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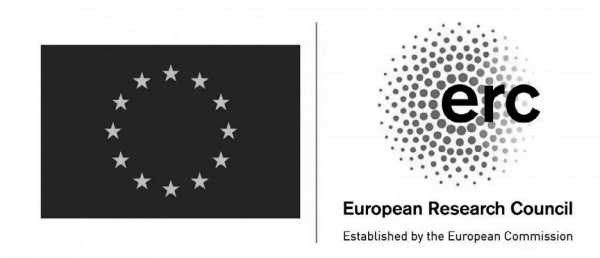
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## DONIZETTI IN HABSBURG EUROPE

edited by

Barbara Babić, Axel Körner, Riccardo Mandelli

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Luca Zoppelli

Words after words.

## Donizetti's Europe as a historiographical challenge

### “AN OPERA HE COMPOSED FOR GERMANS”

When I was invited to contribute to the *Donizetti in Habsburg Europe* conference held in Leipzig and asked to reflect on “what does it mean to write a biography on Donizetti today?” I immediately thought that it was an excellent opportunity to reflect on historiographical challenges in writing the biography of a European composer. As regards my book on Donizetti, I had already grappled with this exact question and was confronted with certain methodological choices, some of which are examined in the book's preface.<sup>1</sup> Two years after the completion of the book, enlightened by the distance that comes with the passing of time, the Leipzig conference has compelled me to expand this historiographical reflection. Moreover, the conference aimed to reflect on Donizetti in a transnational perspective, something that from the start of my work on the composer has seemed fundamental, and which raises huge historiographical questions in and of itself.

Before the book was commissioned, I had never planned to write a biography of Donizetti. If anything, I was thinking about a study dedicated to the dramaturgy and cultural history of Italian Romantic opera—a study in which Donizetti's works written for Italian theatres would have played an important role and which would have problematised the discourse on Romanticism. But in the end I was asked for something different. The book was to be part of a series (*L'opera italiana*) of five volumes of an informative nature on the most famous *Italian opera composers* (the others being Rossini, Bellini, Verdi and Puccini<sup>2</sup>). On the one hand, as part of the editorial norms, this meant that it had to follow the traditional life-and-works model. On the other hand, this model forced the five authors to take into account the entire output of each composer, including those works that cannot be defined as “Italian” or those that do not belong to the operatic genre. Especially for Donizetti this created a problem of consistency (although similar problems exist for Rossini and Verdi).

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1. LUCA ZOPPELLI, *Donizetti* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2022), pp. 13–26.

2. The respective books have been written by Andrea Chegai, Fabrizio Della Seta, Paolo Galarati and Virgilio Bernardoni.

My immediate response was to focus on the drawbacks of the life-and-works model. For many generations, so my reasoning goes, it was the instrument of the Romantic cult of genius, and its aim was to develop the artistic biography as a *Bildungsroman*, the narrative of “how an artist becomes himself”, in the form of a coherent, inner maturation. Twentieth-century critics measured the development of an artist’s production on the basis of an unique teleological model; they went through the works one after the other, in chronological order, in search of a “stylistic evolution” towards what they normatively saw as his “true voice”, without worrying about the fact that each work was calculated to fit specific needs, primarily the *genre* to which the work belongs, the characteristics of the performers, the expectations of a specific public, and so on. Accordingly, these authors paid little attention to the role that the production’s context and cultural trends had in determining artistic choices. This critical attitude is particularly unsuitable in the case of Donizetti, who in the first part of his career mainly composed works belonging to genres such as semi-serious opera or farce with spoken dialogues, which are impossible to compare with the works of his final decade. This model also encouraged a narrow national vision of an artist’s development, since it started from the assumption that an Italian composer, for example, cannot do anything other than develop and complete the forms and aesthetics inherited from his national tradition.

I soon realised, however, that a life-and-works monograph is not necessarily condemned to fall into this outdated style of representation. With some corrections, it could become a useful tool for understanding not only Donizetti’s artistic career, but also other aspects of the European opera system. This system is comprised of the network of professional, social, cultural and subjective forces that contributed to making each work what it is; and it has not been studied sufficiently. In particular, audiences should be considered a determining force in shaping the features of each specific work of art. The *Erwartungshorizont* is not the same in Venice as it is in Naples, not the same at the Teatro del Fondo as it is at the San Carlo.<sup>3</sup> Even if one considers individual theatres, what the audience expected and desired changed as one moved from the stalls to the boxes; and expectations would be different again in case of a gala or a regular performance.

