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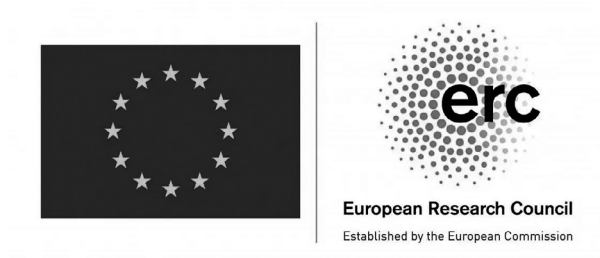
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DONIZETTI IN HABSBURG EUROPE

edited by

Barbara Babić, Axel Körner, Riccardo Mandelli

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Barbara Babić

Introduction.

Donizetti's tales across borders

1841, deep within a wild forest in Italy. A carriage on its way to Florence is suddenly ambushed by a band of brigands. Shots echo through the trees, followed by screams and pleas for mercy: a woman and her daughter are captured and plead for their lives. The captain of the brigands approaches and recognizes the woman: it's Maria, an opera singer. "You sang for me [...] at the Teatro San Carlo, I often listened to your Norma, Lucrezia Borgia, Gemma [di Vergy], and Lucia, and I was among those who applauded and shouted 'brava, brava'".¹ The woman, fearful for her fate, asks what he expects as ransom for her freedom: "one of your best arias",² he replies. And so, the forest turns into a natural stage and the diva appears as Lucia di Lammermoor. The power of her voice touches the hearts of the brigands, granting her freedom.

This is the plot of *Sangerinden* (*The Soprano*), a one-act drama premiered on 7 November 1841 at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen. As a brigand tale with an operatic touch, the piece combines pre-existing melodies written by composer Friedrich Kuhlau for the *Singspiel Røverborgen* (*The Brigands*, text by Adam Oehlenschläger, 1814) together with famous excerpts from Gaetano Donizetti's operas. Its subtitle—*Dramatic motif for an aria*—highlights the centrality of its master scene featuring the soprano Maria singing the aria "Perché non ho del vento". Originally composed by Donizetti for *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* (1834), it was widely used as a substitute aria for the cavatina "Regnava nel silenzio" in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835).³

The librettist of *Sangerinden* was none other than the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), a man equally at home in the worlds of fairy

1. "CAPITAINEN. I har jo siunget for mig [...] Tidt i Sanct Carlo, naar I spilled Norma, Lucrezia Borgia, Gemma og Lucia, Jeg hørte til og jubled' brava! brava!". HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, *Sangerinden. Dramatisk motiv for en arie, Musik af Fr. Kuhlau og G. Donizetti*, in *Andersens samlede værker, Skuespil*, 2, 1836–1842, edited by Klaus P. Mortensen (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 2005), pp. 507–513, here 511.

2. "Ja, vi fordre mange! Vi fordre een af dine bedste Sange!". ANDERSEN, *Sangerinden*, p. 511.

3. HILARY PORISS, "A madwoman's choice: aria substitution in *Lucia di Lammermoor*", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 13/1 (2001), pp. 1–28 and *Changing the Score. Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 102.

tales as he was in Europe's opera houses. The origins of this work can be traced back to his travels across Europe in the 1830s, punctuated by experiences full of rich theatrical encounters and musical discoveries. It was on his trip to Italy in the summer of 1834 that he heard of a "well-known anecdote, only a few months old" which involved the celebrated singer Maria Malibran and would go on to inspire the plot of *Sangerinden*. Reportedly, as Malibran's carriage had to stop in "one of the smaller Italian towns, she was encouraged by the crowd that assembled in a frenzy around her to sing an aria in the middle of the street; she obliged and was rewarded for it with the most enthusiastic cries of 'brava'".⁴

Sangerinden is not merely an homage to Maria Malibran, one of the operatic voices that most impressed the writer;⁵ it is, more specifically, a tribute to *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a subject matter that held particular significance in his biography. Indeed, Andersen was one of the first to adapt Walter Scott's novel for the stage: *Bruden fra Lammermoor*, with music by Ivar Frederik Bredal, premiered in Copenhagen in May 1832. His fascination with this topic endured for years, resurfacing a decade later in early 1840, when Donizetti's operatic version captivated him during his travels in the Habsburg lands. Akin to a sign of destiny, upon crossing the Alps and arriving in Bolzano/Bozen, Andersen noted that "in the inn there was as much Italian spoken as German, and on the table lay a playbill on which we read in large letters: *Lucia di Lammermoor, tragedia lirica*: we were near Italy, although yet on German ground".⁶ Interestingly enough, Donizetti's opera served to define a sort of liminal experience, crucial in bridging the Italian and German-speaking cultures unified under the Habsburg crown.

