DONIZETTI INEDITI PER PIANOFORTE
An Introduction by Pietro Spada

Though for all the 19th century and most of the 20th, Italian music of the romantic period was usually associated with opera and the names of the great Italian opera composers, a tendency has emerged and taken consistency over recent years to recover, amidst the glories of Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti, those links with a resplendent and, uninterrupted instrumental tradition, whose roots are to be found in all that *non*-operatic music (suffice it to remember, among others, Corelli, Vivaldi, Scarlatti, on down to Clementi) which for almost two hundred years was the exclusive domain, as it were, of Italian virtuosos and composers. From this new vantage-point, wich in a certain sense has set a clearer focus on the course of Italian musical creativity, the figure of Donizetti has taken on a unique distinction. A famous and sought-after composer in his day, he wrote an incredible number of operas in a relatively short time, only two of which, «Lucia di Lammermoor» and «L'Elisir d' amore», continued to appear with any frequency, at least in this century. Then, due in part to the appearance of a group of distinguished stylist (Maria Callas, Leyla Gencer, Montserrat Caballé, etc.) capable of renewing the sumptuous magnificence of "bel canto", much of that enormous output was slowly brought back to life. So it was that the Anna Bolenas, the Lucrezia Borgias, the Robert Devereux sang for us again: the so-called Donizetti Renaissance, marked also by a remarkable blossoming of articles and essay on the Bergamasque composer, in Italy and especially abroad,was and still is in full swing. Within this framework, his chamber music also emerged and came to the fore, with an unexpected freshness and charm.One began to realize that the training of German-born Simone Mayr had provided the young composer with a very solid foundation and that he made his way among Sonatas, Overtures and Quartets with and ease and naturalness which, had he wished, could have made a great symphonic composer out of him. That is, of course, of that irresistible enchantress, that alluring siren that went by the name of opera in early 19th century Italy had not been listened to or at least partly renounced.

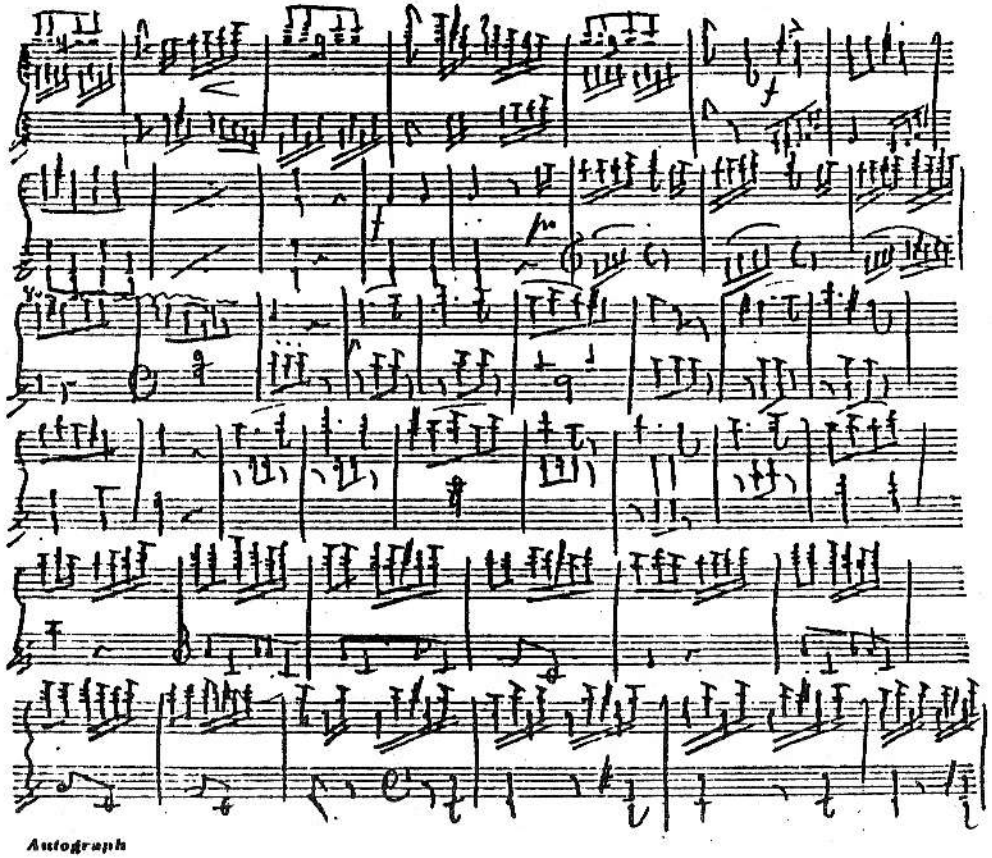
From this perspective and with particular attention to the piano, the first recording ever of Donizetti's four-piano music has already appeared, followed now by the present albums of his two-hand piano works. Donizetti was surely an accomplished pianist and a great accompanist, especially if solicited by outstanding singers, and for him the piano was the instrument and vehicle of immediate expression.This does not mean that one can speak of "piano works" in the sense of a Chopin or a Schumann, but of a varied and lively creative imagination that made use of the piano in every possible way, exalting it or even humbling it, sometimes against its deepest and truest nature.

