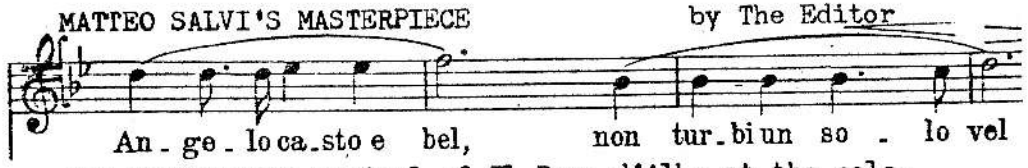
MATTEO SALVI'S MASTERPIECE

by The Editor



THE FORTHCOMING revival of Il Duca d'Alba at the celebrated Théâtre de la Monnaie brings with it the additional good news that the decor is to be that of the first perfance, that of 1882, retrieved from the storerooms and refurbished for the occasion. Musically however, there is to be no resurrection. We are to hear the Schippers version, a drastic reduction of the music of the prima and created for the Spoleto festival of 1959 - the occasion when the original sets were remade and repainted.

This twenty-year-old rifacimento has been a considerable success, its lightness and sensitivity to Donizetti's musical idiom has been much admired (members of the Donizetti Society will remember hearing it at the beginning and end of the 1976/7 season at Ghent.)

Since we live in the days of exhumations however it might be useful to consider the possibility of raising the body in something like the same state it was set to rest. The curious twilight history of this triumphant corpse has been repeated many times. Written to a text largely by Eugène Scribe - the first setting of this prolix writers versification by the Italian maestro (Les Martyrs, theoretically the first,was partly a translation) - the opera was sketched-in during the months of April to November 1839. At this stage, with the first two acts nearly complete and the remainder in a skeletal condition, Donizetti dropped the work for reasons that are not easy to discover. Proposals for its performance came to nothing. Virtually nothing was added to the unfinished score. It was despoiled to some extent in favour of later works but the integrity and cohesiveness of the whole was never encroached upon. As it stood, Donizetti no doubt considered it a performable proposition. It is most probable that many of his scores were in no more complete a condition in the run-up to stage presentation that this one; he could - with his music in this state - cut it, expand it, ammend it, transpose, enhance or diminish it precisely to the talents of his singers, the deftness of his orchestra, or the tastes and disposition of his audience. The huge capacity of the Bergamasc maestro to do this time and time again, with his acute creative insight into the needs and limitations of his cast was possibly the best demonstration of his genius - and it showed him at his most extravagantly versatile. Without the maestro to inhabit such a score was simply an empty suit of clothes.

How then did it come to be performed at all ? This like so many other things about Donizetti's musical legacy was the result of an ignominous squabble. The score passed from hand to hand, a mysterious bundle, hardly ever opened, until it came into the determined clutches of Signora Giovannina Lucca, a publishing widow who was hoping to use it in her redoubtable battle with Ricordi of Milan. Brushing aside all dissenters she set up a commission to examine the manuscript and with their compliance appointed Matteo Salvi to fill in the gaps and prepare it for performance.

This was a major undertaking. Few in the 1880's would have been equipped to attempt it but it is possible that the choice of Salvi was dependant on two factors: firstly on the political grounds that he was a Bergamasc like the maestro himself, secondly, that this almost forgotten operatic composer was the attentive but phlegmatic pupil who had followed him round like a shadow at the time he was writing Linda di Chamounix at Vienna in 1842.

Donizetti, whose relations even with old and favoured friends seem to have been limited to a generalised heartiness, clearly both liked and sympathised with this unwonted attachment who was young enough to be his son. But any paternal responses - if there were any - were quickly dispelled by his listlessness and pallid behaviour so little to his own taste. Undoubtedly too, Donizetti with his restless disposition did not favour deadweights.

Even so Salvi has attracted myths. His legendary sloth is not born out by facts. The year 1843 saw two of his operas - both certainly scrutinised by the maestro. The first of these - a startling late debut by Ottocento standards as the newcomer was 27 - was a 1 act melodramma semiserio (Donizetti called it a 'farsa') entitled La prima donna to a libretto by Carlo Guaita and given its prima at the Vienna Kärntnertortheater on the 20th April. This damp squib had Eugenia Tadolini as its eponymous heroine so it could not have been intended to have been too much of a romp. Certainly the Viennese found it unfunny. Nonetheless this inauspicious debut was followed by a far grander. At the Teatro alla Scala, Milan no less with a full scale opera seria Lara, on a plot rejected by Donizetti himself but made into a libretto by Leopoldo Tarantini, an efficient librettist and writer of song texts. * A tragedia lirica in 3 acts this work was launched on the 4th November and given 7 performances. It was not a complete failure (a new opera given 7 unpapered performances

nowadays would be truly an operatic sensation) and was thought sufficiently promising for the management of the great theatre to offer the young composer another chance.

