Maria di Rohan

Does life imitate art, or vice versa?

Notes for a lecture

Nineteenth century composers, it is sad to say, diminished all the historical characters they depicted in their operas. "*Don't put your daughter on the stage*" ought to have been the motto inscribed under the coats of arms of many unsuspecting noble families. So many ill-treated ladies – poor Lady Macbeth for example, poor Lucrezia Borgia, poor Queen Elizabeth I and most of her step mothers - have found their reputations in tatters as a result of their operatic treatment by carefree musicians.

This, I very much fear, is the case with our heroine. It is but one short step from the Vienna Kärntnerthortheater to appearing in "*Doctor Who*" (in 2002) but this, I can assure you, has been the case with the beautiful and intrepid Marie-Aimée de Rohan-Montbazon, *duchesse* de Chevreuse. She was one of those people who fascinated everyone even making an involuntary appearance in *The three Musketeers* (where she had an entirely fictional son by Athos of all people!)

But why did our generous Bergamasc devote an opera to Marie de Rohan, an iconic figure of an unimaginable past? It is because he felt himself to be close to her. The story of the opera gives only a hint of this. It is not complicated a tale. Set in the precincts of the Palais du Louvre, Maria "*contessa di Rohan*" (as she is called in the opera) is in attendance on the Spanish Queen of France known to history as Anne d'Autriche while having a guilty affair with the *conte di Chalais*, a minister of Louis XIII. Unknown to Chalais, Maria has secretly married his best friend, the *duca di Chevreuse* - a marriage both to please her dying mother and to escape the attentions of the all-powerful Cardinal de Richelieu. Chalais challenges the offensive courtier Gondi to a duel, before leaving for the duel, he writes a compromising letter to Maria to be delivered to her in the event of his being killed. While he is away from home the agents of Richelieu search his rooms, steal the letter, and send it to Chevreuse. The latter is incandescent with rage and jealousy and obliges Chalais to to have a shoot-out with him instead, but Chalais turns the pistol on himself. Chevreuse furiously condemns his wife to perpetual ignominy and disgrace for her infidelity!

What a pack of nonsense

What you have here is the default plot of Italian Opera which someone summed-up as "*The soprano marries the baritone but loves the tenor*" (but don't smile so condescendingly - this is the plot of *Tristan und Isolde*). Based on a *louche* boulevard shocker called *Un duel sous le cardinal de Richelieu* staged in Paris on 9 April 1832 and much to the taste of the times offering as it did a thoroughly bourgeois *ménage-à-trois* suitable for popular consumption in the reign of Louis-Philippe, it was equally intended to put past grandees in their



Marie de Rohan as Diana the Huntress **[Chateau de Versailles]**

place as to find an argument with which everyone in the audience could identify.

First, an attempt to describe the people featured in this opera: in real life Marie de Rohan was a cross between Angela Merkel and Mata Hari (if you can imagine any such thing). Born in 1600 and one of the most beautiful women of the day, she married at seventeen the *Connêtable* de Luynes, a vindictive henchman of Louis XIII who got himself killed not long after leaving her with a son, thus, of course, she was no spinster "*contessa di Rohan*" as in Donizetti's passionate melodrama but the widowed *duchesse* de Luynes when she married Chevreuse and this was several years before she became involved with Chalais. Her second marriage was a *marriage de convenance*, no more, her husband was a crony of her father and if she married again to please anyone it was to please him. Indeed the most ludicrous invention of all in the libretto is her mother's "deathbed wish": Madeleine de Lenoncourt died when Marie was one year old and it is highly improbable that either ever set eyes on each other. This notwithstanding, the Chevreuse couple lived – when they found themselves under the same roof – in perfect harmony, alcove activities they took in their stride - he had lots of lovers, so did she, it was the way of the world in which they lived. Her main preoccupation was politics. Almost all her energy was spent plotting against the reforming plans of Richelieu to increase the power of the Church and State at the expense of the territorial nobility. She was about as far from Cammarano's "*angelo di pace*" as possible, stirring–up trouble across Europe, exploiting her status as a crony of the Queen, and agitating in Madrid, London and Brussels, avoiding the clutches of the Cardinal-tyrant in that being married to a "foreign" Prince she was out of his range. Galloping to the frontiers disguised as a man, such Amazon exploits brought fame to the remarkable duchess, not just for her courage and fascination, but also for her manifest political heft. Ingenious, resourceful and dashing she was involved in every subversive coup in her heyday and became one of the genuinely emblematic figures of her day and age. Painted by Velasquez (the Wallace Collection), if you can recognise her in Cammarano's libretto for Donizetti you must have an especially powerful imagination.

