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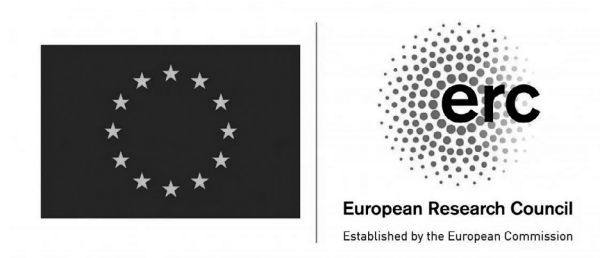
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## DONIZETTI IN HABSBURG EUROPE

edited by

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Riccardo Mandelli

## Malicious tongues and elusive success.

### Donizetti's reception in Milan in the 1820s

In the late 1860s, after a long career in Milan, the equestrian performer Gaetano Ciniselli decided it was time to seek his fortune elsewhere and moved to Russia, settling in St. Petersburg. His former theatre, the Politeama Ciniselli, had for nearly two decades animated Milan's cultural scene with its popular equestrian spectacles. Over time, the venue began alternating these performances with opera productions in response to the popularity of the genre. After the theatre was left vacant, the city seized the opportunity to construct a new opera house, further enriching Milan's operatic season. Count Francesco Dal Verme, a local nobleman, took the initiative to sponsor the project and entrusted the architect Giuseppe Pestagalli with the task. In an impressively short time, the new theatre was completed in just over a year, opening its doors in September 1872.<sup>1</sup>

The Milanese public, still captivated by the triumph of Verdi's *Aida* (Teatro alla Scala, 1872), clamoured for grand operas, represented by the nationalized category of *opera ballo*, the undisputed protagonist of the Italian operatic life in the 1870s.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting this enthusiasm, the decision was made to inaugurate the theatre with Donizetti's *La favorita*, a grand opera that had enjoyed repeated success in Milan's foremost venue, Teatro alla Scala, during the preceding decade.<sup>3</sup> With this choice the impresarios Giuseppe Lamperti and Arturo Merini sought to ensure a successful debut.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See FERDINANDO FONTANA, "I teatri di Milano", in *Milano 1881* (Milan: G. Ottino, 1881), pp. 241–272, pp. 248–250; and RAFFAELLA VALSECCHI, "Teatri d'opera a Milano: 1861–1880", in *Milano musicale 1861–1897*, edited by Bianca Maria Antolini (Lucca: Lim, 1999), pp. 3–20, p. 6.

2. See ALESSANDRO ROCCATAGLIATI, "Opera, opera-ballo e *grand opéra*: commistioni stilistiche e recezione critica nell'Italia teatrale di secondo Ottocento (1860–1870)", in *Opera e libretto II*, edited by Gianfranco Folena, Giovanni Morelli and Maria Teresa Muraro (Florence: Olschki, 1993), pp. 283–349.

3. The original French version, *La Favorite*, premiered in 1840 at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris. The Italian version, edited by Lucca, was presented at the Teatro alla Scala in the years 1860, 1861, 1865, 1866, 1867. See GIAMPIERO TINTORI, *Duecento anni di Teatro alla Scala. Cronologia. Opere-balletti-concerti, 1778–1977* (Bergamo: Grafica Gutenberg, 1979).

4. Giuseppe Lamperti (1834–1898), son of the singing teacher Francesco Lamperti (1813–1892), later impresario at Teatro alla Scala, Teatro Apollo (Rome), and Teatro San Carlo (Na-

However, *La favorita* was more than just a strategic commercial choice. The decision to open the new theatre with this specific opera was accompanied by plans to name the venue after its composer, who had passed away on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals of 1848.<sup>5</sup> This choice was emblematic of a broader post-unification effort to establish a national cultural tradition celebrating prominent Italian figures of the past.<sup>6</sup> A similar decision would be made a year later when, following the death of the poet Alessandro Manzoni, the recently opened Teatro della Commedia in piazza San Fedele—situated directly in front of the spot where the poet suffered his fatal fall—was renamed Teatro Manzoni.<sup>7</sup>

Those familiar with the current Teatro Dal Verme know that the story ultimately took a different turn. For unknown reasons, possibly connected to the preferences of the artists involved in the inaugural season, Donizetti's *La favorita* was set aside in favour of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*.<sup>8</sup> The confusion surrounding the naming of the new theatre, as well as the changes to the opening production, was vividly captured by Salvatore Farina in an article published in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* on the day of the theatre's inauguration:

Today—thank heavens!—the new theatre opens, and the matter of its name is settled. The impresarios were in great embarrassment over choosing a fitting name. *Teatro Bonaparte* meant nothing, *Teatro Nuovo* didn't mean enough, [...]

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ples). He authored an essay on copyright (*Sulla legge dei diritti di autore*, 1898). See ELISABETH FORBES, *Lamperti, Francesco*, in *Grove Music Online*, from <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.15924>>, last accessed 20 January 2025. No precise information could be found about Arturo Merini, but his activities can be traced in Ferrara. The two took initially the direction of the theatre for a period of nine years. See *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 27/19 (12 May 1872).

5. See *La perseveranza*, 14/4580 (30 July 1872).

6. The phenomenon, in relation to the toponymy of the streets, is discussed in SERGIO RAFFAELLI, "I nomi delle vie", in *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, edited by Mario Isnenghi (Rome: Laterza, 1996), pp. 215–242, pp. 219–223.

7. The renowned actor Ernesto Rossi (1827–1896) played a leading role in the event: "The Teatro della Commedia assumed its new title of Alessandro Manzoni yesterday. [...] After the drama, when the curtain was lifted, a bust of Manzoni veiled in black appeared. Rossi stepped forward carrying a laurel wreath, which he placed on the Poet's head after removing the veil. [...] Then, amidst a solemn silence, the distinguished actor recited the magnificent chorus from *Il Conte di Carmagnola*". "Il Teatro della Commedia ha assunto jeri il nuovo titolo di Alessandro Manzoni. [...] Dopo il dramma, levatosi il sipario, apparve il busto di Manzoni velato a bruno. Il Rossi si presentò, portando una corona d'alloro, che depose sul capo del Poeta, a cui aveva tolto il velo. [...] Poscia, in mezzo ad un religioso silenzio, l'egregio attore declamò lo stupendo coro del *Conte di Carmagnola*". *La perseveranza*, 15/4871 (31 May 1873).

8. Also, in the Italian version *Gli ugonotti*. See *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 27/28 (14 July 1872).



*Teatro Nuovo al Foro Bonaparte* clearly meant too much; the proposed name of *Donizetti* remained, but that would have been doing too much right. And so? So, the theatre will be named *Dal Verme*, after the owner. I bow to the wisdom of the theatre's godparents and hang my head in shame on behalf of my fellow brothers, for we did not think of it.<sup>9</sup>

Two years later, in 1874, Milan tried to make amends for the missed opportunity to pay homage to Donizetti by unveiling a statue of him in the foyer of Teatro alla Scala. Unfortunately, this effort by the city to celebrate the composer turned out to be similarly uninspiring:

Until the other day, I naïvely believed that inaugurating something required some kind of ceremony; the venture of La Scala has convinced me that, to inaugurate a statue, the statue itself suffices. The real ceremony [...] should have been a dignified performance of *Lucia*; but the masterpiece of the Bergamasque composer was staged as it is in the provinces [...]. The result was hesitations, uncertainties, and off-key notes. Donizetti is made of marble and cannot move; otherwise, he would have walked out the door.<sup>10</sup>

The composer's true sanctification would take place not in Milan but in his nearby birthplace of Bergamo. In 1875, Bergamo solemnly celebrated Donizetti with a cantata composed by the new Milanese star Amilcare Ponchielli, set to a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni.<sup>11</sup> This recognition was further ce-

9. "Oggi – siano lodati i cieli! – il nuovo teatro si apre, e la questione del battesimo è risolta. Gli impresari erano in grave imbarazzo per la scelta di un nome grazioso. *Teatro Bonaparte* non diceva nulla, *Teatro Nuovo* non diceva abbastanza, [...] *Teatro nuovo al Foro Bonaparte* diceva evidentemente troppo; rimaneva il battesimo proposto di *Donizetti*, ma sarebbe stato far troppe cose bene; dunque? Dunque il teatro s'intitolerà *Dal Verme*, dal nome del proprietario. M'inchino alla sapienza dei padrini, ed arrossisco per me e per i miei confratelli che non ci avevamo pensato". *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 27/37 (15 September 1872). The confusion had already become apparent by August, see *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 27/31 (4 August 1872), and the debate persisted until December, see *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 27/49 (8 December 1872).

