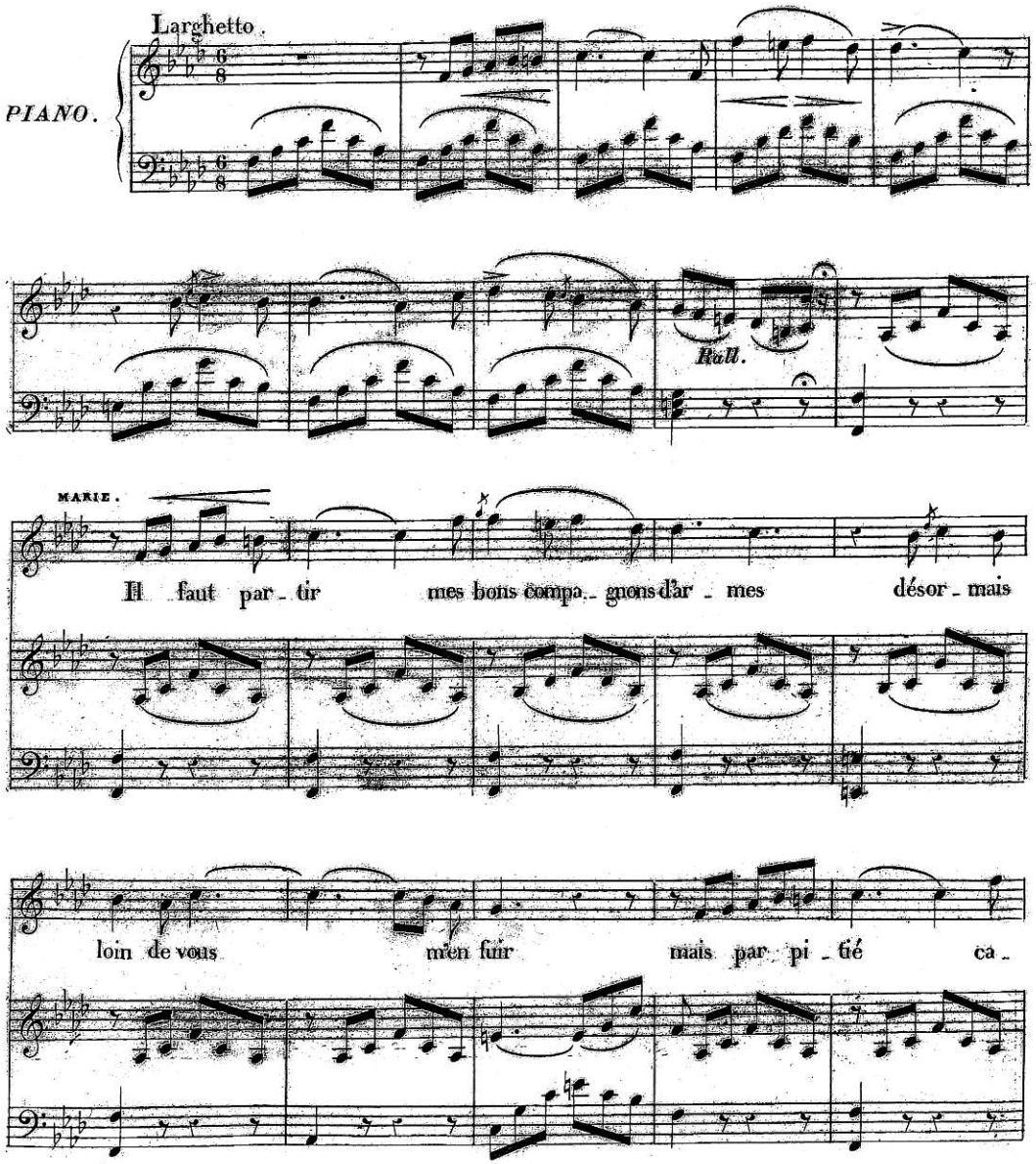
LA FILLE DU RÉGIMENT.

ROMANCE.



DONIZETTI and VIENNA

Douglas M. Bennett

I came across a book about Biedermeier Vienna (ref. Vienna in the Biedermeier Era 1815-48, ed. Robert Waissenberger, Alpine Fine Arts 1986, a translation of a German original). The book claimed to give a social and artistic portrait of that mildly balmy period in Austro-Hungarian history through a variety of individual essays of variable quality. After interesting surveys of politics, manners, psychology, home décor, dancing and fashion I turned with relish to the one on the topic of music.