This first album presents two apposite sides of Donizetti's keyboard writing: one in which the instrument is used as a substitute for the orchestra, in the «Sinfonie»; the other which reveals him as a now intimate, now sumptuous romantic poet in the «Waltzes». These keyboard "sinfonie" (or overtures), most of them early works, are closely related to other similar, purely instrumental works (L'Incendio, "Sinfonia in morte di Capuzzi," etc.) and the single four-hand example. Naturally, they are "Sinfonie all'Italiana," that is in one movement, almost always preceded (except in one case) by a slow introduction that leads to a brilliant Allegro. Some information is available about one or two of them. For example, the first one recorded here, in C major, was written on August 19, 1816, and "done in an hour and a quarter by order of Padre Mattei". Mattei, celebrated composer, theorist and teacher, and a Franciscan friar, was at that time the mentor of the young Gaetano who had gone to Bologna to "perfect himself" with him. The "Capriccio in Sinfonia" - "in Bologna, August 15, 1817" - was drafted in a "half hour between four-thirty and five". And it was certainly a half-hour well spent. Nothing seems to be known of the others, except that the "Sinfonia" in D Major (the last on the present recording) is also dated Bologna, 1819, whereas the manuscripts are scattered between Naples, Bergamo and Paris.The «Waltzes» instead are certainly, for stylistic reasons, later works and generally speaking distinctly romantic in feeling. The first bears the sub-title "L'Invito" (to some tender rendezvous, perhaps?). Sensual and refined, quivering with pangs and seductions, they are certainly important works. Though not "confessions of the soul" like some of Chopin's finest waltzes, and basically the products of the "salon" tastes of the times, they are certainly not inferior to the best works of their kind. Because of their stylistic elegance and worldly charm, they might well date from his last "French" period. But that is merely an hypothesis, even though one of them (the fourth on the present recording, in A major) is preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris in the form of a "Romanza" entitled "Je ne plaignis pas", which differs slightly from the piano version, based on a copy in the Donizetti Museum in Bergamo. It is also worth remembering that in 1844 Donizetti wrote a lovely piece of the same genre for four-hand piano.

DONIZETTI INEDITI PER PIANOFORTE: Pietro Spada
3 Vols on RCA Records
Available separately
£4.90 from Ottocento Archive. Postage 85p

Also Available:
DONIZETTI LA MUSICA PER PIANOFORTE A QUATTRO MANI
w. Spada & Cozzolino
3 RCA discs NAS £14.90





