The Finding Of Two Donizettian Rifacimenti; Elisabeth and Elisabetta

A spate of newspaper headlines, a more-or-less lucid article or two, and an obtuse letter have so far distinguished the remarkable discovery of some Donizetti manuscripts in the cellars of Covent Garden Opera House. Perhaps a few lines of explanation would be of assistance to those members of the Donizetti Society who are confused by it all. The saga begins with Otto mesi in due ore (Gli esiliati in Siberia), a melodramma romantico by Donizetti with a libretto by Domenico Gilardoni which was staged for the first time at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples on 13th May 1827. This opera, with its peculiar plot, was rather successful and could well be regarded as a key to the exotic vein in Donizettian composing, initiating a series which leap-frogged through his career, touching lightly on La regina di Golconda (1828), on Il paria (1829), on Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo (1833), on Torquato Tasso (1833), and last of all even touching Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal (1843), all of which were operas with slightly incredible plots and showing his very special faible for highly coloured music when the occasion demanded.

Based on a novel by Sophie Cottin, and on a play by Pixérécourt which had been adapted for the Italian stage by Luigi Marchionni, Gilardoni inveigled Donizetti into a strange farago of events with this Otto mesi in due ore (Eight months in two hours). Its heroine Elisabetta sets out on foot from Siberia to Moscow to appeal to the Tsar to release her unjustly banished father: Act I sees her secret departure; Act II her terrible journey; Act III her arrival in the capital and eventual triumph with the assistance of a magnanimous Sovereign. Though the music contained few novelties the opera was destined to have some years of revival in Italy. Act II, which held the greatest theatrical challenges, did not inhibit its attraction for audiences it seems. Elisabetta is seen climbing over mountains miming her terror of the cold and the terrain, she crosses a flooded river, she encounters and reforms an old enemy of her beloved parent, she confronts and converts from barbarism to Christian charity a Tartar horde, finally - having witnessed the accidental drowning of the reformed villain - the stage having filled with water, she floats off serenely into the wings clinging to a raft providentially contrived from a wooden tombstone. Few composers could ever have encompassed such an odd exit. Donizetti provided an aria, a duet, and a storm scene for this act which were some of the best pieces he had written up to that date.

Clearly, this plot represented a challenge which remained a challenge to the end of his life. After 1827 many revivals brought changes and improvements. The spoken dialogue was firs to go. At revivals of Otto mesi in the early 1830's there were imposed sung recitatives - first at Florence in 1831, then with a text supplied by Jacopo Ferretti, for a revival at Rome in 1832. Revivals at La Scala, 1831; the Teatro Pergola, Florence 1831; the Teatro San Samuele, Venice 1833 - saw each one a new finale for Act III, the old-fashioned polacca of the original being dumped in favour of a coro (Florence), but more typically for a switch-back cabaletta or rondo for the prima donna. Thus, La Scala had a full scale rondo-finale for Giuditta Grisi (the heroine's role having been bagged by a mezzo soprano), and San Samuele - a magnificent new cabaletta for Caterina Lipparini (who, as the first Elisabetta at Naples, now asserted her claim to the last word). Otherwise, as is made clear by the autograph fragments of Otto mesi still remaining in Naples today, the aria-finale from Donizetti's Il falegname di Livonia had been used to end the opera (Lipparini would have been unwilling to sing this in Venice for the simple reason that Il falegname di Livonia had had its prima at the San Samuele in 1819). A major revision was not made for the Teatro Nuovo in Naples in 1833 as The New Grove asserts - there was no revival of Otto mesi at that theatre in 1833; the 1833 Livorno revival (Ashbrook) took place actually in 1831. But in general - as was usual - all sorts of chopping and changing was in evidence from the prima onwards, manuscript sources reveal several versions of key sections written for various revivals.

The most important of the changes in Otto mesi in due ore were, however, conceived for a staging that never took place at all. In the Spring of 1834 Donizetti asked Ferretti to make major changes to the plot for a projected revival at the Teatro Carignano, Turin. These were to include a reversal of plot in Act III. In the original, Elisabetta's parents remained in Siberia until the very last moment of the score, when (miraculously one can only presume) they were somehow whisked to Moscow for the happy ending. This was clearly unsatisfactory. Donizetti asked Ferretti to prepare a text which brought back both parents to Moscow early in Act III in search of the vanished daughter; at the same time the role of the Gran Maresciallo - the deus ex macchina who had contrived their disgrace in the first place - was to be cut and his big aria in Act III removed. Evidence for these changes is provided in concrete terms by two hitherto unexpected sources; amongst the manuscripts unearthed at Covent Garden is a section of a copyist's score of these projected revisions, including a complete new aria for Potoski (the father) on his arrival in Moscow, 'Ah non sogna, è la patria, è la diletta': at the same time, an incomplete copyist's score in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris of a quartet leading to a fragmentary trio-finale can be identified as yet another section of this same 1834 revision. Sadly this version was abandoned it appears, the contract 'went up in smoke'.

So far so good.