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3. In our recent study, *Nei palchi e sulle sedie. Il teatro musicale nella società italiana dell’Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2023), Carlida Steffan and I attempted to examine nineteenth-century Italian opera from the perspective of audiences, their practices and their needs. It became clear that the tastes and behaviours of the audiences were very heterogeneous, even within the same venue and on the same occasion. For the term *Erwartungshorizont* see HANS ROBERT JAUSS, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1969), pp. 34–37; REINHART KOSSELLECK, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 349–375.



Accordingly, I devised a structure that would allow me to avoid these historiographical shortcomings. The book is divided into chapters that do not correspond with “operatic milestones” but rather deal with the major steps of Donizetti’s institutional and symbolic position in the operatic market.

The first chapter covers the years preceding Donizetti’s definitive detachment from Bergamo and his entry into a career as an opera composer. This is followed by a chapter on his “anni di galera” (1822–1827), far more dramatic than those experienced twenty years later by Verdi. A further chapter considers the years of his recognition as a major composer (1828–1832). Statistics, starting in 1833, show that Donizetti would be the most performed composer in Italian theatres, ahead of Bellini and Rossini. This implies another rupture, which has previously gone unnoticed by many biographers. Owing to his prestige, Donizetti was able to leave Naples. He interrupted his collaboration with the Royal Theatres and, after a brief return at the end of that year to stage *Sancta di Castiglia*, he remained absent from Naples until 1834.

In the following period (1833–1835) he was active in Rome, Milan, Florence, Naples and then in Paris for *Marino Faliero* at the Théâtre-Italien. In this phase, thanks to his recently acquired symbolic capital and position in the European operatic market, Donizetti developed new strategies in the choice and treatment of dramatic sources, assuming increasing responsibility for the adaptation of theatrical texts.

From spring 1835 to autumn 1838 he was once again based in Naples; after prestigious engagements in Milan and Paris, his professional position had been strengthened, enabling him to demand much higher fees; moreover, throughout this period he taught at the Conservatorio. His productivity became highly regulated, only two *opere serie* a year, one for Naples in the late summer/autumn and one for the Carnival season in Venice, where La Fenice was directed by the impresario Alessandro Lanari.

In the autumn of 1838, a series of professional and personal events led him to leave Naples and settle in Paris, which remained his main residence for about three years. By assimilating the characteristics of French national genres, and writing for all of the city’s operatic stages, he became a protagonist of the Parisian theatrical scene.

In the subsequent years, from 1842 until his mental collapse in the autumn of 1845, he divided his time between Paris and Vienna. His final masterpieces, with the exception of *Dom Sébastien*, are considered “Italian” operas, but all of them were strongly influenced by European contexts and experiences.

Within each chapter the reader will find a biographical and professional synopsis and an examination of the operas, presented not in strictly chronological order, but grouped by genres and shared features. This was a significant choice, avoiding the traditional “evolutionary march” from *Enrico*

*di Borgogna* to *Lucia* and from *Lucia* to *Caterina Cornaro*, and instead to present each work as a response to a set of expectations, conditions and specific codes. This division is quite different from what is common in Donizetti literature. Previous studies have always emphasised the importance of *Anna Bolena* (1830) as the watershed between Donizetti's youthful period and his artistic maturity, and the work that assured him a place in the Olympus of Italian opera. A careful examination shows that, from an artistic point of view, *Anna Bolena* is a much less personal opera than those that preceded it; while, from the point of view of the prestige of its author, its decisive influence did not depend on the first Milanese production of 1830, but on the international marketing strategy set up by the publisher Ricordi. Therefore, *Anna Bolena* cannot be considered as a fracture in Donizetti's career, but only as an episode in his gradual affirmation, which begins with *L'esule di Roma* in 1828 and was completed around 1832, when he felt entitled to leave Naples and embarked upon a "freelance" career.

Furthermore, old biographies tend to dedicate a single chapter to the final part of Donizetti's career, after his definitive departure from Naples. The unspoken assumption behind this decision is largely negative in nature. Donizetti is "abroad"; he no longer resides in Italy. However, there are notable differences between the productive dynamics of the three-year period in Paris (1839–1841) and those of the following three-year period, in which, while continuing to frequent Paris, Donizetti became gradually more tied to Vienna. The Viennese and Parisian theatre worlds were very different, and so were their audiences, which oriented the composer's artistic choices in very different directions.

