudigen Sängern unter der umsichtigen Leitung von Maestro Emmanuel Siffert löste immer wieder begeisterten

Applaus aus. Ein renommierter Kritiker lobte die Produktion «als grosses Theater mit einfachsten Mitteln», derweil ein anderer «die Balance zwischen Witz und Sentiment als Glück des Abends» betonte und darin gipfelte: «Für den Umgang mit dieser eminent französischen Opernkunst gibt es kein besseres Wort als: Esprit». Über ein solches Lob hätte sich wohl auch Boieldieu gefreut…
Dr. Bruno Rauch, Direktor Free Opera Company Zürich

La Favorite

Caramoor Opera, July 11 2015
Katonah, New York
John Yohalem

Having rewritten *Poliuto* (banned by the Neapolitan censors) as *Les Martyrs* for his first première at the Paris Opéra in April, 1840, Donizetti hoped next to devise a full-scale grand opéra there, *Le Duc d'A*lbe, begun in 1838. He had got a tidy bit of this down when word came from Léon Pillet, the director of the Opéra, that the new piece must star Rosine Stoltz, by no coincidence Pillet's girlfriend. Stoltz was no negligible quantity; besides two grand opéras by Donizetti (the other was his last, *Dom Sébastian*), she created the heroines of Halévy's *Charles VI* and *La Reine de Chypre*. But she was a mezzo soprano with a range on the low side; therefore *Le Duc d'Albe* would not suit her, nor could its intricate ensembles easily be remodeled to accommodate her.

La Favorite had to be put together in a hurry for its première that December—composing *La Fille du Régiment* for the Opéra-Comique occupied Donizetti's idle hours in the interim. Happily, elegant rush jobs were his specialty. Too, a couple of acts existed of another opera, *L'Ange de Nisida*, which had been in preparation for the Théâtre de la Renaissance when that theater's management went broke. Royer and Vaëz, who had written the libretto, were familiar with the changes of venue and plot required by the Opéra—later, they would transform Verdi's messy *I Lombardi* into the comparatively straightforward *Jérusalem*. They transferred the Neapolitan locale of *L'Ange de Nisida* to medieval Spain for *La Favorite*. The dour monastic scenes that bookend the opera suited the impression widely held of Spain's church-ridden past, while Spanish local color (Moorish rhythms, castanets) appeared in the ballet-divertissement that Donizetti composed for insertion in the alcazar grandeur of Act II. The grand finales of Acts II and III were adapted, along with several arias, from *Adelaide*, an uncompleted *semiseria* that had been lying in a drawer for five years. Legend has it that Donizetti composed the entire fourth act in one evening, after dinner, but in fact Fernand's "Ange si pur," its most famous moment, was taken from *Le Duc d'Albe*, without alteration.

The resulting piece is impressively coherent and very tight for a grand opéra of this era. There are just four acts (five scenes) and the two monastic scenes call for no very elaborate scenic effects. The suavely vengeful rather than brutal king is a type of baritone rarely met with in earlier operas but a model for many successors, and Fernand's naïve but ardent denunciation of the hypocrisy of an entire society at the climax of Act III would inspire a successor in Verdi's

Traviata. Most of all, however, *La Favorite* is a gift to the true mezzo soprano, a type who had barely begun to emerge from trouser roles and confidantes to heroines. Dalila, Didon (Berlioz) and Carmen owe much to *La Favorite*.

The opera was a tremendous success and longtime favorite, almost a thousand performances being recorded at L'Opéra in the next hundred years. It reached the new world at New Orleans in 1843, then New York in 1845, also in French. In Italy, however, where French operas were usually translated in any case, the story of a fallen woman being pardoned and almost attaining holy matrimony simply could not be accepted—not to mention the scandalous appearance of a churchman (an emissary of the pope, no less!) in conflict with a state that shrugs him off. But the translation concocted for *La Favorita*, besides violating melodies composed for French prosody, made mincemeat of the personal relationships and has long been deplored by admirers of Donizetti. It has nonetheless held the stage, not only in Italy but in much of the world, singers being lazy, publishers cheap and theaters uninterested in scholarship. *La Favorite* was probably never performed in French in the United States in the twentieth century, but it is not only the bad translation that accounts for its failure during its last (1978) Met revival. There, the performing edition was afflicted with such pointless and abrupt omissions and rearrangements that any delight was undermined. After the failure of Verrett and Pavarotti, the Met could never be persuaded to revive the work for Dolora Zajick, who so eminently deserved to sing it there.

Once beloved, now largely forgotten, *La Favorite* is just the sort of opera Will Crutchfield delights in bringing to light in the Caramoor/Opera summer bel canto festival ninety minutes north of New York City. *La Favorite* appeared on July 11 in the original tongue and with most of the traditional cuts in the score opened up, including a brief but effective cabaletta duet for the King and Léonor, apparently unheard since the premiere. Presenting the French operas of Italian composers is something Crutchfield does with fervor and Gallic elegance; he has given us Donizetti's *Elisabeth (La Fille de l' Exilé),* Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (almost uncut), Verdi's *Don Carlos* and, a New York region premiere, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes.* (Dare one hope for *Jérusalem* or *Les Martyrs* or *Le Siège de Corinthe* or even *Robert le Diable*? Well, I dare hope.)