He took a long breath before going again in front of the lights but to absolutely no avail. His next opera was one of those fiasci of legendary abruptness, I burgravi a dramma lirico in 3 acts to a text by Giacomo Sacchèro made one tremulous appearance on the stage of La Scala on the 8th March 1845 and was never seen again. Finally came his only (near) success. Caterina Howard with a book by Giorgio Giachetti, a melodramma tragico in 4 acts was staged at the Kärntnertortheater on the 10th June 1847. At last one of his operas was received with respect and was the sole work to be given revivals; at the Teatro Grande, Trieste during the carnevale of 1847, and a more ambitious one at the Teatro Comunale, Bologna in 1854 with Maria Piccolomini, Negrini, Corsi, Nanni, Lanner, Cheldi and Garulli as a far from negligible cast. (The tragic tudor queen was not unknown in Bologna - a 6 act ballet by Morosini had appeared at the Comunale in 1841 with the attractive title of 'Caterina Hovvard') So, as far as is known, ended the career of this opera which would repay investigation.

It also ended the operatic career of Matteo Salvi. Except, that is, for Il duca d'Alba. Donizetti's opera was Salvi's single triumph, he wrote for it his only well known aria 'Angelo casto e bel ' and nobly endured the chagrin (no doubt he had the satisfaction of making a last tribute to the master he had admired so much) of not being credited with its authorship. He revised and padded the score very thoroughly, adding a pleasing prelude (which survives in the Schippers version) and an orchestral colouring which perhaps was the sort of thing Donizetti might have written, had he lived into the age of Gomes and Ponchielli. But then perhaps not. Most of this has gone from the score we shall hear at Brussels. 'Spirto gentil' has come back from Favorita to displace Salvi's aria. The music is pared down to bel canto weight. The conductor's score is full of pins - gigantic cuts where neo-verismo passages have been savagely excised just like one of those performances de rigueur when Callas was a debutante. As it stands Il duca d'Alba is not a work to be missed. There is the suspicion that this score, Donizetti's first unadulterated essay in grand-opéra was much the most promising, the pacing and the disposition of the music is so much freer than in Favorita or Les Martyrs, both of which contain uncomfortable passages of compromise. Dom Sébastien, a masterpiece, suffers from inordinate length and an insupportable plot. It is no coincidence that Verdi found its series of situations ready-made for his pen.

Donizetti creates an unforgettable tension combined with desperate self-sacrifice in this work - ironically concerning the kind of parental despair that would later be so much in vogue. The only casualty has been Donizetti's unfortunate pupil whose own humility and self-effacement has come to nothing.

* Donizetti wrote songs to texts by both Guaita and Tarantini.

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Il Duca d'Alba: Teatro Apollo, Rome 22 March 1882

Performance history

Duca=D, Amelia d'Egmont=A, Marcello=M, Sandoval=S, Cond:=C

22.3.1882	Rome	w. Giraldoni(D), Bruschi-Chiatti(A), Gayarre(M), Igalmer Frey(S) Mancinelli (C)	+
13.1.1952	RAI	w. Guelfi(D), C.Mancini(A), A.Berdini(M) D.Caselli(S), F.Previtali(C)	+
9.7.1959	Spoleto	w. Quilico(D), Tosini(A), R.Cioni(M) W.Ganzarolli(S), T.Schippers(C)	*
20.10. 59	New York	w. same cast as Spoleto.	*
18.12. 59	Modena	w. A. Colzani(D) Tosini(A), R.Cioni(M), Ganzarolli(S), Belardinelli(C)	*
23.12. 59	Bologna	same cast as Modena.	*
17.9.1976	Ghent	w. G.Dubuc(D), Fr.Garner(A), W.duPre(M), E.Nicaise (S), A.Margaritov (C)	*
12.6.1977	"	" "	*

Salvi edition + Schippers edition *

NOTE: Following the Rome 'prima' IL DUCA D' ALBA was given at Naples, Bergamo, Turin, Barcelona (19 Dec 82) and at Malta in 1884.