Andersen had to wait until his arrival in Vienna to experience the opera firsthand. On 11 June 1841, he rushed to the Kärntnertortheater to attend a

4. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, "Italiensk Musik, Sang og Theatervæsen" [Italian Music, Songs, and Theatres], *Søndagsblad*, 6 (8 February 1835), pp. 91–94. English translation by Jens Heselager, 2018. On Andersen and the operatic world see HENRIK ENGELBRECHT, *Hjertet brast i toner – med H. C. Andersen i operaen* (Copenhagen: henrikengelbrecht.dk, 2019).

5. "In Naples I heard Malibran for the first time. Her singing and acting surpassed anything which I had hitherto either heard or seen" ("In Neapel hörte ich zum ersten Mal die Malibran; ihr Gesang und Spiel übertraf Alles, was ich bisher gehört und gesehen hatte"). HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, *Das Märchen meines Lebens ohne Dichtung. Eine Skizze*, 1 (Leipzig: Carl B. Lorck, 1847), p. 104.

6. HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, *A Poet's Bazaar. Pictures of Travel in Germany, Italy, France, and the Orient* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), p. 39. "[...] i Vertshuset hørtes italiensk ligesaameget som tydsk, og paa Bordet laae en Placat fra Theatret, der stod med store Bogstaver: *Luzia di Lammermoor, tragedia lirica*; vi vare ved Italien, omendskjøndt endnu paa tydsk Grund". HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN, *En Digters Bazar* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1842), p. 66.

performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* featuring soprano Erminia Poggi-Frezzolini in the title role. Encountering Italian opera there proved to be a true epiphany for him:

During my stay I did not hear German opera here, but Italian, and that the most excellent I have ever heard. The male singers were Napoleone Moriani, Badiali, Donzelli; and the ladies Tadolini, Frezzolini, and Schoberlechner. I heartily wished that the Copenhageners might once hear such an Italian opera; they would and must be enchanted!⁷

Four months later, upon returning home, Andersen had brought with him a souvenir from Vienna: his drama *Sangerinden*. The piece clearly echoed the melodies of *Lucia* and served as a way to introduce a touch of Donizetti's music to his fellow countrymen. In fact, Andersen was slightly ahead of the curve. In the following year in 1842, a complete production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* resounded in Copenhagen's Hofteatret in a series of operatic nights staged by an Italian travelling company.⁸

Andersen's writings—his drama, the travel notes, and diary entries—offer a unique insight into the “Donizetti moment” that captured the Habsburg lands in c. 1840, not unlike the one that arose around Gioachino Rossini during the Congress era. Commenting on the opera season 1840–1841, the influential *Wiener Theaterzeitung* remarked on the number of productions dedicated to the composer, emphasizing that “everything written by Donizetti is considered a masterpiece”.⁹ Some months later, the commission of *Linda di Chamounix* (19 May 1842) and his appointment as *Hofkammercapellmeister und Hofcompositeur* (3 July 1842) officially marked Donizetti's connection to Vienna in both its essences: as a leading European operatic centre and as the *Haupt- und Residenzstadt* of the Habsburg monarchy.

7. ANDERSEN, *A Poet's Bazaar*, p. 333. “[...] under dette mit Ophold hørte jeg ingen tydsk Opera, men italiensk, og det den fortræffeligste jeg nogensinde har hørt; det var Sangerne Napoleone Moriani, Badiali, Donzelli og Sangerinderne Tadolini, Frezzolini og Schoberlechner! Jeg ønskede ret, at Kjøbenhavnerne engang maatte høre en saadan italiensk Opera, de vilde eg maatte henrives!”. ANDERSEN, *En Digters Bazar*, pp. 560–561.

8. *Lucia di Lammermoor* was played for the first time in Copenhagen's Court Theatre on 6 January 1842. For performance records see the online catalogue: <danskforfatterleksikon.dk>. Andersen himself stressed the arrival of Italian opera in Copenhagen in his travel report: “it was after my return home to Copenhagen that the first Italian company came here”. ANDERSEN, *A Poet's Bazaar*, p. 333. “Først ester min Hjemkomst til Kjøbenhavn, indtraf, som bekjendt, det første italienske Opera-Selskab hertil”. ANDERSEN, *En Digters Bazar*, p. 561.

9. “[...] alles, was Donizetti schreibt, als Meisterwerk gilt”. “Wien, k.k. Hoftheater nächst dem Kärntnerthore, Schluß und Uebersicht der italienischen Opernvorstellungen”, *Wiener Theaterzeitung* (2 July 1841), p. 698.