The Biedermeier period as defined in the introduction to this book started with the Congress of Vienna and ended with the so-called Year of Revolutions. This period was marked in most European countries by concessions soon cancelled by reactionary reprisals, but in Vienna the difference was that 1848 marked the fall of the second 'Emperor of Austria', Ferdinand, a poor substitute for the beloved and astute Francis who is largely identified with the term 'Biedermeier'. Surely, I thought, it was under Emperor Ferdinand that our Society's hero Donizetti assumed the post of Hofkapellmeister to the Viennese court? But in the index the name Donizetti appeared only to cover the interpolation of the *"Lucia Mad-Scene"* between movements of a Schubert symphony in a concert!

After that disappointment I turned to another book: Schubert's Vienna. Ed. Raymond Erickson, Yale University Press, 1997. Here, under the discipline of a more restricted scope the focus was steadier, and within the specific musical thrust the scholarship seemed more trustworthy. Although the Donizettian period was excluded by date coverage of the aftermath to the Schubert era up to 1848 implied inclusion, but the index showed that Donizetti had still been excluded completely from even the most indirect reference.

The situation in which Donizetti found himself around 1842 may need a little amplification. In spite of his success in gaining *scritture* for operas almost wherever he wanted, there remained a personal need for a basic salaried position. Perhaps living out of a suitcase was proving less than satisfying. In spite of his success in Paris the focus of his career plans remained, with his roots south of the Alps. His position as director of Royal theatres in Naples (since 1828) was not an unalloyed success. Either for that reason or for other personality problems the chance to follow Zingarelli at the Naples Conservatory eluded him, both it and an earlier vacancy at Novara cathedral fell to Mercadante. Rossini tried in 1842 to get Donizetti to the Conservatory at Bologna but nothing came of his efforts. Perhaps in the circumstances it should not be surprising that

Donizetti fell back on his roots-he was, after all, a citizen of the Habsburg Empire since he was born in pre-Risorgimento Lombardy, perhaps as a native of Bergamo he had some special access to opportunities in Vienna. But how might such an opening arise?

Like all ancien régimes, Vienna took its social direction from the personality of the titular head, rather than by reacting against it. In art and culture the adopted 'style' was largely the Emperor's own. It would arguably remain so until at least the twentieth century, although as the era of the waltz swirled through society this underpinning loosened. In terms of the performing arts, which were thought of by the authorities (and their emasculating and emasculated censors) as defining an important moral imperative to the populace, the influence should have been particularly in evidence. It was in this area of theatrical performance that the book about Schubert's Vienna proved most interesting because it projected the trends before 1828 all the way to the shattered dreams of 1848. By that time Donizetti had gone and the Emperor who appointed him was also deemed surplus to requirements. He was summarily dismissed: Donizetti meanwhile succumbed to early dementia.

During this extended period starting with Schubert's unsuccessful efforts to write opera the trend in the theatre seems to have been dominated by continuing Germanification of drama. After all the culture that had Schiller needed to pay no deference to other theatrical traditions. In the circumstances perhaps the question ought to be 'What did Vienna really NEED from the services of Donizetti?

It is not easy to work out how it all happened. The tale of the drawn out negotiations, humorously relayed by Donizetti to Peppina Appiani, stresses the importance of 'due process' rather than the undue haste with which the personal enthusiasms of rulers usually get carried out:

"I was brought to court to be asked if I wanted the post that Krommer, Mozart and Kozeluch held before, ie Hofkapellmeister to His Majesty, receiving directions from the Chamberlain. It will involve two or three concerts in the private salon each year and commissions that will earn separate payment, five or six months leave of absence and all in exchange for 3000 florins."

In response by using his well-developed commercial sense Donizetti offered to serve for nothing (but presumably to be paid for anything he wrote) or take an 'all up' deal for 4000 florins. In the event such a deal was struck: the salary, a princely 12000 Austrian francs per annum, paid monthly, was clearly enough to ensure loyalty in the eyes of those paying the price. It also indicates that someone really wanted him to come.

It would be fascinating to be able to see behind the masks adopted in that negotiation. Who, for example, in the first place had the idea of reviving

the position of Hofkapellmeister (it had been vacant for some 12 years)? Then more particularly who orchestrated the commercial moves that satisfied what was probably seen as Donizetti's vanity? He, apparently star struck by the court impedimenta (uniforms and etiquette) comes across in the reports as trying to sound disinterested, but that is likely to have been a mask covering other more mercenary motives. Money seems to have been the universal standard by which all things were successfully reconciled.