Let us take the case of the works composed by Donizetti for Vienna. Although he was hired as a composer of Italian operas, based on Italian librettos, there is no doubt that the three operas composed for the Habsburg capital—*Linda di Chamounix*, *Maria di Rohan* and *Caterina Cornaro*<sup>4</sup>—are very different from those he composed elsewhere in the preceding years. They are formally unpredictable and very sober in their use of "belcanto"; furthermore, the overtures of *Linda di Chamounix* and *Maria di Rohan* can be considered a tribute to the Viennese symphonic tradition. This, at least, was the opinion of the Viennese press. In the case of *Linda di Chamounix* the reviewers, accustomed to judging Italian opera severely for its stereotyped forms and the ornamental abstractness of the vocal profiles, were impressed by the accuracy and

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4. The composition of the *Caterina* was interrupted when Donizetti learned that Franz Lachner's German opera on the same subject would be performed in Vienna: in the end the opera had its premiere in Naples. Based on the press reactions, it is reasonable to assume that the Neapolitan public failed to appreciate it precisely because of these "Viennese" features.

strength of the characterisation; and in *Maria di Rohan* they saw a dramatic force, concentration and restraint perceived as eminently “Germanic”, hailing this opera as the beginning of a new stage in Donizetti’s career:

The overture already shows that Donizetti went to work with the seriousness that is unmistakably expressed throughout the entire opera [...] the primarily dramatic attitude of this music, the brevity and compactness of the musical style, the unity and wholeness of the form, we want put all this on our account and believe that Donizetti wanted to give an opera that he composed for Germans that air of seriousness and dignity that is so close to the character of the Germans.<sup>5</sup>

“We want put all this on our account”. In reality, such a proud assertion of co-authorship could be made by all audiences in the performing arts, but here it succinctly expresses the self-awareness of the Viennese theatrical and musical culture at this stage.

#### TRANSCULTURAL BEGINNINGS

If used correctly, the life-and-works formula has a great advantage. It forces us to take into consideration the entire path of a composer’s life, and therefore of his changing position in the different operatic fields he is active in. (I use the term *field* in the sense of the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu.) This is no easy task, but it must be said that far more information and sources are available today than fifty years ago, when William Ashbrook was preparing his pathbreaking study on the composer. We are more aware of how artistic choices are the result of an artist’s position in the field, of his endowment of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, as well as of his hierarchical position with respect to the impresario, the singers, the audiences and the press. We are better situated to observe how composers negotiated between this set of conditions and their own subjective “project”, and also that this project, in turn, depends on their “habitus”. (Their social origin and their trajectory in the field partly determine what at first glance may appear to be their “nature” or their artistic choices.)

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5. “Schon die Ouverture zeigt, daß *Donizetti* mit jenem Ernste ans Werk gegangen sey, der sich in der ganzen Oper unverkennbar ausspricht [...] die vorzugsweise dramatische Haltung dieser Musik, die Kürze, Gedrungenheit des musikalischen Styles, die Einheit und Ganzheit der Form, wir wollen dieses Alles auf unsere Rechnung schreiben, und glauben, *Donizetti* habe einer Oper, die er für *Deutsche* componirte [*sic*], jenen Anstrich von Ernst und Würde geben wollen, die dem Charakter des Deutschen so nahe liegen”. A[UGUST] S[CHMIDT], *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung*. Article reprinted in *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva*, edited by Annalisa Bini and Jeremy Commons (Rome–Milan: Accademia nazionale di Santa Cecilia–Skira, 1997), p. 1153.

If studied from this perspective, Donizetti's career proves extremely interesting, because it is anomalous in many respects. Unlike Donizetti, Rossini, Bellini and Verdi, but also Mercadante and Pacini quickly gained an important position in the Italian opera market. If we ignore Rossini, who started his career in the distinct context of Napoleonic Italy, a study of the careers of Donizetti's contemporaries shows that in Habsburg-dominated Italy of the 1820s or 1840s a talented young composer could quickly rise to a position of prestige, provided he enjoyed aristocratic protection. Bellini, at the end of the 1820s, and Verdi, from 1840, were "adopted" by the Milanese aristocracy, comparable to the "construction of genius" associated with Beethoven in Vienna during the 1790s.<sup>6</sup>