Next, Henri de Talleyrand, *comte* de Chalais (yes he was a forebear of Napoléon's foreign minister). Born in 1599, he did not commit suicide as in the opera he was decapitated by Richelieu in 1626. He was no kind of candidate for the ministry of any King, indeed he was a remarkably foolish young man, hotheaded, politically naïf and more like a daft juvenile delinquent than a hero. If they did actually have an affair it was brief and functional and took place shortly before his death. Though she was briefly part of his plotting it was scarcely a conjunction of equals, she was fearless and a winner, he was impetuous and a loser. When he was arrested by the Cardinal she left him to his fate. No one actually bothered to remember Chalais before the time of Louis-Philippe never mind associated him with Marie de Rohan-Montbazon. Her biographies say nothing about Chalais:

"She married in 1617, Charles d'Albert, Duc de Luynes, Connêtable de France, then, her husband being dead, she married in 1622, Claude de Lorraine, Duc de Chevreuse. She intrigued at first against Richelieu and had to fly into exile. Richelieu being dead, she intrigued then against

Mazarin and put herself at the head of a "Cabale des Importants" made up of old friends of Anne of Austria disappointed with the confidence the queen had in the latter. During the Fronde, she also played an important role and supported with all her power Gondi and Condé. She died in 1679"

Brief and to the point, she would have liked this account of her life. No sentimental digressions, no lovers, no fantasy offspring with Athos, no galloping about the country in drag. Ashbrook asserts magisterially that the *"basic demand of the romantic melodrama is that the composer give musical coherence and credibility to an intense plot whose denouement is tragic and inevitable"*: Marie died in her bed, the only person actually to have had a *"tragic and inevitable denouement"* was Chalais, which is why he has been dug up by the eager authors of libretti and trashy plays.

So much for romance in the Seventeenth Century.

Then Claude de Lorraine, *prince* de Joinville, *duc* de Chevreuse. Born in 1578 he was the last son of the *duc* de Guise, fanatical Head of the Catholic League against the Protestants who was assassinated together with his brother the Cardinal de Lorraine in a bloody coup at Blois in 1588 with the complicity of Henri III who detested them both. The seventh child of the severely tried Catherine de Clèves, Chevreuse was a lightweight, a remarkably brave soldier who undertook some diplomatic duties but was otherwise utterly incompetent except in bed. He was always in debt - indeed he was more famous as a spendthrift than anything else and in and out of the skirts of a whole series of important ladies. Married to Marie de Rohan in 1622 he was exactly twice her age. He liked his rich and celebrated wife, he was devoted to the French Crown (unlike Marie who loathed Louis XIII), but their marriage was a huge success, they lived cheerfully enough in a kind of alliance founded on mutual concerns. He took no interest in her lovers, she was invariably polite to his. They had no less than three daughters. He often tried to get her out of political hot water and his semi-royal status enabled her to get away with – if not exactly murder – at least with every kind of treason.

There are a few minor characters in the opera, one of them Armando di Gondi had indeed an historic role but is given an entirely fictitious lust for the heroine that Donizetti amplified out of all proportion. The Cardinal de Richelieu himself does not appear in Donizetti's opera at all.

How did Gaetano Donizetti get involved with these overlifesized people of a remote past? And what do Paris and Vienna have to do with it?

One can hazard all sorts of guesses why he chose this plot. The most persuasive of all is that Maria was on his doorstep. He was living in Paris in the Hôtel Manchester, formerly the town-house of one of the closest friends of the beautiful duchess fallen on hard times after the Revolution by becoming a commercial hotel. Even though it had been extensively rebuilt and even though its destiny had been clouded by commerce if our composer listened very carefully he might have been able to hear her foot on the stair. Situated near the Opéra of his day he was within a stone's-throw of the site where the seventeenth

century Hôtel de Chevreuse used to stand, side by side with the Hôtel de Chalais with a secret door linking them - both houses built in the vast quadrangle of the Louvre where now the *Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel* tries to look important. If you dug down under flagstones, you might find a vestige or two of the foundations of these two houses under its marble vault. The *mise-en-scène* of the opera was very real to the Italian composer. He could see the double staircase within the Louvre (which now leads to the fabulous Napoléon III apartment) where the opera opens, in earshot was the Gallerie d'Apollon whose distant murmurs of voices, dances and striking clocks he could actually hear and which we too can hear in his *Maria di Rohan.* At night [no one even dreamed of tourists in his day] the shadows and empty grandeur of the Tuileries were still magical and thanks to the Revolution and its memories of the fatal departure of Marie Antoinette and her children in flight to Varennes it was indeed a place full of impending doom. A *"voce fatal di morte"* that colours the whole of his music. As far as Marie de Rohan was concerned, he was not just writing an opera but evoking a living being.