10. "Fino all'altro giorno io credeva ingenuamente che per inaugurare qualche cosa occorresse una specie di cerimonia; l'impresa della Scala mi ha persuaso che, per inaugurare una statua, basta la statua. La vera cerimonia [...] doveva essere una rappresentazione decorosa della *Lucia*; ma il capolavoro del maestro bergamasco fu messo in iscena come si fa in provincia [...]. Ne risultarono tentennamenti, incertezze e stonature. Donizetti è di marmo e non si può muovere, se no avrebbe infilato l'uscio". *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 29/11 (15 March 1874). *Lucia di Lammermoor* was performed for a single evening on 10 March 1874, during which the statue, created by Giovanni Strazza and gifted to the theatre by the widow Giovannina Lucca, was presented. See *La perseveranza*, 16/5161 (11 March 1874).

11. The cantata *A Gaetano Donizetti* was performed at Teatro Riccardi in Bergamo on 13 September 1875.

mented in 1897, on the centenary of his birth, with the inauguration of a monument in his honour and the successful renaming of the local Teatro Riccardi into Teatro Donizetti.

Although the events of 1872 may seem tangential to the main subject of this article, which focuses on Donizetti's early reception in Milan during the 1820s, they are more closely connected than they might initially appear. The failure to celebrate the memory of Donizetti in post-unification Milan reflects the complex and ambivalent relationship between the composer and the city, a dynamic that persisted beyond his lifetime and well into the late nineteenth century. This strained relationship can be traced back to the 1820s when Donizetti was attempting to establish himself in Milan's challenging theatrical scene, then dominated by Rossini's works.

While the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia provided him with opportunities to stage his early operas in cities like Venice and Mantua, it was in Milan in 1822 that he encountered failure with *Chiara e Serafina*.<sup>12</sup> After this discouraging fiasco, he left for Naples, writing to his teacher Mayr: "by removing myself from Lombardy, I remove myself from the pasture of a thousand malicious tongues... I hope to recover the honour lost on the Olona in the bosom of Partenope, Heaven willing".<sup>13</sup> These "thousand malicious tongues" played a pivotal role in shaping Donizetti's early Milanese reception. It was not until his return in 1830, with the triumph of *Anna Bolena* at the Teatro Carcano, that he finally silenced his detractors, uniting them in agreement about his talent.

The reception of Donizetti in Milan during this decade is often dismissed as negligible, attributed to the alleged general aversion critics and audiences had to his music. However, this perspective overlooks his continuous presence in the city's operatic scene. Between 1822 and 1830, Milanese theatregoers had several opportunities to familiarize themselves with his works. For instance, his "melodramma giocoso" *L'aio nell'imbarazzo* was the highlight of La Scala's autumn season in 1826, with over thirty performances between August and November, and was reprised in the autumn of 1828 due to its en-

12. Donizetti's first theatrical appearances occurred between 1818 and 1819 with *Enrico di Borgogna* (Teatro di San Luca, Venice), *Le nozze in villa* (Imperial Regio Teatro, Mantua) and *Pietro il Grande zar delle Russie* (Teatro di San Samuele, Venice). See LUCA ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2022), pp. 515–516. For a study on *Chiara e Serafina*, see LIVIO ARAGONA, "Un processo d'appello per *Chiara e Serafina*", in *Chiara e Serafina. Qui comincia l'avventura*, edited by Livio Aragona (Bergamo: Fondazione Teatro Donizetti, 2022), *Quaderni della Fondazione Teatro Donizetti*, 65, pp. 9–21.

13. "[...] togliendomi alla Lombardia, mi tolgo il pascolo a mille lingue maledicenti... Spero risarcire in Seno a Partenope, L'onore perduto Sull'Olona, Lo voglia il cielo". *Gaetano Donizetti. Carteggi e documenti 1797–1830*, edited by Paolo Fabbri (Bergamo: Fondazione Donizetti, 2018), no. 1822.29, p. 499 (11 December 1822). Parthenope and Olona are metonymies for Naples and Milan, respectively.

during popularity. Additionally, Milan hosted the first revival of the successful *L'esule di Roma*, which had premiered in Naples a few months earlier. But it was not all a bed of roses, *Il borgomastro di Saardam* ended in miserable failure, with only a single performance.

At this point, it is necessary to make an important distinction. While critics' voices can be easily traced through the detailed reviews published in newspapers, the general response of audiences cannot be documented with the same precision. A particularly harsh review of an opera did not necessarily correspond to the feelings of the wider theatre-going public. Especially in the 1820s, revivals of operas, in cities that had not been the site of their premiere, were often met with indifference by critics, particularly if the composer was not personally involved in the production. In Milan, despite clear signs of audience appreciation—evidenced by the extended runs of Donizetti's operas—critics frequently downplayed his abilities, emphasising his supposed lack of originality and rarely acknowledging his growing prestige elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, Federico Fornoni has highlighted the persistence of a strong emphasis on the principle of novelty since the critical reception of Donizetti's first stage work, *Enrico di Borgogna* (1818). However, he argues that many of the composer's musical and dramaturgical choices, initially met with harsh criticism, ultimately contributed to the development of a precise concept of musical theatre, one that engaged with European aesthetic trends and theatrical techniques, thereby helping to shape the landscape that emerged after the Rossinian era.<sup>15</sup>

Within this framework, I argue that the composer's difficulties in penetrating Milan's cultural life were not due to his lack of originality or expertise, as the local press suggested. Instead, they stemmed from a deeply rooted bias against composers of his generation, who, during the Restoration, were frequently accused of plagiarism and a general lack of innovation.

This article revisits this critical decade, shedding new light on the challenges Donizetti faced in navigating Milan's competitive opera market. Drawing on archival research conducted in Milan, articles published in the periodical press, and extensive documentation published in the recent edition of *Carteggi e documenti* by Paolo Fabbri,<sup>16</sup> as well as Luca Zoppelli's new monograph,<sup>17</sup> it examines the obstacles Donizetti encountered in the early stages

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14. With the sole exception of the successful debut of *L'esule di Roma* in Naples. See *Gazzetta di Milano*, 16 (16 January 1828).

15. FEDERICO FORNONI, *Oltre il belcanto. Direttrici drammaturgiche del teatro donizettiano* (Milan: Musicom.it, 2020), p. 15.

16. Gaetano Donizetti. *Carteggi e documenti*.

17. ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*.

of his career and explores what it meant for a composer of his generation to gain recognition in Milan. Furthermore, the composer's limited interest in the Milanese revivals of his works is considered in relation to the consistent failure to engage with the multiple layers of Milan's vibrant cultural life, which extended far beyond the renowned Teatro alla Scala.

The article presents the Milanese production of *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (1826) and the revival of *L'esule di Roma* (1828) at the Teatro alla Scala as case studies. Through philological and historiographical analysis, it contextualises the challenges these works faced, considering both their performances and critical reception. Finally, the success of *Anna Bolena* (1830) is reassessed in light of these findings, offering a broader perspective on Milan's theatrical life during the 1820s and illustrating how Donizetti's rise to success extended beyond the city centre and into its suburbs.