Autograph

The present second album of Donizetti's unpublished works for piano contains all that music which can more properly be called pianistic. Though what was said in Volume One, namely that for Donizetti the piano is the immediate vehicle for an irrepressible imagination and inventiveness, remains valid, it is clear that these pieces, most of them of considerable importance, spring neither from the "salon" nor from the use of the piano as a sort of small domestic orchestra, ready to be strummed into sound by diligent fingers. They are completely "pianistic" and quite difficult from the point of view of the performer, if not of the listener, their style being fully romantic along the lines of Mendelssohn and Weber, whereas the form was cast in the usual classical molds, mostly Sonata-Form with broad, densely elaborated development sections. These characteristics, together with a rarefied harmonic substance, a remarkable contrapuntal consistency and an impressive enlargement of the dimensions of the various pieces, taken as a whole, lead one to place these works in the period of Donizetti's maturity. Precise dates do not exist, except for the one to be found in the strange foot note attached to the beautiful "Larghetto" in C major (the first piece on Side B): "October 30, 1834. To Foppa (?) for the bottle. For A.M.". This enigmatic phrase would seem to indicate a festive and wholly extemporaneous origin of the piece, for that matter entrancing in its simplicity and inspiration. Then there is the curiosity of the "Larghetto" in A minor, which is nothing but the well-known aria, "Una furtiva lagrima" from «L'Elisir d'Amore», hastily jotted down, without a moment's hesitation, in the form of a miniature nocturne for piano, which would seem to be the fleeting notation of a flashing keenly-felt musical image. One might reasonably presume that it precedes, however shortly, the composition of the opera and that Donizetti, to express the trembling emotions of Nemorino, had therefore remembered, harked back to that moment of sincere and poignant tenderness, so hastily jotted down on a scrap of music paper. Of all these pieces, which are more truly "Klavierstücke" than "pezzi per pianoforte", only one bears a title: "La Ricordanza", Adagio sentimentale, which automatically sums up the character of the work. Even so, in its compositional technique and overall sense of expression, it would seem to be an earlier work than the other pieces and bears comparison, for example, to the four-hand composition, "L'Inaspettata", whereas the tone of the general organization, the way the music is carried forth, seems to be on a lesser level than the other similar works, all for them "Allegro" (except for one "Adagio ed Allegro" in G major), wide-ranging and of captivating instrumental style and technique. These pieces, however similar in the quality of their compositional approach, differ greatly in their expressive moods and characteristics: playful, almost in the spirit of a "divertissement", the "Allegro vivace" in G major; tragic and convulsive, the "Allegro" in F minor; brillant, though cast in darker hues, the "Presto" in F minor (almost a Tarantella); structural and rhythmic, regular as clockwork, the "Allegro" in C major (No. 3, Side B), whereas the other "Allegro" in C major (No. 5, Side A) subsides into the rocking, almost barcarole-like turns of a gentle triple-time beat. As to the piece entitled "Due motivi del celebre Maestro Paer messi in Suonata", the situation is necessarily different. Famous in his day, Ferdinando Paer was for several years Maestro di Cappella to the Grand Duke of Parma, before undertaking an international career that led him to enthusiastic acclaim in Vienna, Berlin and lastly in Napoleonic Paris; he was certainly one of the composers that the young Donizetti viewed with respect and admiration in his early years. The original manuscript of this piece, dated "Bologna, October 7, 1817", bears a curious inscription on the front page: "To be returned to the owner". It is conceived as an Introduction and Aria, in pure operatic style, even though the Aria is in Sonata-Form. The chosen themes are clearly indicated: "Questo è il sepolcro" from «Agnese», which is used in the Introduction, and "Vederlo sol bramo" from «Griselda» which constitutes the more broadly melodic second theme of the "Allegro". Within this clearly operatic framework, the young Donizetti comes up with a strange hybrid, however charming, half-way between opera and an instrumental work of Mozartian purity, while the thematic use of other composers' music already relates the piece to that genre-to-come which culminated in the paraphrases, fantasies, etc. of Liszt. Even so, the form is classical and the development and recapitulations proceed in keeping with those Viennese "norms" so deeply instilled in him by the teaching of Mayr. In so doing, Donizetti, perhaps without realizing it, introduces into piano music a uniquely fresh vocal style which would be typical of the early romanticism of a Field, for example, polished in its purity and elegance, alive with a whole new pulse of emotional expression, exquisitely Donizettian, in fact.