Weather in the tented outdoor Venetian Theater at Caramoor can be chancy, as those who remember the sweltering *Norma* and the stormy *Semiramide* recall. On the present occasion, the weather was warm but of low humidity, so that the strings of the Orchestra of St. Luke's had a happy crispness, and the winds were on precise pitch and luxurious in sound. Maestro Crutchfield's tempi were on the speedy side, especially in choral passages like the wonderfully silly wedding march in Act III. More gracious support was allowed to individual singers with bel canto lines to spin and reveries to summon. The Caramoor cast was exceptionally fine. Clémentine Margaine filled the tent with sultry sound and bel canto luster, full-bodied and even from top to bottom of her range. She had all the notes and the aching fervor that Léonor, ill-treated by so many men she has unwisely loved or trusted, must deploy to gain our sympathy. And after a strong first half (and a change of costume) her voice became larger and warmer in the final scenes of the opera. One longs to see what she can do in a full staging of this or a dozen other operas. Fernand was sung by Santiago Ballerini, well-known in his native Argentina for Mozart, Donizetti and Rossini.

His lyric tenor is smaller than the voices one associates with Fernand, but has a sweetness that gracefully projected both the character's yearning for love and the melancholy disillusion of "Ange si pur." The prettiness did not grow harsh when called on for warrior power in his denunciation of king and court, and there is the gleam of metal in the sound. Though he seemed to run out of power by the end of Act III (and simply dropped out on a couple of lines in the *concertato*), he made clever use of his exhaustion to express Fernand's mental anguish. Léonor's saturnine lover, Alphonse XI, was sung by veteran Stephen Powell in tones no less powerful than beautiful, dwelling on his love for Léonor with Verdian fervor and French suavity. Later, offended, he made palpable his malicious delight in engineering her humiliation and the wreck of her romance. Powell, who sang a much-admired *Rigoletto* at Caramoor last season, in Donizetti (whose baritone roles were Verdi's models), gave a commanding performance, delicately ornamented. Daniel Mobbs, a pillar of the Caramoor program, sang Prior Balthasar, that study for Verdi's abbots and inquisitors. He seems to be developing more resonance and cavernous excellence in the bass-baritone depths. Isabella Gaudí sang the small but elegant part of Inès, Léonor's confidante, as if determined to turn it into a coloratura star moment, but her register breaks and shrill top did not convince. SungWook Kim's Don Gaspar, however, seemed worthy of a larger assignment.

Besides the cooperative weather, the Caramoor opera was graced, as usual, by a series of afternoon appetizers: a discussion (with recorded samples) of the abilities of the French lyric singers of a century past (Calvé, Campagnola, Villabella, Pelletier et al), a program of "chamber duets" sung by singers in the student program, composed by everyone from Monteverdi to Paer to Rossini and Donizetti, and a concert of scenes from operas written for (or even by) *La Favorite*'s original cast, operas even more forgotten than *Favorite* such as Niedermeier's *Marie Stuart*, Duprez's *Tariotti en Bulgarie*, an aria from the French version of Donizetti's *Robert Devereux*, and Halévy's *La reine de Chypre.*

The duets are "*arie antiche" a due*, charming melodies in many moods, designed for amateurs and home entertainment; they recalled a golden age when anyone with pretensions to culture played or sang. They made no overwhelming demands on the performer but they do require line, breath, diction, communication, excellent practice today for young singers aspiring to perform on stage. Of special interest to Donizetti fans were "I Bevitori," a *brindisi* for tenor and baritone performed by Matthew White and Thomas Lynch, and a charming number from Rossini's *Aureliano in Palmira* (which will be next summer's Bel Canto at Caramoor offering), performed by soprano Danielle Buonaiuto and mezzo Chelsea Major. In the opera scenes, JoAna Rusche was charming in Marie Stewart's farewell to France, cleverly written so low in the mezzo range that when it rises to a high note at the end—and it's not very high at all—a mood of special anguish was conveyed. Brody Del Beccaro exhibited a lovely *cantante* baritone in an aria from Rossini's *Viaggio a Reims*, and Kevin Wetzel joined his gruff baritone to the suave tenor of Nikhil Navkal for a duet of male bonding (they're in love with the same mezzo soprano but don't know it yet) from *La reine de Chypre*. Mr. Wetzel's instrument seemed a bit dry in Nottingham's aria from *Robert Devereux.*

Diary

Berlin, Deutsche Oper
Vasco da Gama (Meyerbeer) 4/7/11/15/18/24 October 2015
(w. Sophie Koch Cond. Enrique Mazzola)



Sassari, Teatro Verdi
Elisabetta, regina d'inghilterra (Rossini) 9/11 October

Parma, Teatro Regio
Il corsaro (Verdi) 14/20/25/31 October

Lyon, Opéra
Zelmira (Rossini) 8/10 November
Il viaggio a Reims (Rossini) from 1 May 2016

Liège, Opéra Royal de Wallonie
Lucia di Lammermoor 17/20/22/25/28 November
(w. Annick Massis, Celso Albelo Cond. Jesus Lopez-Cobos)

Treviso, Teatro Comunale
Le convenienze teatrali 20/22 November

Oviedo, Opera (Sixty-seventh Season)
Il duca d'Alba (Donizetti) 13/15/17/19 December

London, Cadogan Hall, Chelsea Opera Group
Il trovatore (Verdi) 28 February 2016
(w. Marianne Cornetti Cond. Andrew Greenwood)
Le comte Ory (Rossini) 25 June 2016
(Cond. Toby Purser) 2016

Braunschweig, Staatstheater (Großes Haus)
La Falena (Antonio Smareglia) 15/20 April, 7/31 May, 23 June 2016

Oldenburg, Staatstheater
Cristina regina di Svezia (Foroni) from 21 May 2016

TO BE ESPECIALLY NOTED FOR NEXT YEAR

The pioneering "Una Voce Opera Company" of Liverpool celebrates its 20th Anniversary with a Gala Night concert in the splendid Concert Room of St. George's Hall in Liverpool on Saturday 12 March 2016, followed by a Opera Supper Concert in the Ancient Barn of Crosby Hall on 10 September 2016. (Further events to be found on their website)

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Published from 11 Buckland Crescent, London NW3 5DH