An angry young man of 1833
Il furioso

Alexander Weatherson

Islands have always invited soul-storms, if only operatically, think of Rinaldo, Alcina et al. A microcosm fit to concentrate the mind wonderfully upon the eternal truths, but not just the mind, the eye and the ear too. Something of the sort must have warmed Jacopo Ferretti to his bold plot, a focus for truths blown-asunder by a tropical hurricane no less capable of wiping the plate clean than sardonic and parodistic. The tobacco trade[1] must indeed have alerted the famous librettist to the wilder shores of humanity. In *Il furioso all'isola di S.Domingo* he and Donizetti came up with an unexpected variant of the romantic hero, of the *solitario*, the man who wants to be alone, but now in the guise of a furious young husband blind with rage at his wife's infidelities who has taken refuge at the end of the earth. In point of fact on the paradisal beaches of San Domingo where he is an object of pity by the natives. Surrounded by exotica poor Cardenio re-lives his trauma on a daily basis, absurd, comic and tragic by turn. Half-naked emotionally and literally. Bitter, pathetic and exalted, taking refuge in every lyric escape-clause to underpin his sad fate.

The Ferretti *Furioso* is a perfect vehicle for a Donizettian commentary on the anguish of despair, irresolution and heartbreak with a leavening of self-awareness that is both amused and cathartic, it is no coincidence that the plot derives from Cervantes 'Don Quixote'. Poor Cardenio is to suffer, but never so much as when - as a result of a storm-sequence - his unfaithful Eleonora is washed-up in 6/8 on the shore.

Is this really an *opera semi-seria* ? The printed libretto declares it to be an *opera seria in due atti* but tradition has allotted the less-taxing description and this mostly on behalf of its buffo bass, the black slave Kaidamà of the trenchant wit who is the opera's star turn. Ferretti offers us a double irony, his slave is the one character liberated from emotional excess, his comments - the one serious element in this *comédie-humaine*. The poet (1784-1852) had encountered Donizetti some twelve years before, meeting in Rome in 1821 they had worked together on two previous comedies of manners: *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* of 1924 and *Olivo e Pasquale* of 1827; *Torquato Tasso* was to follow at the end of 1833. Operas by Ferretti correcting social exclusion in more-or-less comic terms had extended from his famous *Cenerentola* of 1817 to his *L'innocente in periglio* (for Carlo Conti) of 1827, and then, significantly enough, at the very last gasp of his long career when he wrote the text for an *Il mulatto ossia Il cavaliere di S.Giorgio* [2] whose hero too was destined

Opposite: Programme cover for the London revival of 1979

to come in the same sillage as Kaidamà. And such an enlightened series despite a constant demand for "vecchie comè Noè' arguments like *Berenice in Armenia, Scipione in Cartagine* and *Cesare in Egitto.*

Its title proved rather elusive at the start, the opera was first generally known as 'Il furioso *nell'*isola di S.Domingo' as the original vocal score (Ricordi) makes clear, probably because a play of this name was familiar to audiences, indeed a certain casualness was more in evidence than usual, the Teatro Carolino of Palermo - an opera house distinguished by performances of operas unknown elsewhere - *Arturo e Elvira* of Bellini for instance, and *Orietta di Lesbo* of Verdi - coming forth with an 'Il furioso *dell'*isola di S.Domingo.' Ferretti started work on the poem in the summer of 1832 and by August Donizetti had the first act in his hands; from the beginning he was pleased and wrote to him *"Bravo, bravo Ferretti"*. A series of letters exchanged between the maestro in Naples and the poet in Rome show both engaged in a struggle to tailor Ferretti's text to Donizetti's music almost note for note, the latter's constant perfectionism always in evidence by his exhaustive exhortation: *"Don't sweat...caro amico"* he says after some particularly meticulous demands. By mid-autumn the first act was in-hand and the maestro (who had dashed-off *Sancia di Castiglia* in the interim and given it a successful prima at the S.Carlo [4 November]) travelled up to Rome to join Ferretti where - as both immediately became ill - a tragi-comic correspondence ensued between the respective sickbeds. Even so, *Il furioso* was in rehearsal by the middle of December, its prima on 2 January 1833 at the Teatro Valle was one of the most clamorous successes in the history of a theatre which had seen so many momentous prime. The *furioso* himself, Giorgio Ronconi, then aged 22, carried moist-eyed audiences with him almost from his startling first appearance singing 'Raggio d'amor parea' in an irresistible cantilena that is the essence of his role. He made a sensation as Cardenio (which alone broke new ground as baritones of the day - villains and fathers, were especially deprived of sympathy when cast as husbands), his haggard, boyish outline and his alternately pitiable, endearing singing - frenzied interjections and brief access of quasi-reasonable behaviour (mostly in in the face of the terrified Kaidamà) drew compassion from capacity houses, an empathic sigh in no way diminished when the opera was revived at La Scala that same year, this time with an equally moving Orazio Cartagenova in the title role and where it ran for 36 performances.

