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# Donizetti's Serious Operas

WINTON DEAN

UNTIL RECENTLY Donizetti was not respectable enough for musicology. He was remembered for two or three comedies; yet he and Rossini both devoted their mature years almost entirely to serious opera. Of Donizetti's 70 stage works, a few of which are lost, exactly half belong to the *opera seria* class (that includes two French grand operas); three are early works on Classical subjects, nine are *opere semiserie*, and 23 are comedies or farces. But those figures do not give a true picture. In the first place, twelve of the comic operas but only one of the serious are in a single act. Second, if we take the end of 1828 as a dividing line—which is roughly when Donizetti reached maturity—we find that before that date he composed 29 operas, of which only six are serious, whereas after it he produced eight comedies (five in one act), four *semiserie* (one in one act), and 29 full-length serious operas. Clearly he regarded Romantic tragedy as his main line.

Traditional opinion assures us that, because Donizetti composed very rapidly, 'even allowing for the thinness and conventional character of the accompaniments, it is clear that such work can be no more than successful improvisation'. (Exactly the same could be said of *Messiah*.) '... Facile, sentimental melodies can no longer sustain the interest or be supposed to represent adequately dramatic action, and Donizetti seldom rises above that standard.'<sup>1</sup> That view was almost universal in England until perhaps the last ten years, and is still heard today despite the enterprising revivals of so many of Donizetti's forgotten operas—though at least half of the best have not yet been staged in this country. The prejudice derives partly from our peculiar brand of Philistinism that regards music written gratefully for the singing voice as *per se* trivial, if not immoral, and partly from the increasing reputation of German opera, especially Wagner. Donizetti was of course not the only casualty: Bellini, nearly all Rossini and a great deal of Verdi were likewise consigned to the garbage heap.

<sup>1</sup> *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th edn., London, 1954, art. 'Donizetti'.

Before considering Donizetti's achievement it is worth glancing at the origins of his style. His teacher, Simone Mayr, was a very important influence on Italian nineteenth-century opera. Mayr was a Bavarian, a younger contemporary of Mozart, who studied in Italy and soon decided to settle there, italianising his name. Between 1794 and 1824 he composed more than 60 operas, all in Italian; like Donizetti he tended to concentrate on comic operas in youth and serious in maturity, and he had many successes in both forms. In 1802 he established himself at Bergamo, Donizetti's birthplace, from which he refused to budge, despite invitations to London, Paris, Lisbon and Dresden. His operas, like those of Peter von Winter and Ferdinando Paer, give a very good idea of what may be called the routine style during the period of Beethoven's early maturity, the generation before Weber, Schubert and Rossini. They are thoroughly competent, but suffer from a bland tone and a lack of creative heat. They look back rather than forward, to Gluck, Cimarosa, Cherubini and above all Mozart; the demonic D minor element in *Don Giovanni*, which influenced so many composers of this period, brought out the best in Mayr, notably in *Medea in Corinto*, perhaps his most successful opera, which was produced at Naples in 1813. The novel feature of his music, from an Italian point of view, was his varied and subtle treatment of the orchestra, especially the woodwind instruments. He probably learned this from Mozart; he certainly bequeathed it to Rossini, who was much more his direct heir than Donizetti. There is very little Romantic feeling in Mayr. In his Leonora opera, *L'amor conjugale*, one is never aware of the darkness of the dungeon as a dramatic force, as one is in Beethoven and in earlier French Revolution composers like Méhul and Dalayrac. Nor was Rossini in this sense a Romantic composer, though the powers of nature do make themselves discreetly felt in his later operas, *William Tell* in particular. Romanticism in Italy was always a matter of pathos and politics rather than the supernatural that obsessed the Germans. The negative side of this emerges from Verdi's treatment of Joan of Arc's voices and the witches in *Macbeth*.