#### THE MILANESE VERSION OF *L'AIO NELL'IMBARAZZO* (1826)

*L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* was staged at the Teatro alla Scala at the end of August 1826, marking nearly four years since Donizetti's music had last resounded in the theatre. Although the opera itself may have been unfamiliar to the public, its plot was undoubtedly well-known. The play of the same name by Giovanni Giraud, adapted into a libretto by Iacopo Ferretti and set to music by Donizetti two years earlier in Rome (Teatro Valle, 1824), had enjoyed remarkable popularity in the Lombard capital.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1820 and 1826, Giraud's play was performed numerous times in various venues, including the minor theatres Teatro Re, Teatro Lentasio, Teatro Carcano, and the Anfiteatro de' Giardini pubblici, as well as the Imperial Regio Teatro alla Canobbiana, by over ten different comic companies. The *Gazzetta di Milano* highlighted this widespread popularity, reporting that the play was so well known that there was no need to comment on the libretto, and even drawing a connection between Andrea Bertolucci, the bass singer portraying the tutor Don Gregorio in the opera, and Luigi Vestri, the celebrated actor who had gained fame for his portrayal of the same character in Giraud's play.<sup>19</sup>

Following the opera's premiere in Rome in 1824, Donizetti revised his work into a new version (known under the title *Don Gregorio*) which was successfully performed in Naples (Teatro del Fondo, 1826).<sup>20</sup> Letters from the

18. The play *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* was published in Milan in 1825 as the first work in a five-volume collection of Giovanni Giraud's works. See GIOVANNI GIRAUD, *Commedie*, 5 vols. (Milan: Manini, 1825).

19. *Gazzetta di Milano*, 237 (25 August 1826).

20. See MARIA CHIARA BERTIERI, "L'Ajo alla napoletana", in *Don Gregorio*, edited by Livio

composer reveal that after completing this revision, he intended to present the opera in Bergamo, possibly through his connections with the impresario Paolo Agazzi.<sup>21</sup> This effort likely paved the way for the opera's eventual arrival in Milan.<sup>22</sup>

The opera's plot centres around four main characters: an authoritarian father, Don Giulio Antiquati, a marquis who attempts, by any means, to protect his son Enrico from the perceived dangers of romantic entanglements; Gilda, Enrico's lover; and Gregorio, the son's tutor, who ultimately manages to help the young couple overcome Don Giulio's opposition. While Giraud's play—which Ferretti's libretto followed almost to the word—might have eased Donizetti's return into Milan's musical scene after his failure in 1822, critics still dwelled on his perceived and unforgivable lack of originality. The *Corriere delle dame* described the opera as an anthology of motifs by Rossini, Mercadante and Pacini.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the *Gazzetta di Milano* criticized an aria performed by Giovanni Giordani in the role of Don Giulio, remarking: "An aria from the second act [...] could be transplanted directly into *Semiramide*. In hearing and seeing [Giordani], he seemed like Assur, wearing an old-fashioned wig and dressed in sword-bearing attire".<sup>24</sup> While the claim that the aria in question (Act 2, "Sugli occhi tuoi, spietata") bore Rossinian inspiration is not entirely unfounded, the accusation that Donizetti lacked originality is misplaced. In fact, a closer examination reveals that Donizetti did not compose that aria at all. It was taken from Giovanni Pacini's *La schiava di Bagdad* (Turin, 1820) and inserted into the opera most likely under the request of the singer Giovanni Giordani himself. Adapting or substituting arias to suit performers' preference was a very common practice at the time, further complicating attributions of authorship and challenging simplistic critiques of Donizetti's creativity.

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Aragona and Federico Fornoni (Bergamo: Fondazione Donizetti, 2007), *Quaderni della Fondazione Donizetti*, 7, pp. 17–23.

21. This intention eventually did not take place. The opera would become the first of Donizetti's work to be performed in Bergamo, but not until 1830, thanks to the efforts of impresario Bartolomeo Merelli. See *Gaetano Donizetti. Carteggi e documenti*, pp. 611–614.

22. Even though no primary sources are available, it is important to note that impresario Domenico Barbaia was active during this period in both Milan and Naples, making it highly likely that he facilitated the introduction of Donizetti's opera in Milan.

23. "An anthology of Rossinian, Mercadantian, and Pacinian motifs, for the many flowers Donizetti gathered from those gardens, grafting them clumsily into a work he called his own". "Un'antologia Rossiniana, Mercadantesca e Pacinesca pei tanti fiori che da que' giardini raccolse il Donizetti, innestandoli con poca destrezza nel lavoro che diede per suo". *Corriere delle dame*, 34 (26 August 1826).

24. "Un'aria dell'atto secondo, [...] si potrebbe di pianta portar nella *Semiramide*. Nell'udirlo e vederlo [Giordani] pareami *Assur* in parrucca all'antica e in abito da spada". *Gazzetta di Milano*, 237 (25 August 1826).

What is certain is that the version performed in Milan differed from both the Neapolitan revision and the original premiere in Rome. Furthermore, the widespread circulation that the opera had in this form, makes it plausible to talk about a Milanese version of the work.<sup>25</sup> A closer look at the libretto printed in Milan<sup>26</sup> reveals the following alterations: Act 1. Don Giulio's cavatina "Basso, basso il cor mi dice" was replaced by the aria "Non è ver, che ognor la prole", not authored by Donizetti; Act 2. Donizetti composed a new duet for soprano and tenor ("Sempre a te fedele"), following which Pacini's aria was interpolated.

In the first act, the aria "Non è ver, che ognor la prole" originated from an opera based on the same source, with a libretto by Alberto Scribani, and music by the amateur composer Daniele Nicelli.<sup>27</sup> Dedicated to the Duchess of Parma, Marie Louise, the opera was staged in Piacenza in 1825, but no further performances are recorded. A key connection between the Piacenza and Milan productions is that in both, Don Giulio was performed by the bass Giovanni Giordani. However, it remains uncertain whether the version heard in Milan was actually Nicelli's music. Later that year, Giovanni Ricordi published the aria as a single piece, attributing the music to Donizetti's cousin Giovanni Gorini.<sup>28</sup> Around the same time, Francesco Lucca published Nicelli's original aria performed in Piacenza.<sup>29</sup> In the second act, in order to accommodate the new duet for Enrico and Gilda and Pacini's aria, the third scene was restructured into a more complex system, as can be seen in the table below.

25. For a detailed account of the productions in Rome and Naples, see MARIA CHIARA BERTIERI, "Roma–Napoli solo andata: Il caso *L'aio nell'imbarazzo–Don Gregorio*", in *Musica di ieri esperienza d'oggi. Ventidue studi per Paolo Fabbri*, edited by Maria Chiara Bertieri and Alessandro Roccatagliati (Lucca: Lim, 2018), pp. 273–296.

26. See *L'aio nell'imbarazzo. Melodramma giocoso da rappresentarsi nell'I.R. Teatro alla Scala l'autunno dell'anno 1826* (Milan: Fontana, 1826).

27. Daniele Nicelli (1798–1879), a local nobleman, studied music with Stanislao Mattei in Bologna. See GASPARE NELLO VETRO, "Nicelli, Daniele", in *Dizionario della musica e dei musicisti del Ducato di Parma e Piacenza*, available at <<https://www.lacasadellamusica.it/vetro>>, last accessed 16 September 2025. For the libretto, see *L'aio nell'imbarazzo. Farsa tratta dalla commedia del conte Giovanni Giraud da Alberto Scribani e posta in musica dal maestro Daniele Nicelli per essere rappresentata nel teatro di Piacenza il Carnevale 1824–25* ([Piacenza]: Majno, [1824]).

28. G[IOVANNI] B[ATTISTA] GORINI, *Cav[atina]. Non è ver, per B., intercalata nell'opera "L'aio nell'imbarazzo" di Donizetti* (Milan: Ricordi, [1826]), plate 2954. Gorini (1805–1863, also spelled Corini) was "maestro al cembalo" and composer. Together with Donizetti, he was a pupil of Mayr in Bergamo. After studying from 1813 to 1824, he embarked on a career as a composer. See *Gaetano Donizetti. Carteggi e documenti*, p. 122.