In this third album of unpublished piano music by Gaetano Donizetti are collected both those compositions which, in the field of literature, would be known as "minor works" and the three sets of Variations, which, for technical as well as aesthetic reasons, occupy a separate place in the keyboard music of the Bergamasque composer. Both the "Pastorale" in E major and the "Fugue" in G minor are obviously works which date back to Donizetti's infancy or boyhood. The "Pastorale" bears the date, 1813, and is surely a very early effort, resounding with the echoes of bagpipes and enveloped in a sugary Christmas atmosphere. It is interesting to note that the proverbial speed in composing for which Donizetti was famous, that which allowed him the most astonishing productivity and for which he was also roundly criticized (who doesn't remember the famous 19th century cartoon of the composer, intent upon writing two operas simultaneously, one with the right hand, the other with the left?), these gifts, as we were saying, are already present here. In fact, to avoid the tedium of writing in a long series of repeated notes to describe the drone of a bagpipe, Donizetti simply notes: "Drone with the fifth finger always with E". The almost frantic anxiety to make haste, which was certainly an element in the tragic neurosis which was to take on such a fatal hue in the last years of the composer's life, is already clearly in evidence here. The "Fugue" in G minor is also unquestionably an early work, but it isn't a fugue. It would seem to be perhaps something like an exercise by an eager young man who does not quite know what a fugue is and tries to jot something down that smacked of that pedantic austerity, that seriousness of purpose which an age-old tradition has, often wrongly, ascribed to the form. Actually, it is a generically contrapuntal piece, in which the young Gaetano also lets slip a completely homophonic and operatic moment, a sort of escapade on the part of an incorrigible scamp. Therefore it's interesting more as a curiosity, an element in the formation of the complete picture, than for any intrinsic values that may or may not be present. Later on, in numerous ensembles in his operas, or in the strictly polyphonic sections of his great Masses (the Requiem Mass and the Gloria Mass), Donizetti would give ample proof of what he could do in the way of counterpoint.

The «Variations» are an altogether different matter. If the tiny, pseudo-classical Variations in G major almost certainly date from childhood or almost, such is surely not the case with the Variations in E flat major and the Variations in E major. Though neither of the original manuscripts, preserved in the Donizetti Museum in Bergamo, is dated, the E flat major Variations, going by certain stylistic and graphic details, would seem to pre-date the other set. What is immediately striking is Donizetti's approach to the Variation Form as such, which he construes in a primarily ornamental sense, as a succession of more or less difficult "assignements" to the performer, and certainly not as variations of moods and states of mind as is the case with the great Beethoven series. The Theme is a mere framework, however carefully fashioned, which is worked and reworked in every possible way but never really altered in its structural essence. In other words, virtuoso Variations, at times of the utmost stylistic refinement, with complicated crossings of the hands and entangled rhythmic combinations, virtually mental tongue-twisters, music which is not so much based on effects or on violent contrasts in the dazzling sparks of mere speed, as marked by an almost narcisistic indulgence in a sort of abstract intellectualism. From this point of view, the Variation-Form is for Donizetti a little like it was for Paganini: "guardate o villici", to put it in the words of L'«Elisir d'amore», "sempre più difficile, sempre più strano." This tendency, which lends the work an abstract flavor, establishes (and it seems almost incredible) a subtle link to Brahms'concept of virtuosism and his famous "Variation on a theme by Paganini". Certain spasmodic crossings, certain sudden shiftings of position, which make more sense on paper than in terms of actual sound and spring from a pianistic approach that is more experimental and theoretical than practical, are also to be found in these Donizetti pieces, possible revealing a wholly unsuspected side of the composer's personality, distinguished as it is by an extraordinarily immediate and warm humanity. Keeping this in mind, the two great sets of Donizetti piano variations are both extremely interesting, especially the one in E major. But for whom or to what purpose were they written? For himself as a pianist, certainly not, for it seems that he never appeared as a soloist; nor for others. Anyway, who among his circle of friends would have been capable of playing them easily and accurately? Maybe he wrote them for himself, almost as studies for his instrument, to test his skills. He probably never thought others would have read or performed them.