From Mayr, an excellent teacher, Donizetti acquired a sound operatic technique, a feeling for instrumental colour and a firm control of harmonic movement, especially in big concerted pieces. He was more profoundly and lastingly influenced by Rossini, whose bouncy rhythms, clattering orchestration, irrepressible crescendos, resounding thumps off

the beat before the voice enters, and rare but decisive and cunningly judged modulations haunt Donizetti's early operas and reappear from time to time in the later ones, serious as well as comic. It was the digestion of the Rossini influence more than anything else that delayed Donizetti's maturity till beyond the age of thirty. What seems to have turned him from a follower of Rossini into a Romantic composer was his contact with Bellini, his junior by four years—'seems' because the matter requires more detailed investigation. The two were composing at the same time, often for the same theatres and with the same collaborators, and they were constantly in direct competition. Temperamentally they were very different. Donizetti was the most generous and open-handed of men; he admired Bellini and said so repeatedly. Bellini on the other hand was consumed by suspicion and envy, convinced that every other composer's hand was against him; Donizetti, as the most successful of his rivals, was most frequently accused of trying to damage his interests and his reputation. Bellini's character was as unlike his music as could be imagined; but it is his music that matters, and it can hardly be coincidental that Donizetti's sudden emergence as a composer of Romantic opera came soon after his encounter with Bellini. He wrote most enthusiastically of *Bianca e Fernando*, Bellini's second opera, at Naples in May 1826; but the decisive work was probably the very successful *Il Pirata*, produced at La Scala in October 1827. Bellini's individual brand of long-breathed elegiac lyricism was conspicuous here for the first time (along with much that was trivial and still immature), and Donizetti soon began to reflect it, combining it with his own stronger feeling for harmonic structure, orchestration and rhythmic energy. His later operas, especially those written for Paris and Vienna, show many signs that he studied Beethoven, Meyerbeer and Weber among others; and it is amusing to find him echoing 'Va, pensiero' from *Nabucco* in *Dom Sébastien*.

Before staking any claims for Donizetti one must allow some weight to the case against him. It is true that his work is uneven. He did write, if not too rapidly, at least without always exercising a due measure of self-criticism. Even his best operas are liable to regress without warning into footling little tunes more appropriate to a municipal bandstand than an imperial or renaissance court. The young Verdi was an even more glaring offender here, if only because he put more vim into them. It is also true that Donizetti's plots sometimes throw up

dramatic absurdities. Two flagrant examples are the happy ends of *Adelia* and *Maria Padilla*; in the latter, after a splendid tragic build-up, all logic is suddenly abandoned: the heroine recovers her lover while he is in process of marrying someone else, fires off a brilliant rondo-finale, and dies of joy—or perhaps sheer surprise. This was due not to cynicism on Donizetti's part—he was thoroughly disgusted with what he had to do—but to the censorship's refusal to permit a suicide on stage. Librettists at this period could be slapdash and inconsequent, but some of their worst excesses were imposed on them by the censors. Everyone knows the trouble Verdi had over *Rigoletto* and *Un ballo in maschera* a decade or two later, and he was a tougher character than Donizetti.

There are three main reasons for looking closely at Donizetti's serious operas. First, though none is a flawless work of art, a great many are—or could be—extremely moving in the theatre. Second—though this may come as a surprise—Donizetti was not just content to accept things as they were; he was from the first a conscious innovator, eager to expand the range of operatic form, though hampered at every stage by factors over which he had little or no control. Third, he exercised a more decisive and fruitful influence on Verdi than is commonly recognized. These points of course are connected. Marco Bonesi, a fellow-student under Mayr, said that as early as 1820 Donizetti 'had many ideas how to reform the predictable situations, the sequences of introduction, cavatina, duet, trio, finale, always fashioned the same way. "But", he added sadly, "what to do with the blessed theatrical conventions? Impresarios, singers, and the public as well, would hurl me into the farthest pit"'.<sup>2</sup> He told Mayr in a letter of February 1828 that he wanted to break the yoke of the finales, an ambition he achieved with striking success. In 1832, long before Verdi, he was demanding brevity from his librettists. In 1839, when preparing *Poliuto* for production in Paris, he rejoiced in the chance to get rid of crescendos and cadenzas and in the emphasis laid by French taste on motivation between verses of cabalettas, so that they do not become mere repetitions. His letters are full of care for dramatic detail; again and again they refute E. J. Dent's suggestion<sup>3</sup> that he took little trouble to read the libretto he was setting.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by William Ashbrook, *Donizetti*, London, 1965, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> 'Donizetti: an Italian Romantic', *Fanfare for Ernest Newman*, ed. Herbert Van Thal, London, 1955, p. 92. The reference is to the early operas, but the implication is extended to the later.

