Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.5

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La Fille du régiment

Donizetti's first real French opera reached London in complete form on Thursday 27 May 1847, at Her Majesty's Theatre, and as was customary, was given in an Italian translation, as *La figlia del reggimento*. Reading accounts of the initial and subsequent performances it could easily have been called *Lind, the Darling of Her Majesty's* for the critics concentrated on three items: "Jenny Lind"; "who was in the audience"; and the "gigantic crush - consisting as it did of those inside with tickets, and those outside trying to buy them."

Superlatives were in order for this famous "Stella du Nord" in her first opportunity to display her comic prowess. One critic said that what *"she exhibited in the two acts of this charming opera was as remarkable as it was judicious and enchanting"*, another thought that the score was *"interesting, pleasing, light, graceful and melodious"*, while another said of the opera *"it is a remarkable proof of the great genius of the lamented Donizetti, a composer as it were buried, whilst still living"*. The other roles were taken by Italo Gardoni as Tonio, Federico Lablache (eldest son of Luigi) as Sergeant Sulpice, and Madame Solari as the Marchesa di Berkenfield, hardly any of them getting any mention.

The Morning Chronicle (Gallic apologist ancestor of The Guardian - Jenny Lind had declined to sing in Paris) did not like it, it felt that Lind's voice was *"husky and thick, her intonation unsteady and precarious"*, of the production itself they commented *"having seen this opera in Paris we protest against its cruel treatment here in London, an orchestra without tone or discipline, a coarse chorus and the total neglect of the ensemble are the order of the day"*. In fact one paper claimed that the hysterical adulation given to Mlle Lind could only undermine the morals of other artists. There was one question that did arise. Why was Lind demeaning her art by appearing in a *"third-rate comic opera with pretty tunes?"* (The same question levelled at Adelina Patti in 1863 and Joan Sutherland in 1966 - both at Covent Garden).

Even Benjamin Lumley the Impresario and Manager of the theatre came in for criticism regarding the opera house publication of the libretto. It was felt that the Italian version lost much of the original French terseness and vivacity. As for the English parallel translation: it was considered *"disgraceful, the language vulgar, slip-slop and full of absurd perversions"*

But 1847 was not the first time Donizetti's score (or, at least, part of it) had been heard in the city. Three years earlier on 6 March 1844 at the Haymarket Theatre as adaptation of *La Fille du régiment* with some of the score and titled *Joséphine, or the Fortune of War* had had *"a triumphantly successful production of Mr John Buckstone"*. This latter was an actor/playwright and future Manager of the Haymarket and other theatres. Marie (Joséphine) was played and sung by Mrs Fitzwilliam *"who in the*

part of the vivandiere of the 21st Regiment was inimitable". Mr Buckstone (who I presume was the male lead) was *"admirable"*, as also was Mr. J.Bland *"as the rough but honest Sergeant"*. It was thought that more of the score could have been used or omitted altogether as the little that was used did not do justice to the composer's intentions. The review ended: *"altogether, we have seldom seen a more lively and affective piece"*.

In December 1847 press reports told how the prevailing epidemic and isolated cases of cholera were affecting box-office receipts. The epidemic was influenza, plus a reaf fear of cholera. In fact, only seven years later that dreaded disease claimed the lives of over 50,000 of London's inhabitants.

But it was at this time that an English version of our opera was prepared by Edward Fitzball for the actressand singer Miss Poole. This opened at the Surrey Theatre on 21 December 1847 as (of course) *The Daughter of the Regiment*. The review four days later said of Miss Poole *"a more charming piece of acting was never witnessed on any stage; she did not rival Mlle Lind in the vocal portion but we question whether any other English singer could have approached her in the charms of her voice"*.

That first performance in English saw Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, her mother the Duchess of Kent, the dowager Queen Adelaide with their guests, the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia and the Duke and Duchess of Saxe-Weimar in the Royal Boxes. Victoria and the others saw it again on Tuesday 1 June with this time the Prince of Leiningen; then again on Saturday 5 June this time with Prince Oscar of Sweden as their guest. These visits to the opera were her personal choice and she paid for the tickets herslf. The Queen obviously enjoyed this opera as I found when checking other productions. Not only were there visits to Her Majesty's Theatre in other years to see this opera but also to Covent Garden, the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, the Princess's Theatre, and most notably the St. James's Theatre in 1854 where a French company with Marie Cabel as *La Fille du régiment* gave a short season of appropriate fare. The Queen went to six performances during this latter season, three of which were to see Donizetti's opera. At one of these she took as her guests the King of Portugal and his brother the Duke of Oporto. (The other operas in the season were Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* and Auber's *L'Ambassadrice*). Also, late in 1847, a season of pantomime, drama and opera opened at the Princess's Theatre which ran for about eight months and in June 1848 another English version opened as *La Vivandière* with Anna Thillon (the first Lucie) as Marie. This last season was not a financial success and at the end of July it was announced that the theatre was to close. This notwithstanding, the British public enjoyed *La Fille* in all its guises as did their Queen and in the last few weeks the theatre only opened on the nights this opera was due to be performed. Moreover, the demand for tickets was so great that extra performances were scheduled, Mlle Thillon sang in all of them.

Her Majesty's Theatre, July 1856

Nine years after the 1847 first night the memory of Jenny Lind was all-but forgotten and a new Marie was in town, This was Maria Piccolomini of whom it was said *"with such exquisite sweetness and feeling, she combines the lightness and vivacity of the French stage with Italian grace, softness and sensibility"*. My print shows the finale to Act 1 with her flanked by

Sig. Belletti on th left as Sulpizio, and on the right Sig. Calzolari as Tonio.

Loewenberg's 'Annals of Opera' lists another adaptation by Mr Fitzball entitled *Madelaine, or the Daughter of the Regiment*, of which it states that it opened at Drury Lane on 30 November 1843. I can find no record of this in the papers and journals of that time and I query the date because of one irrefutable fact: on Monday 27 November Michael Balfe's new opera *The Bohemian Girl* opened to instant success. That week it was performed every night except the Tuesday. From Monday 3 December it was given four times a week, with the other two being taken up by English versions of Rossini's *La donna del lago* and *La cenerentola.*

However, there must have been a *Madelaine* around as it was used as the basis for the Toy Theatre published either by John Redington or J.Green. The illustration on the back cover of this Newsletter is of the very first page of a book (reprinted in 1937 by Benjamin Pollock) to be used with the Toy Theatre in my collection. The main characters are Madelaine and Andreas and the 24 pages give all the dialogue to be used, three pages of figurini to be cut-out, and four pages of the sets for both acts. It also has the score and libretto of four pieces of Donizetti's music. They are the Regimental Song; Madelaine/Marie's air from Act 1; a duet for Madelaine and Andreas and the Rataplan Chorus. Such a Victorian Toy is part of the real history of the stage.



MDLLE. PICCOLOMINI IN "LA FIGLIA DEL REGGIMENTO," AT HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.