29. *Non è ver che ognor la prole. Cavatina nell'"Aio nell'imbarazzo" del m.o Daniele Nicelli; eseguita in Piacenza dal sig.r Gio. B. Giordani* (Milan: Lucca, [1827]), plate 0093.

| Rome, Teatro Valle (1824)  | Milan, Teatro alla Scala (1826)  |
|--|--|
| SCENA III, Gilda, ed Enrico,<br>indi il Marchese Giulio                  | SCENA TERZA, Enrico e Gilda  |
| Recitativo [Gilda, Enrico]<br>“Quando avrò fra le braccia il figlio mio” | Recitativo [Gilda, Enrico]<br>“Quando avrò fra le braccia il figlio<br>mio”              |
|  | Duetto [Gilda, Enrico]<br>“Sempre fedele a te”   |
|  | SCENA QUARTA, Don Giulio di dentro,<br>e detti   |
| Recitativo [Gilda, Enrico, Don Giulio]<br>“Aprite... aprite”             | Recitativo [Gilda, Enrico, Don Giulio]<br>“Aprite... aprite!”                            |
|  | SCENA QUINTA, Don Giulio afferra Gil-<br>da [...]  |
| Terzetto [Gilda, Don Giulio, Enrico]<br>“Signor... Se parli, o perfida”  | Recitativo [Gilda, Enrico, Don Giulio]<br>“Perfida! Se un accento”                       |
| Duetto [Gilda, Don Giulio, Enrico]<br>“Donna rea, mi leggi in fronte”    | Recitativo e Aria [Don Giulio]<br>“Sconsigliata ignoravi – Sugli occhi<br>tuoi spietata” |

Instead of the more dynamic and seamless succession of recitativo, terzetto, and duetto, the scene was divided in two distinct *pezzi chiusi*: the newly composed duet and Pacini's aria. This modification not only disrupted the dynamic, the fast-paced rhythm characteristic of the entire opera, but also introduced an abrupt stylistic shift in Don Giulio's character.

In both Giraud's play and Ferretti's libretto, Don Giulio is portrayed as a stubborn and strict father, burdened by the responsibility of raising his children. This characterization is evident from his first appearance in Act 1, in a duet with Gregorio (“Le dirò... così a quattr'occhi”), where his paternal philosophy is epitomized in an archetypal *duetto buffo*. The piece distinguishes itself by the typical use of syllabic singing on a single repeated note that leaves the melodic line to the orchestra—a style that Donizetti would still be employ-

ing twenty years later in *Don Pasquale*. It is worth noting that both Don Giulio and Gregorio share the same vocal style, contributing to the opera's overall light-hearted tone, while the task of convening the father's stern character is left primarily to the libretto.

Donizetti's depiction of the character is disrupted in Act 2, where the interpolation of Pacini's aria marks a dramatic turning point transforming Don Giulio's vocal line to a more declamatory and melismatic, reminiscent of Rossini's Assur in *Semiramide*, or more generally of a style associated with *opera seria*.<sup>30</sup> While this could represent Don Giulio's inner turmoil—since it is the first time that he is confronted with his worst fear, the son's lover—it affects the opera to such an extent that it did not go unnoticed by the critic writing in the *Gazzetta di Milano*. The precision with which the press in this period consistently reported these interpolations is in stark contrast to the critic's failure to recognize that Donizetti had nothing to do with the aria. It leads to the conclusion that the critic was unfamiliar with the original Pacini music, since *La schiava di Bagdad* had been performed only briefly the year before at the Teatro alla Canobbiana, with little success.

In the interpolation, the aria's text was slightly altered to better fit the context of *L'aio nell'imbarazzo* (see the table on the front page). In Pacini's opera, the aria was sung by a caliph, who, upon learning from his confidant Tamas that a young man (Nadir) intends to steal his beloved Zora, reacts with fury against the treacherous couple. It is evident that the triangle formed by the caliph, Zora and Nadir parallels vocally with the one involving Don Giulio, Gilda and Enrico. Alongside the necessary modifications to the text, the interventions of Tamas and the chorus (*pertichini*) were eliminated.<sup>31</sup>

While it is likely that these modifications stemmed from Giordani's request for a larger number of solo parts in the opera, evidence suggests they were introduced specifically in Milan. This assumption is supported by comparisons of the surviving *libretti* from various productions. No trace of these changes appears in any of the librettos published prior to the Milanese perfor-

30. In the original duet for Gilda and Don Giulio “Donna rea, mi leggi in fronte”, composed by Donizetti for this scene, the style did not shift so abruptly, and Don Giulio still maintained a more syllabic vocal line.

31. The original music and text of Pacini's aria are preserved in a later manuscript copy, see I-Nc, H.4.5, available at [internetculturale.it](http://internetculturale.it) (vol. 2, ff. 40v–58v), last accessed 16 September 2025. Adaptations of the aria, made for Donizetti's opera, are documented in I-OS, Mss. Mus. B 4276. Pacini's aria was performed in *L'aio nell'imbarazzo*'s production at the Teatro Regio in Turin in 1984, both CD and DVD recordings are available.



mance of August 1826, including the one printed in Venice for the performance at the Teatro San Benedetto earlier that same year.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, while both the modified version of Don Giulio's cavatina and the original one soon disappeared from the first act, the changes made to the third scene of the second act became an integral part of Donizetti's opera.

| <i>La schiava di Bagdad</i><br>(Turin, 1820)   |  | <i>L'aio nell'imbarazzo</i><br>(Milan, 1826)   |
|--|--|--|
| <p>CALIFFO<br/>Sugl'occhi suoi l'ingrata<br/>vedrà il rival trafitto<br/>invano al suol prostrata<br/>mi chiederà pietà.<br/>Bagnata di quel sangue<br/>anch'essa al suol cadrà.</p> <p>TAMAS E CORO<br/><i>Bagnata di quel sangue*</i><br/><i>anch'essa al suol cadrà.</i></p> <p>CALIFFO<br/>In chi fidavi o credule [<i>sic</i>]<br/>Il più costante amore!<br/>Come disparve rapida<br/>la pace del tuo core!<br/>Il duolo di quest'anima<br/>eterno oh Dio! sarà.<br/>Su ti sveglia o mio coraggio,<br/>si sopprima il vile affetto;<br/>parli sol, m'avvampi in petto<br/>la vendetta, ed il furor.</p> <p>TUTTI<br/>Piomberà su tutti i rei<br/>il pugnol vindicator.</p> |  | <p>DON GIULIO<br/>Sugli occhi tuoi, spietata<br/>punir saprò l'indegno;<br/>invano al suol prostrata<br/>mi chiederai pietà.<br/>Punito un tanto eccesso<br/>dal mio furor sarà.</p> <p>A chi de' figli, o credulo,<br/>fidavi il bel candor?<br/>Come disparve rapida<br/>la pace, oh Dio! dal cor!<br/><i>Come disparve rapida</i><br/><i>la pace, oh Dio! dal cor!</i><br/>Si punisca omai l'indegno,<br/>si punisca un vile affetto.<br/>Parli sol, m'avvampi il petto<br/>la vendetta ed il furor.</p> <p>Ah! Su voi del cielo il nembro<br/>pregherò vindicator.</p> |

\* The verses in italics are the one repeated according to music.