It was not so easy to put this into practice, and Donizetti had to proceed cautiously; but proceed he did, loosening the forms by degrees from the inside. One characteristic feature was his treatment of recitative, in particular the relaxation and expansion of dialogue sections by means of short lyrical ariosos, often only a few bars long but intensely expressive of the emotion behind the words. Besides varying the design this helped to deepen the characterization. It is rare in Bellini and almost unknown in Rossini, even in *William Tell*, but common in Donizetti's operas from *Il paria* (January 1829) and *Anna Bolena* (December 1830). The final scene of *Anna Bolena*, his first great international success, is a masterpiece of dramatic pathos of a type personal to Donizetti, but quite unlike Bellini or for that matter Verdi (though it haunted Verdi's memory). The unhappy queen languishes in prison, her mind wandering, after being condemned to death by her brutal husband, whose marriage procession with her supplanter Jane Seymour is heard backstage. Instead of the conventional and far inferior mad scene he was to write in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and which we meet in Bellini, Meyerbeer and elsewhere, Donizetti gives the queen a series of ariosos of varying length, interspersed with comments from the chorus (her ladies in waiting) and other characters. By expanding the recitative and at the same time breaking up the cavatina sections he produced a fluid texture that reflects the quickly changing moods—until the final cabaletta, which is more conventional. The last scene of *Maria Stuarda* is similar, though not quite on the same level; and so is much of Act IV of *La Favorite*. Vivid little ariosos that never return occur throughout Donizetti's serious operas. Sometimes, as with the first phrase uttered by Lucrezia Borgia or Tasso's 'Poco dunque ti pare' in Act II of *Torquato Tasso*, he seems to toss away material that could have formed a whole movement. There are beautiful ariosos for Emma in Act I of *Ugo, Conte di Parigi*, both Parisina and Duke Azzo in the bedroom scene of *Parisina*, Nello in Act II of *Pia de' Tolomei*, Pedro the Cruel at his first entry in *Maria Padilla* (and for Maria herself near the beginning of Act III) and countless others. Most of them are mere fragments, yet they haunt the memory and carry the individual stamp of the composer.

One of the notorious stumbling-blocks to appreciation of Italian opera of this period is the regularity of the aria plan. All too often an expressive cantabile is followed by a bouncy cabaletta over a standardized accompaniment that may bring

applause to the singer (which of course was one of its intentions) but causes the fastidious listener's heart to sink. It is not easy to vary them, as Verdi complained later. Donizetti wrote quite enough of the regular pattern, which he eventually discarded; but he also evolved a new type—the slow cabaletta, generally marked 'andante' or 'moderato' or 'maestoso', which pays more attention to the dramatic requirements than to the pyrotechnical demands of the singer. If there is coloratura, it is expressive rather than spectacular; and that applies to Donizetti's coloratura in general, much more than to Rossini's. Perhaps the most familiar example of the slow cabaletta is Edgar's 'Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali' at the end of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Quite a few other operas, including *Parisina*, *Pia de' Tolomei*, *Torquato Tasso* and *Roberto Devereux*, end with a movement of this kind. There are no fewer than five in the score of *Pia de' Tolomei*, and almost as many in *Maria di Rohan* and *Gemma di Vergy*. The cabaletta of Chevreuse's aria in Act I of *Maria di Rohan* is actually slower than the cantabile before it. These are all dark tragic operas, in which the hero or heroine is betrayed, condemned or killed by someone he or she loves; more often than not it is a wife despatched by her jealous husband. One response to this threat is to hurl defiance in the face of destiny, as Anna Bolena does; but other solutions can be more moving and revealing of character, quite apart from the variety they introduce into the musical design. Pia's final aria begins with a Larghetto expressing love for her husband, who has already poisoned her out of groundless jealousy, though she does not know it; in the 'andante' cabaletta she forgives him, and prays for peace between the warring factions. During the second stanza the drooping vocal line and the accompaniment gradually disintegrate as she grows weaker. *Parisina* is suddenly confronted with the corpse of her lover, who has been executed by her husband; her cabaletta is a lament over his body, and at the end she collapses. One of the most striking examples is Queen Elizabeth's 'Quel sangue versato' at the end of *Roberto Devereux*. If we can forget the historical absurdity of her abdication in favour of James I, this makes a superb end to a very impressive opera.<sup>4</sup> Her plans for rescuing Essex, whose execution she has ordered but planned to circumvent, have been frustrated by the jealous Duke of Nottingham, with