It is possible of course that his plot had come to him in Vienna where Rohan family exiles were present at Court. Donizetti rapidly became popular in imperial circles in the magnificent city, he gave lessons to the archduchesses and was graciously received by Metternich who was a music-lover (though no one ever bothers to say so). Victor-Louis-Mériadec de Rohan *prince* de Guémené, *duc* de Montbazon now an Austrian Vice-Marshall, though rather old, was still around, his heir Camille-Joseph-Philippe, *prince* de Rohan-Rochefort who largely is responsible for the present day Rohan descendents was very much present as a Knight of the Golden Fleece. Either or both of these survivors could have re-awakened the Cammarano text in the mind of the composer. Did the composer ever discuss his opera with them? Maybe in conversation or maybe by their mega presence could this heroine of the pre-Fronde *Résistance* have been brought to mind. Did either of them attend the first performance? No one knows. Perhaps the archives of Castle Sychrov might one day throw a light on this. But if the princes were around, they would have roared with laughter at the plot.

In defence of a possible princely input into Donizetti's completed masterpiece there is the extraordinary dramatic codicil in the Viennese score which no one seems to know whether was, or was not, actually performed. Eight lines of climactic text for Maria in which – far from accepting the imperious dismissal by her husband - she flings back at Chevreuse: "Eternal shame? I don't love you you are a murderer…"

Onta eterna?...Io non t'amai!...
Io ti resi un omicida…
Per me infamia e morte avrai,
E fu pura la mia fé.
Cielo! Or usa del tuo dritto,
Questa vittima ti sfida…
Se obbedirti fu delitto,
È il tuo fulmine mercè.

Who supplied this brief text? It is nowhere to be found in the Lillo performance material, nor does it exist in the manuscript Cammarano furnished for the Pacini project at Venice in 1841. It is unique to Vienna and I suggest that this was an attempt to set the record straight at the behest of these exiled descendants disconcerted by this grotesque parody of the life of the famous duchess, their forbear, which Donizetti put into verse as a conciliatory gesture.

Presumably it fell at the first hurdle? Was it too brilliant? Too much an anti-climax? Was it too reminiscent of the earlier florid soprano outbursts of yore? Too like the convulsive froth of operatic tradition? Too late for the worm to turn? It was sung at Wexford not long ago with remarkable success. But the crux of all these melodramas lay with the final scene, the final coup. Donizetti dwelt long and lovingly upon the various alternative ways of ending this opera. Indeed, all three of the principal editions of *Maria di Rohan* have a different ending.

In and among the Paris edition (Théâtre-Italien 14 November 1843) Donizetti relinquished the austere authority of the original Vienna setting by uprating the distinctly irrelevant role of Armando di Gondi for Marietta Brambilla with a change of sex and two shiny new arias (neither adding anything to the plot); moving music up and down here and there throughout, revising some of the more important moments – sometimes for the better (the Act II *duetto* for Maria and Chalais), sometimes for the worse - most notably by amputating the key moment of the opera, that is turning Chalais' Act II slow *cabaletta*, sung while burning midnight oil in writing his crucial letter - the highly pessimistic 'E tu, se cado esanime' - into a brilliant, if giddily optimistic and irrelevant cap to Grisi's *preghiera* in Act III, 'Benigno il cielo arridere', an extravagance that got the Paris audience going at the expense of the argument. This version ends much the same as in Vienna. In the Naples edition of nearly a year later (Teatro S.Carlo 11 November 1844) Donizetti reinstated at least *some* of the Viennese economy to the score. Reverting to Cammarano's original title of *Il conte di Chalais* and with Gondi's pretensions reduced by 50% and heavily re-orchestrated, even though Eugenia Tadolini was indisposed (pregnant, she was heard in silence) and Gaetano Fraschini as Chalais was out of voice (giving a poor impact to his new *cavatina* 'La speme di quest'anima'), but hope revived, with Filippo Coletti's Chevreuse at an utterly optimum level the total effect of the opera was at last unassailable with a final enhanced dramatic climax that belongs to a later era of the stage: there is now no Mills and Boon invective like *"vita coll' infamia"* or *"donna infedel "* or anything like that, a brutal Chevreuse pushes aside Maria who tries to get between the two men, he drags Chalais through the secret door, two shots are heard and Chevreuse reappears with eyes blazing. Maria falls to the ground in a dead faint.

It was a version of this fantasy about her life and times that, for the first time, may have left her feeling that she might once have had a role on the stage.

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