This version circulated in later performances to such an extent that Pacini's authorship gradually faded, and the aria began to be attributed to Donizetti. A strik-

32. See *L'aio nell'imbarazzo. Melodramma giocoso in due atti a sette voci da rappresentarsi nel Teatro di San Benedetto la primavera dell'anno 1826* (Venice: Rizzi, [1826]).

ing example can be found in the manuscript preserved in Dresden, which pertains to the 1828 production of the opera at the court theatre. While other additions, such as an aria taken from Michele Carafa's *Berenice in Siria*, are explicitly acknowledged in the manuscript, Pacini's aria is not attributed to its original composer.<sup>33</sup>

The critic's apparent confusion around the authorship shows that it had existed since the modifications had first appeared, later this was compounded by the publisher Giovanni Ricordi. In 1826, through the mediation of Giovanni Simone Mayr,<sup>34</sup> Ricordi published the piano reduction of the opera's Sinfonia, along with vocal scores for both the *buffo* duet and the newly composed duet.<sup>35</sup> As for the modifications, Ricordi published the aria composed by Gorini, while Pacini's aria was issued separately as belonging to *La schiava di Bagdad*, although it retained the lyrics and characters of Donizetti's opera.<sup>36</sup> This editorial decision perpetuated confusion in later editions of the vocal score, where Pacini's aria was often mistakenly attributed to Donizetti.<sup>37</sup>

The difficulties involved in reconstructing the Milanese version demonstrate that those who judged Donizetti's abilities did not always know what they were listening to at the theatre. It shows that the accusations of a lack of originality were misdirected at Donizetti, and (if at all) they should have been placed at the feet of Pacini. Furthermore, the confusion confirms that its critics were correct when they described the opera as an "anthology" of various works, just that Donizetti could not be held responsible for this. While Donizetti acknowledged how adhering to Rossini's style was essential to meet audience expectations, this was irrelevant for the aria in question.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the critics' failure to appreciate Donizetti's music, *L'ao nell'imbarazzo* became the highlight of La Scala's autumn season, remaining on stage continuously from its debut in August until November, and being performed again for the season's closing evening. In fact, the *Corriere delle dame*, despite

33. See *Il governo della casa (Das Hausregiment). Melodramma giocoso in due atti da rappresentarsi nel Reale Teatro di Sassonia* (Dresden: 1828). For the music, see D-DI, Mus.4864-F-503, available at <<https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/dlf/97354/1>> (pp. 703–733), last accessed 16 September 2025.

34. See Gaetano Donizetti. *Carteggi e documenti*, pp. 608–609.

35. GAETANO DONIZETTI, *L'ao nell'imbarazzo, Opera per Pffe. Sinfonia*, plate 2841; *Duetto, Sempre fedele a te, per S. e T.*, plate 2919; *Duetto, Le dirò così a quattr'occhi, per Br. e B.*, plate 2953 (Milan: Ricordi, [1826]). See Gaetano Donizetti. *Carteggi e documenti*, p. 609.

36. See GIOVANNI PACINI, *La schiava di Bagdad, Opera per canto. Scena ed aria, Sugli occhi tuoi, per B.* (Milan: Ricordi, [1826]), plate 2920. The score features Don Giulio, Gilda and Enrico as characters and begins with Ferretti's lyrics "Aprite... aprite".

37. See GAETANO DONIZETTI, *L'ao nell'imbarazzo, Canto e pianoforte* (Milan: Ricordi, [1878]), plate 45735.

38. ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*, p. 79.

its earlier criticism, nevertheless reported on the general success of Donizetti's opera.<sup>39</sup> In this context, it is of note that the opera was not always presented in its entirety. On several evenings, only the second act was performed, paired with *Amazilia* by Giovanni Pacini, *Camilla* by Ferdinando Paer, or the newly composed *Il precipizio* by Nicola Vaccai. This practice—combining works that earned greater recognition among the public with less successful ones in the same evening—was frequently employed to satisfy the *palchettisti*, the owners of the boxes.<sup>40</sup> In fact, throughout the 1820s, Rossini not only dominated opera seasons but also served as a reliable gap filler when new works failed or their premieres were delayed. A similar fate befell Donizetti's *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*.

In Rome and seemingly unaware of the modifications to his opera, Donizetti commented with detachment in a letter to Mayr:

I read the article in the *Giornale delle dame* about my poor *Ajo*... I already knew what awaited me in Milan, so be it. It didn't displease, and that's all. In Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, Malta, Messina, and Madrid, it pleased greatly, and if it didn't in Milan, I'm certainly not going to cry about it.<sup>41</sup>

The failure of his opera in 1822 remained vivid in the composer's memory, who, with feigned indifference, maintained a cold distance from Milan and its public throughout the 1820s.

#### THE MILANESE REVIVAL OF *L'ESULE DI ROMA* (1828)

The year 1828 marked a turning point for the presence of Donizetti's music in the Lombard capital, as three of his works were presented at Teatro alla Scala. That year, *Il borgomastro di Saardam* was scheduled as the second opera in the Carnival season, *L'esule di Roma* was staged at the same theatre during the summer, and *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* returned later in the autumn.

The year, however, began inauspiciously. *Il borgomastro di Saardam* suffered the already mentioned catastrophic failure on its single performance on 2 January. This outcome was foretold by Vincenzo Bellini, who was in Milan

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39. "An outcome that can be described as fortunate; after the performance, the leading actors were repeatedly called back to the stage with applause by the satisfied audience". "Un esito che può dirsi fortunato, dopo lo spettacolo vennero con frequenti plausi chiamati i primi attori dal soddisfatto pubblico". *Corriere delle dame*, 34 (26 August 1826).

40. See CARLIDA STEFFAN – LUCA ZOPPELLI, *Nei palchi e sulle sedie. Il teatro musicale nella società italiana dell'Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2023), pp. 104–111.

41. "Hò Letto il giornale delle Dame sul mio povero ajo... Lo sapeva già che questo a milano mi aspettava, Pazienza. Non dispiacque, e basta. A Palermo, a Napoli, a Roma, a Firenze, a Malta, a Messina, a Madrid, ha fatto piacere e assai, se a milano nol fece, per questo non piango di certo". *Gaetano Donizetti. Carteggi e documenti*, no. 1826.13, p. 623 (30 September 1826).

at the time. In a letter to Francesco Florimo, Bellini commented on rumours he had heard about the dress rehearsal:

Monday, they held the dress rehearsal for Donizetti's *Il borgomastro*, and tonight it premieres. I didn't attend any of the rehearsals, but those who were at the dress rehearsal told me that there's nothing in the first act, and that in the second act there's a duet that might, just might, please the audience. Overall, it will flop.<sup>42</sup>

Bellini's remarks reflected the prevailing prejudice against Donizetti, which had been evident in his reception two years earlier. According to the *Gazzetta di Milano*, the production was intended as a diversion to allow singers involved in Rossini's *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* some rest.<sup>43</sup> A subsequent review in the same periodical confirmed Bellini's prediction, describing the disastrous evening and once again criticizing Donizetti's perceived lack of originality.

This drama provoked such hilarity that, to avoid compromising public health, it was decided not to deprive the audience of their breath for more than one evening. As for the music, from the very first notes of the arias, duets, trios, or finales, one could already predict the rest. It was either Cimarosa, Rossini, Mercadante, or Pacini—poor composers robbed by Donizetti, and in what fashion!<sup>44</sup>

A comparison of the libretto printed in Milan with that of the 1827 premiere at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples reveals numerous cuts and textual modifications, particularly to the parts in Neapolitan dialect, though no specific additions or interpolations were made. Nicola Vaccai, who was present in the theatre, reported in a letter to a friend that after the first act, accompanied by whistles, a person came out from the stage to announce that, as the performance had not met with the public's approval, some pieces would be omitted in the second act.<sup>45</sup>

42. "Lunedì si fece la pruova generale dell'opera di Donizetti il Borgomastro e questa sera v'è in scena: io non ho inteso nessuna pruova, ma chi fù alla pruova generale mi disse che nel primo atto non v'è niente, che nel 2do vi è un duetto che forse forse piacerà, nel complesso farà fiasco". *Vincenzo Bellini. Carteggi*, edited by Graziella Seminara (Florence: Olschki, 2017), p. 80 (2 January 1828).