Donizetti's activity within the Habsburg context has increasingly drawn scholarly attention, as evidenced by recent contributions by Claudio Vellutini¹⁰ and Michael Jahn.¹¹ His music—both on- and offstage—had an impact in various centres of the vast empire, such as Vienna, Budapest, Agram/Zagreb, Prague, and Lemberg/L'viv, to name just a few. Furthermore, his imperial belonging influenced key moments of his career. These include his early steps on the *piazze operistiche* of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia and connections with the influential *impresari* Domenico Barbaia and Bartolomeo Merelli; his entry into Vienna's cultural circles, notably with his nomination as a member of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde;¹² contacts with local aristocrats and diplomats; and not least, his official courtly appointments that lasted until the end of his life. Indeed, in June 1846, by emphasizing Donizetti's "dual role as subject of the empire and chamber composer to His Majesty", Klemens von Metternich expressed his concerns over the composer's health in a letter to the Austrian Embassy in Paris. Metternich remarked that Donizetti "is generally beloved here, and everyone is interested in his fate [...] [His] loss would, in any case, be a tremendous blow to the theaters. Italy is so poor today in composers and performers that if things continue along this path, Italian opera will soon be reduced to silence".¹³

As Austria's chancellor and *mélomane*, Metternich endeavoured to give a voice to Italian opera and its singers within the Habsburg Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century, a mission that he defined as "a good episode in [his] life".¹⁴ Italian opera not only signified a certain prestige and

10. CLAUDIO VELLUTINI, *Entangled Histories. Opera and Cultural Exchange between Vienna and the Italian States after Napoleon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025); "Italian opera in Vormärz Vienna. Gaetano Donizetti, Bartolomeo Merelli and Habsburg cultural policies in the mid-1830s", in *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective. Reimagining Italianità in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Axel Körner and Paulo M. Köhl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 96–112.

11. *Donizetti und seine Zeit in Wien*, edited by Michael Jahn (Vienna: Der Apfel, 2010).

12. Donizetti to Raphael Georg Kiesewetter, Vienna, 14 June 1842, in GUIDO ZAVADINI, *Donizetti. Vita - musiche - epistolario* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1948), no. 427, p. 615.

13. "Donizetti est généralement aimé ici, et tout le monde s'intéresse à son sort [...] La perte de Donizetti en serait, dans tous cas, une fort grande pour les théâtres. L'Italie est aujourd'hui tellement pauvre en compositeurs et en exécutants, que si les choses continuent à aller dans ce train, l'opéra italien sera bientôt réduit au mutisme". Klemens von Metternich to Rudolf Apponyi, Vienna, 20 February 1846, in *Mémoires, documents et écrits divers laissés par le prince de Metternich*, 7, edited by Richard Metternich (Paris: Plon, 1883), pp. 165–166.

14. "April 8. What a good episode in my life is the establishment of the Italian opera here: it has at last succeeded, and I have gained a real and great victory". *Memoirs of Prince Metternich, 1815–1829*, 3, edited by Richard Metternich (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1881), p. 575.

cosmopolitanism. More significantly, it became instrumental in asserting the monarchy's supranational identity. As a *lingua franca* it was able to create cultural and intellectual connections between its many lands and peoples, as well as between its political centre and peripheries. This perspective is at the core of the research project *Opera and the Politics of Empire in Habsburg Europe, 1815–1914* based at Leipzig University, that animates this special issue of *Donizetti Studies*. The project addresses two distinct areas of scholarship: the transnational turn in opera studies and recent trends in Habsburg history, which have moved away from a narrow focus on ethnic and linguistic conflict to examine the role of imperial identity, national hybridity, dynastic loyalty, and factors such as religion, class and gender that cut across national ideology. In this context, examining Donizetti within the framework of Habsburg Europe opens up a wealth of new perspectives. First, it offers a deeper understanding of the interactions between Italian and Austrian territories, framing them as a dynamic of cultural exchange rather than one of oppression. Second, it allows for an exploration of the complex layers of belonging—municipal, regional, imperial, and European—that shaped the composer's career. Finally, it sheds light on a less explored chapter in music history, spanning from the *Vormärz* to the 1848 revolutions, revealing the importance of music culture during the reign of Emperor Ferdinand I (1835–1848).

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“8 avril. Quel bon episode dans ma vie que l’opéra italien, que j’ai enfin réussi à implanter ici ! C’est une grande et réelle Victoire que j’ai remportée”. *Mémoires, documents et écrits divers laissés par le prince de Metternich*, 3, edited by Richard Metternich (Paris: Plon, 1881), p. 540.