The young Donizetti, however, relied on his cultural capital. He was certainly the most capable and refined of his contemporaries, but he desperately lacked economic capital. As for his social capital, Simon Mayr's recommendations were enough to make him known among musicians, especially in the cities where Mayr himself had contacts, but they did not give him access to the networks of aristocratic *dilettanti* that influenced the operatic activity of the Italian peninsula. For many years, he was active almost exclusively in the smaller theatres of Venice, Rome and Naples, where *opera buffa* and *opera semi-seria* were performed. After his arrival in Naples, *impresario* Barbaia kept him on the fringes of the San Carlo, only commissioning occasional works to be performed out of season, with which it was impossible to gain recognition. This had two main consequences for Donizetti's career. For a whole decade he was confined to the lower margins of the operatic field, forced to write for minor theatres or obscure occasions, and within genres that did not help him build his reputation. These were poorly paid jobs that forced him to write a great deal, confining him to an almost proletarian condition, and reinforcing in him the *habitus* of one who can survive only thanks to the ability to write many scores in a short time: a working practice that remained with him even when his wealth and prestige improved. Secondly, the lack of prestige—of symbolic capital—meant that throughout this period Donizetti did not have the bargaining power to propose stylistic solutions other than the Rossinian *koiné* that dominated the operatic world. As he told his friend Bonesi, it was first necessary to win the sympathy of the public by following "the genius of Rossini", and only then would it be possible to do it "his way".<sup>7</sup> This, however, took longer than expected, causing him several periods of an-

6. I am referring to the study of TIA DENORA, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

7. *Cenni biografici su Gaetano Donizetti di Marco Bonesi*, edited by Guido Zavadini, *Bergomum. Bollettino della Civica biblioteca*, 40/3 (1946), pp. 81–89, p. 87.

guish and depression. The idealistic narrative of the artist/hero in search of his “artistic maturity”, to quote an expression by Philip Gossett,<sup>8</sup> cannot explain the path of a talented musician who since his debut showed great competence and, from time to time, the ability to write pages of surprising originality, but who, according to the *fable convenue*, remained a “promising young artist” for almost fifteen years, and only found “his voice” at thirty-three.

Therefore, a more in-depth study of the works composed by Donizetti in the 1820s holds some surprises. It reveals that, although forced to follow the Rossinian path, Donizetti possessed alternative models, which he resorted to on a few but significant occasions. It is not surprising that one of these models was Simon Mayr, especially in the genre of heroic opera. His influence is evident in *Zoraida di Granata* (which Donizetti probably composed as a replacement for the maestro, and under his supervision), and then in some scores from the end of the decade (e.g. *L'esule di Roma*). Even more unexpected, however, is that in the comic and mixed genres, the most unconventional pages show a profound assimilation of Mozart's operatic style. It is well known that Donizetti had studied and imitated the Viennese masters in Bergamo, particularly in the context of the performance and composition of string quartets; as for Mozart's theatrical production, he had certainly examined the scores under the guidance of Mayr but had rarely had the opportunity to listen to it. In almost every of his *buffa* and *semi-seria* operas of the 1820s one finds one or two numbers of excellent quality, many of them with an unmistakable Mozartian flavour (probably the consequence of Mayr's teaching) and written in an unconventional and idiosyncratic style. It was as if Donizetti had wanted to insert at least one “message in the bottle”, an indication of what he would like to do, if allowed to.

Let us examine two examples. First, the initial segment of Finale I of *La zingara* (Naples, Teatro Nuovo, 1822). This is one of the most surprising passages in all *Ottocento* Italian opera. The young gypsy girl Argilla has managed to arrange a brief meeting between the lovers Ines and Fernando. To divert the attention of Amelia, the girl's governess, Argilla gets the servant Sguiglio (*buffo*) to distract her. Finally, Argilla deals with the other *buffo*, Papaccione, organising a masquerade that will enable her to recover the keys to the prison where her father languishes. In the libretto, the three dialogues appear one after the other, and are characterised by three different metres: *settenari*, mainly as *tronchi* for the lovers (“Ah come sul mattin”), *ottonari* for Argilla and Papaccione (“Quando il gufo a mezza notte”) and *senari* for Sguiglio and Amelia (“E botame 'nfaccia”) in Neapolitan dialect. Donizetti

8. PHILIP GOSSETT, “*Anna Bolena*” and the Artistic Maturity of Gaetano Donizetti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

decided to emphasise the simultaneity of the action and superimpose these segments (nothing in the libretto indicates that this was Tottola's intention). The different metres generate different musical rhythms, and the contrasting nature of the singing entrusted to the characters (lyrical for the lovers, syllabic for the buffos), mean that the musical phrases given to the three groups vary in character, density, rhythm and extension. The three layers intersect in a subtle interplay of clusters and displacements, creating a tableau of remarkable complexity. When listening, however, it appears evident that the musical management of this complexity is achieved through the adoption of Mozartian devices and sonorities.