As usual Italian opera struck a popular chord. Hidden in its artificialities were the themes of the day. Especially current was a strain of exotica which reflected what we should consider today to be the stuff of tabloid journalism, opera and ballet both quick to defend and attack - sometimes with sarcasm, sometimes with endorsement, sometimes with a savage irony (based on guilt?) - the age of colonial conquest blossoming at that time. The stage was probably the only place where such overt

dissidence could flourish. It is now overlooked that the first complete decade of *Restaurazione* - that is, between 1820 and 30 - was the boldest ever, theatrically speaking both in France and Italy, and this holds true even when the entire nineteenth century is put under scrutiny. A bourgeoisie that had tasted blood made all the running, launching a theatre which only became anodyne and inspid as the century advanced. In this initial decade the underdog emerged as reluctant hero - not as a matter of modish taste but as a result of plots vaunting the rights of, and making heros out of, the excluded. This was the period when ballets (Le Sacrifice Indien[3]) could tackle *suttee* for example (ie the convention that a widow should perish on the funeral pyre of her husband; when *Il paria* (1826 Carafa and 1829 Donizetti) could feature dramatically even though the case for or against Hindu castes was not exactly under the noses of their audience; when the *outsider* became not just a literary paragon for writers like Delavigne or Byron but launched an inspirational ten years of opera plots, probably the two most influential of which were *La Muette de Portici* (1828 Auber) with its repeated cries of "Esclavage!" and its insurrectional message and *Guillaume Tell* (1829 Rossini), both offering overtures (and what Overtures!) to the politically submerged.

If "slavery" was a figurative item, it certainly was more then this in these candid years. Under Donizetti's nose of at the time of *L'esule di Roma* had been Luigi Marchionni's play 'Il Proscritto Romano' (1825) in which the following dialogne ensues:

Publio (referring to Leontina's [4] slave Eumene who has been hovering in the background)
Leontina! Costui che udì il nostro colloquio...

Leont. *Costui è un degno, e fedel depositario de'miei segreti*

Publio *È perchè dunque ti dai il nome di schiavo? Alzati, o confidente di Leontina. È il cuore, e non la condizione che ci fa schiavi. Abbracciami, e quindi innanzi ti darò il nome di amico.*

The exceptional symbiosis strongly in evidence in these years between Donizetti and almost all his librettists is most potent between him and his *Ferrettaccio*.[5] More than a simple affinity, it is the semi-serious nature of their combined musico-literary struggles that throws the most vivid light on the philosophy of the Donizettian era. As a genre *opera semi-seria* was already expiring quietly when Donizetti wrote *Furioso*. The ingrained *Italianità* of opera with something for everyone was in decline. An opera embodying all the virtues and vices of the South, volatile, haphazard, inconsequential, only half-serious (what anathema this must have unleashed *oltralpe*?) was an option, nonetheless, whose versatilty would prove irresistible to a composer longing to abandon predictability in his scores If he could advance creatively on all fronts, as was

certainly the case in these years, it is difficult to resist the feeling that his heart was more engaged in creating the terrible twins, *Furioso* and *Torquato Tasso,* than any other of the operas of this critical period when everything, figuratively, was turning to gold, even taking into account far-more momentous capolavori like *Parisina* or *Lucrezia Borgia.*

It is the Jeckell and Hyde nature of his *furioso* that epitomises his score, nothing is quite what it seems, especially musically, where a bold cyclothymia enables him to employ an archi-romantic terminology in pursuit of *opera buffa.*

There is no more touching, or funny, or thoroughly disturbing sequence in this *Furioso* than the surreal duetto where Cardenio - who has previously greeted Kaidamà with punches ('piff paff') elects to invite him to an alfresco dinner 'Mio bene! Fior di beltà' 'Vedi una volta pranziam insieme dentro un boschetto'. There is no *primo tempo:*

Cardenio *Oh quanto! Oh quanto*
io smaniavo per te. Sentiami attratto
da un arcano potere...

Kaidamà *Io niente affatto.*

Cardenio *Perchè tremi?*

Kaidamà *È un'usanza*
che non posso lasciar.

His unwelcome host then proceeds to serenade him with one of Donizetti's most beautiful somgs (the *cantabile* of the ghostly duetto and an example, I suspect, of Maestro Donizetti poking fun at himself) 'Di quei negl'occhi i lamp ardenti' after which the encounter becomes serious. Heralded by a *tremolando* indicating a soul-storm of real import, unsure who actually is his guest Cardenio weeps, reverts to an anguished norm 'Iniqua, ingiusta, rea...la mia morte poi segnò', then weeps 'Barbara, io piango'. Kaidamà. first tries reason, then protest, finally reduced to echoing mechanically everything Cardenio throws at him, then, in the face of Cardenio's truly terrible distress 'Era il sorriso de'giorni miei/da lei diviso tutto perdei' (the *stretta* of the duetto!) takes to his heels.

