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Malicious tongues and elusive success: Donizetti's reception in Milan in the 1820s, «Donizetti Studies», 5, 2025, pp. 31-54.

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'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. 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.