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*Words after words. Donizetti's Europe as a historiographical challenge*, «Donizetti Studies», 5, 2025, pp. 131-145.

*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.