43. Rossini's opera opened the season on 26 December 1827.

44. "Questo dramma destava tale ilarità, che per non compromettere la pubblica salute, non si volle per più d'una sera far *perdere il fiato* a tanti uditori. – Se parliam della musica, alla prima battuta delle arie, dei duetti, dei terzetti, dei finali, si sapeva già il resto. Erano o Cimarosa, o Rossini, o Mercadante o Pacini i poveri svaligiati dal Donizetti, e in che modo!". *Gazzetta di Milano*, 5 (5 January 1828).

45. *Il carteggio personale di Nicola Vaccai che si conserva presso la Biblioteca Comunale Filologica di Tolentino*, edited by Jeremy Commons (Turin: Giancarlo Zedde, 2008), p. 688.

Donizetti reacted to the failure of *Il borgomastro di Saardam* with more detachment than he did following the rejection of *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*. Writing to Mayr, he remarked cryptically: "Milan... I'll say nothing! *Il borgomastro* had over 35 performances in Naples, and it's still being performed there... Who knows if, come summer, they won't see *L'esule di Roma* with the same cast and applaud, those who now boo..."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the production of *L'esule di Roma* was already planned for the following summer. As we shall see, it represented another significant chapter in Donizetti's reception in Milan.

While *Il borgomastro di Saardam* failed spectacularly in Milan, *L'esule di Roma* enjoyed significant success in Naples, where it premiered at the Teatro San Carlo on 1 January 1828. One of the highlights of the opera's debut was the bass Luigi Lablache, a singer with whom Donizetti would go on to establish a fruitful collaboration. Lablache was engaged for the Milanese production scheduled for the summer, which appears to have already been planned by February, as indicated in Donizetti's letter to Mayr.

The summer during which *L'esule di Roma* was performed could be considered a season designed specifically for Lablache. Upon his arrival in Milan in May—an event highly anticipated in the press—the theatre prepared productions of Domenico Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* and Rossini's *La Cenerentola* specially for him. Later in August the same was done with *La prova di un'opera seria* by Francesco Gnecco.<sup>47</sup>

Donizetti's new opera clearly benefited from Lablache's Milanese season, a favourable circumstance comparable to the success of *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* in 1826. Could this be the composer's long-awaited success in Milan? Moreover, the work's positive reception in Naples, which had been reported in the local press, helped build anticipation among Milanese audiences, opening a way for Donizetti to finally gain the recognition the city had long denied him.

*L'esule di Roma* premiered in Milan on 12 July and remained on stage for no less than ten performances, continuing until the end of the month. Originally scheduled for early July, the premiere had been delayed due to Lablache's indisposition. While Lablache took the role of senator Murena, the exiled Set-

46. "Milano... Non dirò nulla! Il Borgomastro a Napoli si è fatto per più di 35 recite, e tutt'ora si fa... Chi sa che in estate non vedano il proscritto [*L'esule di Roma*] cogli stessi attori, ed applaude, chi ora fischia...". Gaetano Donizetti. *Carteggi e documenti*, no. 1828.4, p. 686 (2 February 1828).

47. In Gnecco's opera Lablache took the leading role of the Maestro di musica and performed an aria inserted into the Sinfonia which he sang directly from the orchestra. See *Gazzetta di Milano*, 218 (5 August 1828). Furthermore, the singer's popularity was such that critics could not agree whether he would better suit the role of Dandini or Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola*, as his performance was considered remarkable in both cases. See, *Gazzetta di Milano*, 151 (30 May 1828).

timio was to be performed by tenor Berardo Winter, reprising his role from the Naples premiere, while Argelia, the senator's daughter was taken by soprano Henriette Méric-Lalande. Three days after the premiere the *Gazzetta di Milano* reported on the novelty presented at the Teatro alla Scala:

With *L'ao nell'imbarazzo* and *Il borgomastro di Saardam*, Donizetti became known among us for his great fondness for imitations. Constant in this love, even in *L'esule di Roma*, he showed himself unfaithful only briefly. In a trio, in a duet, and in the largo of an aria, one can recognize an inspired student of Mayr; in the rest, there are more recollections than inspirations.<sup>48</sup>

The critic proceeded with an unenthusiastic assessment of the libretto. The text lacked formal quality and it was full of scenes familiar from other operas. The few comments on the music itself consistently returned to the accusation of imitation. Furthermore, the critic reported that during the second performance Lablache omitted his cavatina on the first act, likely due to his poor health, thus sparing the audience from yet another musical emulation.

The terzetto that concludes the first act—considered a masterpiece of modern opera theatre by critics in Naples—was, as Luca Zoppelli observed, decisive to establishing Donizetti as a key figure in the Italian operatic market.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, its originality went unnoticed in Milan, where critics limited themselves to reporting on the success it achieved with the audience.

The role of the senator Murena embodied the opera's novelty. Donizetti tailored the role to Lablache's specific abilities, offering him a dramatic and highly expressive vocal part that relied heavily on its performer's acting skills.<sup>50</sup> It is clear why, in Milan, no other singer could take on the role. Later, in December, when the opera was scheduled to return to the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, the production had to be postponed due to Lablache's delayed arrival in the city.<sup>51</sup> In Milan, however, Lablache did not receive the same acclaim that he was granted following the premiere in Naples. While the reviews did

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48. "Coll'Aio nell'imbarazzo e col Borgomastro di Saardam Donizetti si fece conoscer fra noi per una gran tenerezza alle imitazioni. Costante in questo suo amore anche nell'*Esule di Roma*, non si mostrò infedele che alla sfuggita. In un terzetto, in un duetto e nel largo d'un aria si riconosce un allievo ispirato di Mayr; nel resto ci ha più ricordanze che ispirazioni". *Gazzetta di Milano*, 197 (15 July 1828).

49. ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*, p. 158.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

51. See *Gazzetta di Milano*, 359 (24 December 1828). On that occasion, the opera achieved significantly less success compared to its premiere. Lablache was still in poor health and, as noted by Nicola Vaccai, had to omit several parts of the performance. See *Il carteggio personale di Nicola Vaccai*, p. 743.

not explicitly criticize his performance, the work's success appeared to be attributed evenly to the three lead performers.

While the Milanese production did not differ significantly from the version presented in Naples, Donizetti added a new aria for Settimio toward the end of the second act ("S'io finor, bell'idol mio – Si scenda alla tomba"), which helped to rebalance the three singers' stage presence, which had been weighted heavily toward Lablache in both acts. This aria in particular, along with the other *pezzo chiuso* written for the tenor, displayed a strong influence of Rossini's style.<sup>52</sup>

While Donizetti proudly acknowledged the unconventionality of concluding the first act with a *terzetto*,<sup>53</sup> the rest of the opera—Settimio's part especially—adhered more closely to operatic conventions. For instance, in Settimio's *cavatina* ("Aure di Roma!... Io vi respiro alfine!..."), it is difficult not to be reminded of Arsace's *cavatina* from *Semiramide* ("Eccomi alfine in Babilonia"), which included a similarly long orchestral introduction. Additionally, the aforementioned new aria in the second act seems even more manneristic. Both the *cantabile* and the *cabaletta*, featuring the involvement of the typical *pertichini* of the chorus, are excessively scholastic, with simple melodic lines incorporating the trills and melismatic figures—imitated by the orchestra accompaniment—more characteristic of the previous decade than the dawn of the 1830s. Perhaps Lablache's less effective performance, together with the addition of this manneristic piece for Winter, influenced the opera's reception and reinforced the prejudices critics already held against Donizetti.

Another insight in the opera's Milanese production is provided by Vincenzo Bellini, who reported the opera's failure to his friend Florimo:

*L'esule di Roma* has failed, [...] the music is not liked at all, they say there is no singing, no new motifs, it is full of scholastic movements, and finally, some unbearable phrases are stolen; therefore, last night at the second performance, there was no one in the theatre, [...] this outcome disturbs me because I see that there is some good music.<sup>54</sup>

52. For a contextualization of what Rossini's style represented during this period, see EMANUELE SENICI, *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), pp. 71–81 (Ch. 4, "Style").