In this opera, we get to the matrix of his attitude to operatic genres. 'Comic' and 'Tragic' are not necessarily contradictory forces. It would not be hard to maintain that each and every one of his *opere serie*, however *straziante*, contains at least one wry joke, conceals at least one leavening allusion to the inherent comedy that underpins all our destinies, while every one of his *opere buffe* that manages to keep its head above *farse* has its moment of sober reflection. Thus, one could say, the angry young man of 1833 invoked a tropical storm in the cause of the eternal truths (in the Opera House, at least).

And who was the angry young man, was it really Cardenio? Or was it Ferretti? Could it have been Donizetti?

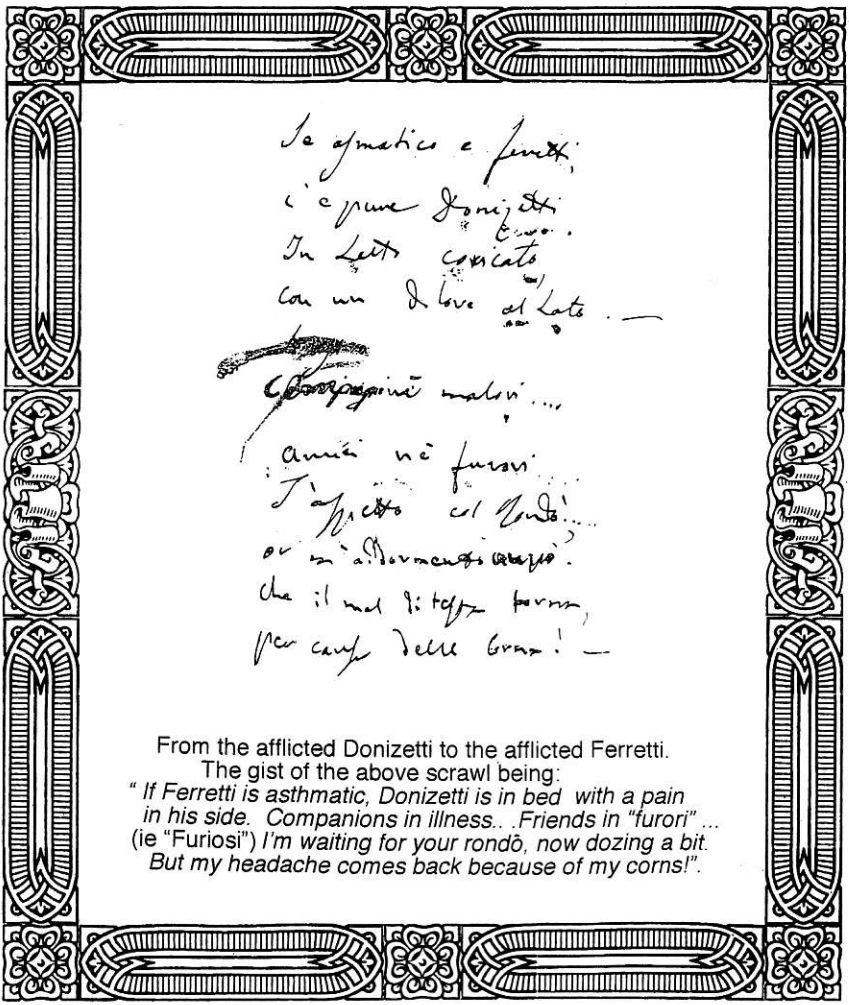
[1] Based in Rome, Ferretti made his living as an offical of the tobacco trade operating in the Papal States.

[2] Whether this opera, set to music by Giuseppe Lillo, was actually performed at the T,Carignano in Torino is not in fact quite clear. Alberto Cametti in his *Jacopo Ferretti* (Milano 1897), 247 insists that is was not: indeed that it was "*abbandonato , per la proibizioni della censura*"; Florimo says it was performed and had an excellent reception; while Caselli in his *Catalogo delle opere liriche pubblicate in Italia* (Ref.4554), 250-1/696 confirms that the libretto was published in the autumn of 1846 but no copy has come to the notice of the author,

[3] Ballet by Luigi Henry, music by Michele Carafa, Pietro Raimondi and Luigi Carlini (Naples 1819/Paris 1822). The theme was one that also occupied Spohr and Mayr.

[4] In Marchionni's play Argelia is called Leontina

[5] *Cfr* John Stewart Allitt *Tutto Ferretti?* [in] Newsletter 81 (October 2000), 17-20



From the afflicted Donizetti to the afflicted Ferretti.
The gist of the above scrawl being:
" If Ferretti is asthmatic, Donizetti is in bed with a pain in his side. Companions in illness.. .Friends in "furori" ... (ie "Furiosi") *I'm waiting for your rondô, now dozing a bit. But my headache comes back because of my corns!".*