Six years were to pass. In Paris, after his arrival there and determined to establish himself as soon as possible, Donizetti set about a positive orgy of composing. Working on Le duc d'Albe; La Fille du régiment; on the rifacimento of Poliuto as Les Martyrs; on L'Ange de Nisida/La Favorite; on Adelia; on a possible revision of Il furioso etc., all of which filled the period 1839-40, give or take a few months. As the Covent Garden manuscripts now make clear, he also worked on yet another revision of Otto mesi in due ore. Was it a commission? It is not sure. Was it destined for a French theatre like La Fille du régiment? Certainly, but goodness knows which one. From the cellars of the Royal Opera House has emerged enough of a large format, oblong folio manuscript autograph full score, to establish that the Bergamasc maestro virtually completed a new opera - that is, new music and new French text - which was to be called either L'Exilé de Sibérie or Elisabeth. This score was written in c1840, which date is confirmed by a note on the overture on which the composer has penned: 'Corrected, revised ... by the author in 1840'.

As I say, this rifacimento - together with some further sections which have now been identified in the Bibliothèque Nationale - amounts more-or-less to a complete new opera. An opera more changed than that of Poliuto as Les Martyrs; with a very different casting and concept of roles; with an altered plot; and throughout with those kinds of insights which mark Donizetti as the Master of the Theatre.

The libretto of this French version is a mystery. It resembles - but is by no means identical with - that text which his 'pupil' Uranio Fontana set in 1853 masquerading as an 'Opera by Donizetti'and known today as Elisabeth ou La Fille du Proscrit.* Fontana may have seen this Donizettian score in its entirety at an earlier stage but the music of his version differs tremendously from that of Donizetti. (Interestingly, the printed libretto supposed to be that of Fontana's opera and published early in 1854, resembles neither of the above versions in many significant ways - all three of the versionshowever feature a third act where the exiled father returns to Moscow in search of his daughter.)

We have now identified the first of these lost rifacimenti. The second can also be identified from these Covent Garden manuscripts. At some time tragically late in his career, arguably in the 1844-45 period when his faculties were declining at an alarming rate, Donizetti made a hasty compilation of music to form a second rifacimento, one which should perhaps be called Elisabetta (there is no sign of an Italian title on the extant sections which would be appropriate). Briefly, he brought together parts of the autograph score of the 1827 version of Otto mesi; added large sections of the 1840 French Elisabeth; added some gatherings from the incomplete Turin version of 1834; added an aria-finale dating possibly from 1843 and written in Vienna? (in waltz-time); dashed-off some new recitatives ** and then set almost the whole to a brand-new Italian text, which involved - in some cases - inserting a new vocal line either above or below that which had already been written. Thus, in the cellars of the Royal Opera House, there has been found a putatively complete Italian opera as well; complete? in two acts - quite different from the 1840 version - a kind of latter day mish-mash of all his previous ideas and music. The whole of Act II with its floating prima donna seems to have been abandoned (he had contemplated a two-act Otto mesi at Naples in 1834 with Malibran in the title-role, but it never materialised).

Elisabetta is a moving score, above all in terms of one man's fight against devastating illness, a heartbreaking witness to the clouds of pain and incapacity which were overwhelming him. Throughout there are signs of superhuman effort - as though music alone was holding the threads of life together.

We should thank Mr. Crutchfield who discovered buried treasure in Floral Street: I wonder how much more lost music lies hidden in surprising places?

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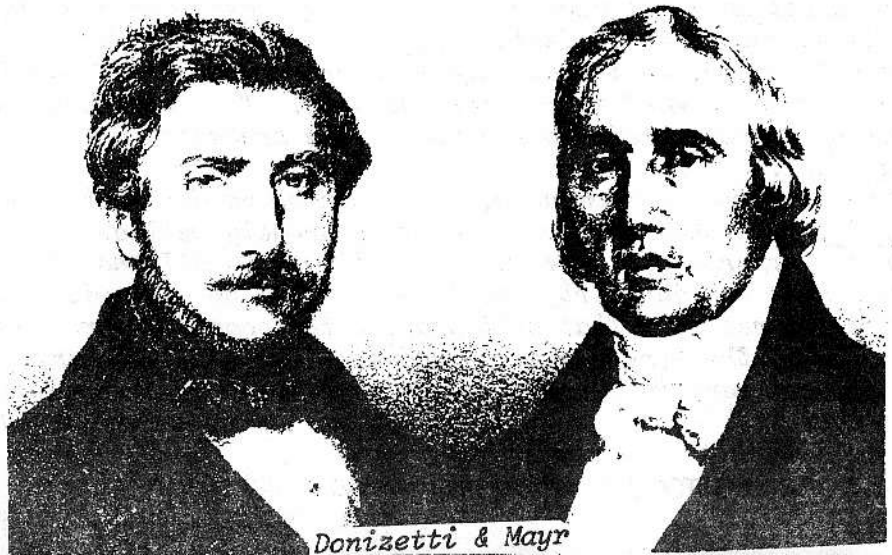
* Republished in vocal score by Belwyn Mills (9891)
** The 1840 Elisabeth was to have been an opéra-comique - ie it had spoken dialogue.

Further reading. G. Zavadini 'Donizetti:Vita-Musiche-Epistolario' Letters nos. 133, 135, 136, 137, 138, 140, 154.



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