53. See Gaetano Donizetti, *Carteggi e documenti*, p. 686.

54. "L'esule di Roma ha fatto fiasco, [...] la musica non piace niente affatto, dicono che non v'è canto, che non vi sono motivi nuovi, che è piena di movimenti scolastici, che finalmente qualche frase soffribile è rubata; perciò jersera seconda rappresentazione non v'era nessuno in teatro, [...] a me quest'esito mi disturba, perché vedo che ci stà della buona musica". Vincenzo Bellini, *Carteggi*, pp. 148–149 (14 July 1828). Bellini would employ the very same finale for his *Norma*, three years later in the same theatre. See ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*, p. 158.

Donizetti's reaction to this repeated failure is not documented. However, it is clear that the composer's mixed feelings toward Milan persisted. Before the premiere of his opera in the city, Donizetti wrote to Mayr, mocking Alessandro Rolla, the first violin of La Scala's orchestra: "How will *L'esule* go in Milan? What will the Jesuit Father Rolla say about it? I may starve to death, but I'll never set a foot in Milan: I've said it, I've said it, and now I'm taking a breath".<sup>55</sup> The letter highlights a crucial point yet to be discussed. As already mentioned, Donizetti never set foot in Milan throughout the entire 1820s. While this can be attributed to his frustration towards a city that failed to recognize his ability, it is equally true that his absence may have contributed to his talent remaining unrecognized. In the nineteenth century, the composer's presence in the theatre was usually expected—often even contractually required—when a work was premiered. Visible as part of the orchestra that was not yet hidden in the pit, in a theatre that was not fully dark during the production, the composer was expected to take an active role in the performance.

As all were revivals, this was not the case with *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*, *Il borgomastro di Saardam*, or *L'esule di Roma*. Donizetti's absence not only led to unauthorized modifications but often resulted in a lack of public interest in the productions. Vincenzo Bellini's remarkable success in the city during the same period, by contrast, was always experienced in his presence and with works newly composed for the Teatro alla Scala (*Il pirata*, 1827, and *La straniera*, 1829). Donizetti's distance, as well as his lack of interest in subsequent revivals of his works, prevented him from achieving similar success.<sup>56</sup> In fact, when the difficult relationship between the composer and Milan finally came to an end with the success of *Anna Bolena*, Donizetti was present in the theatre, ready to receive the public's acclaim.

55. "Come anderà mai l'*Esule a Milano*? Il Padre Gesuita Rolla che ne dirà? morirò di fame ma a milano nemmeno un appoggiatura ci farò: ho detto, ho detto e prendo fiato". *Gaetano Donizetti. Carteggi e documenti*, no. 1828.13, p. 712 (15 May 1828).

56. The success he enjoyed in Naples with *L'esule di Roma* was met with suspicion by commentators in Milan, as they were unable to assess it firsthand: "If fame does not lie, *L'esule di Roma* caused a sensation on the stage in Naples. This success justifies the choice to present it in our theatre. Donizetti's opera also received praise here. If this praise wasn't as fervent, it may perhaps be due to the air, less volcanic on the Olona River than on the Sebeto". "Se la fama non mente, l'*Esule di Roma* fece furore sulla scena di Napoli. Quest'esito giustifica la scelta che se ne fece pel nostro teatro. — L'opera di Donizetti ebbe plauso anche fra noi. Se questo plauso non fu di furore, sarà forse colpa dell'aria, meno vulcanica sull'Olona che sul Sebeto". *Gazzetta di Milano*, 197 (15 July 1828).



## DONIZETTI'S RISE TO SUCCESS FROM MILAN'S SUBURBS

This theatre, vague and harmonious,  
has two enemies: distance and bad weather.<sup>57</sup>

The Teatro Carcano, inaugurated during the Napoleonic era in 1803, was located on what was then the outskirts of Milan, at the far end of corso di Porta Romana, near the city walls. From its opening, the theatre offered both operatic and prose performances, alternating seasons without benefiting from specific impresarios or permanent planning, often being rented out to private performers. Its location was considered to be far from the city centre and difficult to reach, for this reason, it constantly sought new and innovative ways to attract audiences. For instance, in the summer of 1826, in a somewhat desperate attempt to draw the public, the entire theatre was decorated with special velvet drapery embroidered with silver.<sup>58</sup>

In 1829, a nobleman and two merchants approached the theatre's owner with capital to invest and a clear strategy. The proposal, spearheaded by Duke Pompeo Litta Visconti Arese and the merchants Giuseppe Marietti and Pietro Soresi, was hard to refuse. Their initiative to organize a theatrical season at the Teatro Carcano was a great success in the summer of the same year. The season saw the return to Milan of Giuditta Pasta, fresh from her success in Vienna, who performed to great acclaim at the suburban theatre in *Semiramide*, *Otello* and *Tancredi* by Rossini, as well as the popular *Nina, o La pazza per amore* by Paisiello and the pastiche that had become Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo*.<sup>59</sup> This successful venture laid the foundation for the organization of another season, at the same theatre the following year.<sup>60</sup>

In Milan, aside from its two main court theatres, theatregoers could enjoy a great variety of entertainment in numerous secondary theatres. However, only the Teatro Carcano and the Teatro Re managed to offer opera seasons in the 1820s.<sup>61</sup> In part these seasons were contingent on when major theatres,

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57. "Questo teatro, vago ed armonico, ha due nemici: la lontananza e il mal tempo". *Gazzetta di Milano*, 160 (9 June 1823).

58. *Gazzetta di Milano*, 197 (16 July 1826).

59. The season was staged from 21 April to 31 July 1829. See *Censore universale dei teatri*, 31 (18 April 1829).

60. A detailed account of the biographical events of the three entrepreneurs, as well as their involvement in organizing the theatre seasons at the Carcano, is contained in VINCENZO BELLINI, *La sonnambula*, critical edition by Alessandro Roccatagliati and Luca Zoppelli (Milan: Ricordi, 2009), *Le opere di Vincenzo Bellini*, pp. XI-XVI.

61. Regarding Teatro Re's operatic seasons, see STEFFAN-ZOPPELLI, *Nei palchi e sulle sedie*, pp. 56–62.

like La Scala or La Canobbiana, endured their seasonal closure. Temporarily out of work musicians and singers who needed some extra income could seek employment in these smaller venues. In addition to this circular economy within Milan, companies from peripheral theatres in Lombardy underpinned this system.<sup>62</sup>

The season organized by the three entrepreneurs and opera enthusiasts at Teatro Carcano marked the first time in a decade that a theatre other than Teatro alla Scala inaugurated an opera season on the evening of 26 December. Furthermore, the Teatro Carcano's season was distinctive as no other theatre than La Scala had ever presented a newly composed work to the Milanese audience. With the sole exception of Carlo Valentini's *I falsi galantuomini* (Teatro Re, 1827), both secondary theatres always dealt with repertory. Needless to say, it was mostly comprised of Rossini's works but also included ones by other popular composers of the day, like Valentino Fioravanti's *Le cantatrici villane* or Carlo Coccia's *Clotilde*.<sup>63</sup>

The singularity of the season at the Teatro Carcano led the organizers to spare no effort in hiring the best talents available. While this event has also been interpreted as a patriotic initiative against the Teatro alla Scala—and, by extension, Habsburg rule<sup>64</sup>—it is equally true that attracting an audience was precisely what the theatre needed, as Pasta's success had fully demonstrated. To that end, they made every necessary effort to have both Bellini and Donizetti compose new operas, based on *libretti* by the renowned poet Felice Romani. Additionally, they enlisted the star singers Giuditta Pasta and Giovanni Battista Rubini. Both had recently enjoyed remarkable success in the Habsburg capital Vienna during the 1830 Italian opera season at the Kärntnertheater. On that occasion, Rubini was appointed *Kammersänger* by Emperor Franz I, an honour Pasta had received the year before.<sup>65</sup>

With the same objective, large sums of money were invested in the press, ensuring extensive and positive coverage of the Carcano's season. An example of this was the pamphlet *Dialogo tra un abbonato del Teatro alla Scala e uno del Carcano* [Dialogue between a subscriber of the Teatro alla Scala and

62. The opera seasons at the Teatro Re were often reproduced at the Teatro de' Quattro nobili cavalieri in Pavia, or the Teatro Sociale in Monza.