The second example is the duo between Emilia and Don Romualdo in *Emilia di Liverpool* (Naples, Teatro Nuovo, 1824). Many years earlier Emilia, the protagonist, had rejected her betrothed Don Romualdo, a Spanish/Neapolitan aristocrat (*basso buffo*, pompous but not entirely farcical), to elope with a man who first seduced and then abandoned her. By chance they meet again. Don Romualdo presents himself with a grotesque catalogue of his names and noble titles, rattled off in the usual manner of the buffo catalogue aria. Without allowing him to finish, Emilia reveals herself and begs for his forgiveness in tones of extreme pathos. Here, two contrasting dramatic types are juxtaposed and then brought together, their characters accentuated by divergent vocal writing. Emilia expresses herself in passionate lyrical melodies characterised by an intense play of appoggiaturas and frequent harmonic shadows, in a manner unequivocally drawn from the great Mozartian heroines, while Romualdo accompanies or alternates with her in his skipping *declamato*.

These two examples show that a more in-depth examination of Donizetti's "youth" production allows us to understand that he possessed outstanding skills and was already experimenting with that fusion of comic and tragic elements that was becoming a hallmark of Romantic poetics; and that the trans-cultural dimension of his production was already present at the beginning of his career. Years later, when he entered the service of the Habsburg court, he showed immense pride in occupying a position that had once been Mozart's.<sup>9</sup> This veneration was not simply an abstract attitude. Twenty years earlier Donizetti had demonstrated that when he wrote unshackled from Rossinian conventions, Mozart's operatic style was his main point of reference.

Studying *Emilia di Liverpool* allows us to raise another point, one that concerns both the methodology of research on musical theatre and the recovery of the transnational dimension in the narration of early nineteenth-century

9. See his letters to Antonio Dolci (16 June 1842) and Antonio Vasselli (13 July 1842 and 3 August 1842) in GUIDO ZAVADINI, *Donizetti. Vita - musiche - epistolario* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1948), pp. 616, 618, 624.

Italian opera. In writing my book, I paid close attention (more than most of my predecessors did) to the literary, theatrical and iconographic sources from which the works were taken. By Donizetti's time, the choice of the subject matter no longer depended solely on individual taste; authors were strongly influenced by what the public knew and loved. It could originate in reading literary dramas, but also in everyday entertainment, performed on commercial stages, found in the hebdomadary series of *Teatro applaudito*, or be inspired by extracts from the periodical press. Iconography also contributed to creating a system of interests and expectations: exhibitions, engravings, illustrated books, end-of-year almanacs. The endings of *Marino Faliero* and *Roberto Devereux* obviously derive from the tragedies of Casimir Delavigne and François Ancelot, but these, in turn, owe much to the paintings of Eugène Delacroix and Paul Delaroche respectively, which had caused an uproar in the Paris Salon. It is important to realise that Romantic opera developed in the context of a new media system. The source was thus no longer just material, or a pretext, for the development of a libretto, but it remained part of the semiotic structure of the operatic performance. The audience, or an important part of it, wanted to find in the musical drama situations that resonated with them, and comparison between different media was part of the pleasure of watching a performance. Sources were not chosen at random but depended on the circulation of cultural trends; they not only had a genetic relevance, but a true cultural presence. For this reason, I invested a considerable amount of time in establishing not only where each story came from (in some cases the source had been unknown), but also to study its diffusion, relevance and significance in the cultural market of the time. If we assume, as it was usually done, that a libretto is a mere scaffolding in which to insert a few stereotypical “belcanto” arias and duets, the nature of its source seems peripheral. Yet a more nuanced and fruitful approach is to hold that *stories* mattered, and that composers often made a serious effort to match the message on paper with what was subsequently expressed on stage. This procedure also has the advantage of underlining the transnational aspects of *Ottocento* “Italian” opera. Italian opera librettos of the time were mostly taken from non-Italian plays, first and foremost French ones, although not exclusively. The phenomenon is well known, but its importance has been mostly overlooked. We should consider these non-Italian “sources” as a powerful factor of cultural exchange.