But of course, Donizetti had been instrumental in putting this price upon his own head. His 'prentice piece' for this 'entrée' was *Linda di Chamonix.* It is sun-kissed music. Not the melodrama of *Lucia*, or the feather-light comedy of *Don Pasquale*. No, it has a dollop of each and handfuls of both. Semiseria may be the child of neither genre and yet spell death to both, but it seems to have suited the morbidly sentimental Viennese. It was a shrewd choice beyond Donizetti's knowing, and its musical execution (not typical Donizetti, and to our modern ears closer to early Verdi) still displays great panache. This alpine tale still seems full of heady ozone.

It is less certain that the bureaucracy of Vienna was similarly well ventilated. My guess is that the court officials, faced with a new Emperor without the 'common touch' but on the other hand the need continuity with the very personal style of Emperor Francis, would in their own self-interest have been looking for ways to keep the loyalty of those perceived to have influence: ie the bourgeoisie. At that time the commercial classes were increasingly holding the keys to the money needed as gambling stakes in European poker-like diplomacy. If personality could not be used to keep these people from exercising their latent powers then other distractions must be provided.

Donizetti had already demonstrated his skill through *Linda di Chamonix.* Its subject seems designed as a gift for the caressing of the Austrian libido. What Donizetti actually delivered was a bit like Mozart when in the same post. Plenty of dances, good opera and exalting religious music that would make a heady mixture, and it is in effect what the Viennese music world would remain famous for under the Empress Maria Theresa It is not a formula calculated to reveal the private side of public life.

We may speculate whether Biedermeier informality was really a genuine revelation of the inherent good in bourgeois society. History would have us believe so but we will never know for certain. Under the late Francis I any difference between 'public' and 'private' images is perceived as slight. My one modest contribution to unlocking attitudes in Vienna comes in comparing two pictures from the book about Schubert's Vienna.

Moritz von Schwind (1804-1871) is known principally as a romantic painter of murals, often of a religious trait. But here he is invoked as a recorder of the fleeting moment: a joyous al fresco dance at Atzenbrugg by the Schubertians, those youthful zealots of the 'wild surmise' that have

been conveniently, but not wholly accurately bracketed under the composer's name.



The eye of the sketcher catches only the essentials and the mind of the viewer fills out the rest of a story. The result is an appreciation of the scene that is complete and convincing. In spite of the duplication of one figure, and the stray emergence of another, more distant building amongst the dancers the whole sketch creates a vivid snapshot of a dance on an open lawn. I think I can almost hear the music and imagine the subsequent couplings.

Much later in his life (and crucially after the watershed of 1848, around 1860) Schwind converted that hasty sketch into a finished painting:



Without prompting it can be seen that the snapshot immediacy of the original youthful sketch has been conformed into an academic composition of four-square theatricality. The arabesques of the dancers are now joined up, and the proscenium arch hovers just out of view. It is difficult to judge which of the many changes contributes most to the overall change in mood. It is now a scene from an operetta; not a remembered day out in the country. And the intertwinings of the dance have obliterated some of the character of individual dancers. This is not youth recorded at the moment: it is indiscretion made respectable under censorship. It is analogous to the triumph of bureaucracy.

When we look back at 'Biedermeier Vienna' this is what we see; not the innocent immediacy of the first sketch (and of many of Schubert's songs) but the artful construction of a carefully posed image.

And so too it is with Donizetti's choice of Vienna as the scene for what turned out to be his last flowering (or what we would now call 'reinvention'). That his appointment failed to stop the atrophy of Biedermeier society or the triggering of the reaction that led to the expulsion of Emperor Ferdinand is obvious to us now. In the final analysis it is that airless world that Moritz von Schwind painted. Had Donizetti survived I think he would have found it difficult to breathe in the Viennese air. Displaying morbid sentiment is not the same as dissembling the enjoyment of its indulgence.

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The huge singularity of Bellini's exquisite ***Il pirata*** was fully endorsed by the austere precision of the staging at the immaculate Teatro delle Muse of Ancona. Vocal vignettes of immense sophistication, in an icy setting, proved to be a receipe for triumph. Pier'Alli was the designer, Mariella Devia, José Bros and Vladimir Stoyanov were the tortured and despairing inhabitants of Caldora. Even if no one now, truly, can invoke Henriette Méric-Lalande, Giovan Battista Rubini and Antonio Tamburini, you can evoke their shades given the insights and subtlety of the baton of Bruno Bartoletti, and this all three did admirably. The Teatro delle Muse shares the crown with the Carlo Felice of Genova and the Teatro Donizetti in the peninsula. The perfect judgment of Ancona has attracted an audience with an equal finesse to their stagings, a factor nowhere else in evidence, it would seem, today.

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