63. Rossini's operas' presence in Milan during the mid-1810s to the mid-1820s is discussed in SENICI, *Music in the Present Tense*, pp. 161–178 (Ch. 10, "Repertory").

64. BELLINI, *La sonnambula*, pp. XI–XVI; ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*, p. 190; and FABRIZIO DELLA SETA, *Bellini* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2022), p. 208.

65. The success of the two singers in Vienna was extensively covered in the local press. See, *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano*, 122 (2 May 1830); 134 (14 May 1830); 144 (24 May 1830); 158 (7 June 1830); 170 (19 June 1830).

one of the Carcano Theatre] published in January.<sup>66</sup> Whether or not there was an anti-Habsburg motive behind it, this remains a unique episode in Milanese history, when a privately funded opera season was successfully carried out.

Given the favourable conditions, it becomes clear that the decentralized position of the Teatro Carcano and its distance from the Teatro alla Scala, the site of Donizetti's earlier failures, played a significant role in convincing him to return to Milan. For the first time in eight years, no accusation of imitation or lack of originality was directed at him.<sup>67</sup> It should also be noted that by 1830, the obsession with seeking imitations in new works had significantly diminished. As early as 1828, a critic noted that the rigor in judging imitations had become so sophistic that not even the most successful composers could escape such accusations.<sup>68</sup>

The significance of *Anna Bolena* in Donizetti's artistic life has already been extensively discussed elsewhere.<sup>69</sup> In this context, the fact that this opera exhibits neither more nor fewer Rossinian traits than many of the composer's earlier works underscores the motivations of his long-awaited success. Notably, it occurred not in the geographical and cultural heart of Milan but in its suburbs, in exceptional and favourable conditions. Despite repeated attempts, Donizetti had failed to penetrate the vibrant cultural life of a city divided among various theatres. While it might seem logical that gaining popularity in a secondary theatre would lead to opportunities at the main one, for Donizetti, the opposite was true. His many failures at La Scala had barred him from entering Milan's operatic network.

By contrast, Vincenzo Bellini's trajectory offers a telling comparison. His operas enjoyed great success at La Scala and the Teatro alla Canobbiana, and his popularity was such that even puppet theatres in the city, like Teatro al Ponte de' Fabbri and Teatro Girolamo, adapted his operas for their stages.<sup>70</sup> This widespread recognition was due not only to the success of his music but also to his social connection and active presence in Milanese cultural circles,

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66. The pamphlet published in Milan by Bonfanti was advertised in the press. See *Gazzetta di Milano*, 19 (19 January 1831).

67. See *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano*, 362 (28 December 1830).

68. See *I teatri. Giornale drammatico musicale e coreografico*, 2/1 (Milan: Ferrario, 1828), p. 121. A similar judgment was also rendered regarding the accusations against the Milanese revival of *L'esule di Roma*; see *ibid.*, p. 242.

69. For instance, see PHILIP GOSSETT, "*Anna Bolena*" and the Artistic Maturity of Gaetano Donizetti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). For a critique of Gossett's view see ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti*, pp. 188–196.

70. For instance, as evidenced by the periodical press, *Il pirata, con Girolamo suo seguace* (Teatro Fiando, 1827); *La straniera, con Girolamo* (Teatro al Ponte de' Fabbri, 1830); and *La sonnambula, con Girolamo sposo deluso* (Teatro Fiando, 1831).

which granted him access to influential networks. Donizetti's work presented in Milan during the 1820s never achieved the same level of popularization.

Furthermore, the search for novelty that pervaded the 1820s, in Milan was increasingly hampered by the gradual decline in the number of newly composed operas. Analysing the period from 1820 to 1830, it becomes evident that while the number of new titles under the Habsburg administration of the Teatro alla Scala (1821–1824) averaged five per season, this number soon dropped to just three. Probably due to the difficulties the theatre suffered in finding reliable impresarios that lasted in the position. Of the total forty-one operas composed for Milan in this decade, only two achieved the level of success necessary to secure widespread circulation: *Il pirata* and *La straniera* by Bellini.<sup>71</sup>

It is undeniable that Donizetti encountered significant challenges during a transitional period that simultaneously witnessed the dominance of the Rossinian model and its gradual decline. The composer, perhaps aware of the challenges posed by the Milanese scene, wisely kept a distance from it. Yet, he paid almost morbid attention to the outcomes, reading newspapers and inquiring in his letters with friends.

On one hand, the Milanese version of *L'aio nell'imbarazzo* provided a striking example of the complexities inherent in the operatic genre, illustrating how the fruition of opera was more varied and discontinuous than it might appear today. This had an impact on the way an opera was received and in some instances was even divorced from the merits of the original composer. The revival of *L'esule di Roma*, on the other hand, revealed the peculiar aversion of the Milanese audience to Donizetti. Despite the similarities to its successful Neapolitan premiere, the opera received a different reception in Milan, underscoring the uniqueness of an opera production and the relevance of the context in which a certain opera was presented. Finally, Donizetti's return to Milan in the Teatro Carcano marked a turning point. His triumphant return to the city with *Anna Bolena* and the consequent entrance into the city's cultural network demonstrated that, for once, the Teatro alla Scala was not the sole arbiter of taste.

By the late 1830s, Donizetti had firmly established himself in Milan, with an average of six different operas performed in a single season at La Scala. Secondary theatres, such as the Teatro Carcano—where his works were frequently revived—and the Teatro Re, played a crucial role in sustaining his

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71. Bellini commented to Francesco Florimo: "Milan is too enthusiastic about that blessed *Pirata* and Rubini, and I see that all the other music falls". "Milano è troppo entusiasta per quel benedettissimo *Pirata* e Rubini, e vedo che tutte le altre musiche cadono". *Vincenzo Bellini. Carteggi*, p. 149.

presence. Despite his widespread popularity, Donizetti's reception in Milan ultimately ended with the sombre epilogue mentioned at the beginning. The lack of recognition in 1872 suggests that, even long after his death, the complex and often fraught connection between the composer and the city contributed to the neglect of his memory. While Donizetti overcame early scepticism and gained prominence, his legacy never fully took root within Milan's cultural identity. Instead, it developed primarily in the periphery—both in the city's suburbs and, most notably, in his hometown of Bergamo.

*Abstract*

This article examines the reception of Gaetano Donizetti in Milan during the 1820s, a crucial yet often overlooked period in his career. Despite later achieving fame as one of the foremost composers of Italian opera, Donizetti's early years in Milan were marked by struggles with public perception and critical skepticism. The study situates Donizetti's work within Milan's broader musical landscape, highlighting the dominance of Rossinian aesthetics and the challenges faced by emerging composers in establishing their artistic identity. Revisiting this critical decade, the article sheds new light on the challenges Donizetti's works faced in navigating Milan's competitive opera market. Drawing on archival research in Milan, periodical press, and extensive documentation from the recent edition of *Carteggi e documenti* by Paolo Fabbri it examines the obstacles Donizetti faced in the early stages of his career and explores what it meant for a composer of his generation to gain recognition in Milan. The article presents the Milanese production of *L'aio nell'imbarazzo* (1826) and the revival of *L'esule di Roma* (1828) at the Teatro alla Scala as case studies. Through philological and historiographical analysis, it contextualises the challenges these works faced, considering both their performances and critical reception. Finally, the success of *Anna Bolena* (1830) is reassessed in light of these findings, offering a broader perspective on Milan's theatrical life during the 1820s and illustrating how Donizetti's rise to success extended beyond the city centre and into its suburbs. By reassessing this early period, the study sheds new light on Donizetti's development as a composer and the intricate mechanisms of operatic reception in 19th-century Milan.