Precisely for this reason the case of *Emilia of Liverpool* is of interest. Its anonymous libretto was a reworking of another anonymous libretto that Vittorio Trento had set to music in 1817 with the title *Emilia di Laverpaut*. (The first act is almost the same, the second extensively altered.) The source is the drama *Emilia, o La benedizione paterna*, published by the famous playwright and librettist Bartolomeo Benincasa as a “translation” of August von Kotze-

bue (today mostly known for his assassination in 1819—and what Metternich made of it). No play ascribed to this author (there are approximately 240) has a comparable title. However, for an unequivocal identification it was not necessary to read all of Kotzebue's writings. As expected, the plot of *Emilia* derives, very freely, from that of *Misanthropy and Repentance* (*Menschenhass und Reue*, 1790), which circulated widely throughout Europe. It was translated into many languages and is one of the most representative pieces of Kotzebue's melodramatic conservative ideology. The young Donizetti had already set to music two librettos taken from well-known dramas by Kotzebue: *Enrico di Borgogna* (Venice, Teatro di San Luca, 1818; from *Der Graf von Burgund*, 1798) and *Le nozze in villa* (Mantua, Imperial Regio Teatro, 1819, from *Die deutschen Kleinstädter*, 1802), both written by Bartolomeo Merelli (who would be the impresario of the Vienna Kärntnertortheater at the time of *Linda di Chamounix* and *Maria di Rohan* a quarter of a century later). These works force us to reflect on a phenomenon normally overlooked by (Risorgimento-biased) narratives of Italian culture in the Habsburgs-dominated "età della Restaurazione"; despite the massive presence of French theatre, an important cultural transfer occurred, which saw the circulation of texts from German-speaking areas, and whose ideological content seems to have differed to that of French dramas.

#### AN ITALIAN IN PARIS (AND VIENNA)

Traditional historiography never questioned the idea that the historical value and the aesthetic rank of a work are expressed by its current canonical position, and that the status of masterpiece (or of second-rate work) corresponds to its objective qualities and is attributed permanently. Today this principle seems like a myth, since we are aware that such rankings depend on countless contextual elements: institutional support, censorship, market dynamics, practical issues, the needs of performers, and many others. *Anna Bolena*, as mentioned before, has long been described as Donizetti's first masterpiece, the work in which, after years of craftsmanship generally spent imitating Rossinian models, he found his own mature and independent voice. But it is simple to demonstrate that Donizetti had previously already composed operas which can be considered as stylistically more personal and innovative, and that *Anna Bolena* is a rather conventional score, even if carefully written. Nineteenth-century critics considered it a rather diffuse work in which Donizetti synthesised the styles of Rossini and Bellini, trying to captivate the different sections of the audience, to give everyone what they wanted to hear, at the cost of renouncing his customary conciseness (if performed in its entirety, *Anna Bolena* is almost as long as *Parsifal* and not much more entertaining). But in fact it was the first Donizetti opera to be distributed according to new



market and media practices. As I have tried to show, the decisive factor was that the *impresa* sold the package consisting of the scores of *Anna Bolena* and Bellini's *La sonnambula* to the publisher Ricordi, who not only proposed, as was customary, to print the piano-vocal scores, but also to manage the rental of the scores in Italy and abroad. It was the beginning of an innovative business model with a great future. Rubini, Pasta and Lablache sang *Anna Bolena* in London and Paris, Italian theatres soon felt obliged to revive it, thereby quickly turning it into the fashionable opera *par excellence*. The myth of *Anna Bolena* was then renewed, in the twentieth century, by the role it played in the Donizetti revival, starting with the famous performances at La Scala in 1957 starring Maria Callas, with Gianandrea Gavazzeni conducting and Luchino Visconti as director.

One aim of my book was therefore to investigate the mechanisms of reception and the reasons for the selection made by the repertoires and canons in force from then until today, showing that the current image of certain works has been created over time, because of the role attributed to them by audiences and performers. What happened to Donizetti's image in the opera market and in opera historiography? Until the 1870s at least, he was perceived, in the Italian and European musical world, as being on the "modern" side of the border between old and new opera, the initiator of a new phase, dramaturgically and musically, later continued by Verdi. This was followed by an abrupt change. A part of the public, the one that considered the operatic experience according to the traditional ways of "conspicuous consumption"—something to be enjoyed in an intermittent and detached way—seems to have looked with annoyance at the dramatic tendencies represented by such composers as Verdi, Gounod and—above all—Wagner. It was in response to the needs of this group (not necessarily the largest, but one which coincides with the higher social strata of the public) that the narrative of a "golden age of the belcanto" was developed—the term itself only became widespread after 1870—and that a specific place in the repertoire was reserved for operas that seem to revive the happy era in which music theatre was a luxury good, a display of virtuosity and a source of pure sensual enjoyment. This supposed "golden age of belcanto", invented to offer an alternative to the dominance of "dramatic opera", is meant to include Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti, and it is characterised by its discontinuous structure ("number" opera) and the use of *coloratura* singing.

When creating a label, the products offered must obviously correspond to its concept. Within the Italian repertoire of the *primo Ottocento*, works that presented this type of musical writing were favoured, the others were discarded (Bellini's *Il pirata*, for example). In the case of Donizetti, his late works, too close to Verdi's aesthetics, were expelled from the repertoire, or survived in versions with heavy *coloratura* additions. The latter was true for the para-

doxical case of *Linda di Chamounix*, which remained in the repertoire thanks to a single aria, “O luce di quest’anima”, that was not part of its original version, and which has very little to do with the rest of the opera. In a similar context “the invention of *Lucia*” takes place. *Lucia di Lammermoor* is perhaps, among the *opere serie* of the last decade of Donizetti’s production, the least representative. The singing style of the title-role, and in part the work’s formal strategies, are determined by the fact that Donizetti had to write for a singer of outstanding technical qualities, but who at the same time was a bad actress. With remarkable dramaturgical insight, he took advantage of Fanny Tacchinardi Persiani’s voice to depict an individual whose extreme suffering has led to a sort of abstract, crystalline, paradoxical detachment from reality. From the start, *Lucia* was one of Donizetti’s most popular operas, but a modern-day opera lover would certainly be surprised to learn that the mad scene—perhaps the most iconic blockbuster in operatic repertoire—contributed very little to its popularity in the Europe of the Romantic age. The newspapers, both Italian and French, mentioned it *en passant*, giving it far less importance than the closing duet of Act 1 “Verranno a te sull’aure”, the *concertato* “Chi mi frena in tal momento” (Act 2), or the tenor’s aria at the end. For some thirty years, prima donnas chose to replace it with some other Donizettian *rondò*. No theme drawn from it appears among those used by Liszt and others in their transcriptions and reminiscences of the opera, and the scene fails to appear, unlike the episodes mentioned above, in the engravings that adorn them. Even Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, distracted by Léon’s presence, leaves the theatre before the opera ends. The “mad scene” only became the blockbuster we know today in the 1880s, when a spectacular cadenza with *concertante* flute, in one version or another, became part of the performance practice. Its insertion shows that about half a century after the creation of *Lucia*, Donizetti’s output had been definitively pigeonholed in the category of abstract *belcanto*.

With regard to Donizetti, a transnational perspective is necessary to explain his education, his cultural references and an important part of his theatrical career. Furthermore, such perspective clarifies how his image was fixed and how the Donizetti canon was formed and handed down to our times. This becomes clear when one realises that the “invention of *belcanto*” is foremost a phenomenon linked to extra-Italian *clichés* of the *bel paese*, not an Italian one: it was the spectators of London, Paris or Vienna who constructed an ideal of Italian opera that stood for the inversion of the tendencies present in modern “dramatic” musical theatre. Consequently, they demanded that Italian opera conform to this *cliché*. Thus, when Donizetti went to Paris, first in 1835 for *Marino Faliero*, and then at the end of the 1830s, he found himself at the centre of a strange misunderstanding. He felt an intellectual fascination

with Paris, the centre from which ideas, tastes, theatrical and literary novelties radiated out. He had already given a musical form to dozens of *mélodrames*, comedies and tragedies of Parisian origin, and he had thrown the doors of Italian opera open to Victor Hugo's plays. As a consequence, he could hardly fail to see Paris as a sort of promised land of the new music drama. But the expectations of the fashionable public of the Théâtre-Italien were quite different. They wanted beautiful melodies, well sung by Grisi, Rubini and company. *Marino Faliero* was a moderate success, with the press amazed by the austere and dramatic nature of the work, and the public dissatisfied with the fact that Rubini died halfway through the opera, and Grisi did not sing at the end. The impression was that Donizetti, in the excitement of writing for Paris, had misunderstood the needs of the city's different audiences. He had assimilated the principles of the new Parisian Romantic dramaturgy, and then realised that in Paris any Italian opera had to correspond to the *cliché* of the Italian opera. The same situation repeated itself five years later, when he made his debut at the Académie Royale de Musique (Opéra) with *Les Martyrs*, his first *grand opéra*. To some critics it seemed that the opera still retained too many signs of its Italian origin, while others complained that Donizetti had pushed his assimilation of local modes too far, shedding the opera's exotic "Italianness". The former complained about the predictability of the melodic and formal devices, as well as the inappropriately frivolous tone of some passages compared to the situations; the latter reproached the opera for being "slow, plaintive, heavily solemn, devoid of singing, monotonous and tedious", that is, not Italian at all. Parisian audiences instead welcomed *La Favorite*, likewise a French opera, but heavily indebted to the formal structures and vocal profiles of the Italian tradition. An Italian is expected to write as an Italian, that is what we pay him for.

In Vienna, on the contrary, audiences and critics seemed inclined towards a pedagogical discourse that positively evaluates Donizetti's efforts to Europeanise his style, and hailed, as we have seen, the quality of operas "written for Germans". How to explain this difference in attitudes? The Parisian theatrical field—broader, more competitive, more modern since it was based on the clear separation of genres, audiences and ways of experiencing the performance<sup>10</sup>—was disturbed by the experiments of the late Donizetti, who gave the impression of going beyond the boundaries, of leaving his own "Italian" hunting grounds. In contrast, the world of theatre in German-speaking countries seems to have been characterised by a notable permeability between genres, that created a favourable framework for Donizetti's attempt to bring

10. See CHRISTOPHE CHARLE, *Théâtres en Capitales. Naissance de la société du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Vienne* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008).

a new dramatic paradigm to music theatre. Viennese critics, therefore, welcomed *Linda di Chamounix* and *Maria di Rohan* as the expression of a new “Germanised” type of Italian opera.

The success Donizetti enjoyed in Vienna, however, was soon forgotten, the consequence of a Germanic-chauvinist musical criticism and related historiography. It is possible that over the years, the structure and needs of Vienna’s musical world had become increasingly modern, similar to the Parisian one. Unquestionably, the political tensions of 1848 also left an impact, when the ideal of a supranational Habsburg culture, as described in Claudio Vellutini’s studies,<sup>11</sup> gave way to the feeling of opposing and irreconcilable identities. In 1843 the Viennese press had praised *Maria di Rohan* for its German seriousness; in 1848, when the news of Donizetti’s death arrived, the young critic Eduard Hanslick (the future author of the famous treatise *On Musical Beauty*) wrote an obituary. He affirmed that Donizetti “could have written five good operas, had he not written fifty mediocre ones”, and that “the frivolity closely connected with his nationality and temperament made him perceive and treat music merely as a means of pleasant entertainment”.<sup>12</sup>

What had happened between 1843 and 1848? The curse of identity, it seems, had come to Habsburg Europe, and had left its impact on its cultural life: perhaps the political situation (Venice and Milan had just chased out the Austrians) contributed to exacerbating the opposition. In any case, even in Vienna Donizetti was now included in the *cliché* of light and brilliant Italian music—forced to retreat, so to speak, to the reserve of “belcanto”.

Writing a book on Donizetti, therefore, was an exciting opportunity to study the cultural dynamics of mid-nineteenth century Europe. No other composer, not even Rossini and Verdi, would have allowed me to do the same.

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11. CLAUDIO VELLUTINI, “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. Kühl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 96–112.

12. “Er hätte gewiß fünf gute Opern schreiben können, hätte er nicht fünfzig schlechte geschrieben”; “der mit seiner Nationalität und seinem Temperament eng zusammenhängende Leichtsinn, welcher ihn die Tonkunst lediglich als ein Mittel zu angenehmer Unterhaltung auffassen und behandeln ließ”. EDUARD HANSLICK, “Ein Todtenkranz für Donizetti”, *Wiener Zeitung* (24 September 1848), p. 104.

*Abstract*

The article reflects on the historiographical challenges posed by writing a monograph on a nineteenth-century European composer, based on my experience as the author of *Donizetti* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2022). For a long time, the traditional “life-and-works model” has been the instrument of a Romantic cult of genius, where authors pay little attention to the role that a production’s context played in determining a composer’s artistic choices: the expectations of particular audiences, cultural trends, or transnational dynamics. Moreover, authors rarely consider the role of a work’s current canonical position in determining its historical and aesthetic appreciation. Taking account of these flaws can help us to turn the “life-and-works” model into an advantage. For instance, it forces us to take into consideration the entire path of a composer’s life and output, allowing us to better understand the dynamics of his changing position in different operatic fields, and the reasoning behind his aesthetic decisions. In Donizetti’s case, this also means to identify the networks that determined his relationship with Habsburg cultural policies, whether it concerns his formative years, or the masterpieces he composed for Vienna during the last phase of his career. After 1848, and marked by chauvinistic undertones, German music criticism soon consigned the immense success Donizetti had enjoyed in Vienna to oblivion. This background influenced the treatment of Donizetti in international music historiography; and to some extent it still conditions his current image within the discipline.