<sup>4</sup> See Winton Dean, 'Donizetti and Queen Elizabeth', *Opera*, iv (1953), 333–6; reprinted in *The Opera Bedside Book*, ed. Harold Rosenthal, London, 1965, pp. 152–7.

whose wife Essex has been having an affair. The cannon from the Tower announces the execution, and the queen gives vent to a vision of blood and horror in a superb 'maestoso' melody nearly 30 bars long. This is not at all like Bellini's long tunes, but it is very similar in mood and outline to Lady Macbeth's 'Vieni t'affretta', in which another formidable queen has the smell of blood in her nostrils.<sup>a</sup>

These slow cabalettas not only underline a tragic dénouement. They can set up a situation rich in dramatic irony at the first entrance of the principal character. The heroine of *Gemma di Vergy* sits at home longing for her husband's return from the wars. In the first scene of the opera we learn that he intends to divorce her and marry again. When she makes her entry she does not know this, but everyone else on stage does, though each views the prospect differently. Her cantabile expresses her horror of war, which has been disturbing her dreams. She is then told that her husband is returning that very day, and cries out in joy. By setting this cabaletta in slow tempo, while the chorus remarks that her happiness is doomed, Donizetti exploits the irony of Gemma's predicament to the full.<sup>b</sup>

So far as I know, Donizetti was not anticipated in this type of cabaletta. More surprisingly it was not seized upon by Verdi, perhaps because in his cabaletta days he was more concerned to release energy than express pathos. What is in no doubt is the contribution the slow cabaletta made to the flavour of Romantic melancholy, founded not in sentimentality but in dramatic irony, that pervades all the best of Donizetti's serious operas and is perhaps his most personal contribution to the form.

Other factors operated to the same end: choice of subject, vocal layout, harmony, orchestration and the shaping of individual scenes and movements. Donizetti was not interested only in swooning heroines. At least three operas, *Sancia di Castiglia*, *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Belisario*, have no love interest at all in the usual sense. They are concerned partly with politics and partly with relationships inside the family, especially between parents and children. The mutual love of father and daughter that is one of the central themes of *Belisario* was not lost on Verdi; the duet in which they set out for their lonely exile is paralleled and directly echoed in the last act of *Luisa Miller*, even down to the slow cabaletta (one of the very rare examples in Verdi). Both operas incidentally have librettos by Cammarano. There is another fine father-

daughter duet in Act III of *Maria Padilla*. In *Torquato Tasso* Donizetti tried to combine a tragic theme, the love of the poet for a woman above his station, with a *buffo* element represented by a comic bass and a male chorus of courtiers who make fun of him and also comment on the action. It is perhaps not a complete success, but it shows enterprise, and one can almost sense the courtiers in *Rigoletto*. This is even more evident in Act III of *La Favorite*, where the courtiers mock Fernando when he finds he has married the king's discarded mistress; we think too of the laughter of Samuel and Tom in *Ballo*. *Torquato Tasso* is not an *opera semiseria*, a type descending from the French Revolution *opéra comique* with a bourgeois domestic background, as in *Emilia di Liverpool* and *Linda di Chamounix*, or for that matter *La sonnambula*, but an attempt to enlarge the scope of Romantic opera by bringing together two things much further apart, heroic tragedy on the one hand and broad comedy on the other, as Verdi was to do in *La forza del destino*.

The fact that Tasso, the lover-hero, is a baritone considerably darkens the vocal colour. This is very characteristic of Donizetti's serious operas, especially the later ones. In *Belisario*, *Maria Padilla* and *Caterina Cornaro*, as well as *Tasso*, the tenor is almost a peripheral figure; in *Maria Padilla* he is the heroine's father who goes mad, thereby poaching the conventional prerogatives of both baritone and soprano. Again and again the soprano and baritone carry the main burden of the plot, and there is often a prominent bass as well. *Marino Faliero* has four basses and baritones, all important in the action, two of them very substantial parts composed for Tamburini and Lablache. In *Gemma di Vergy*, *Parisina*, *Pia de' Tolomei* and *Maria di Rohan* the powerful figure of the jealous baritone husband dominates the opera, vocally and dramatically. The magnificent scene in Act II of *Parisina*, where the Duke is maddened by jealousy on hearing his sleeping wife murmur her lover's name, inevitably suggests Othello—and the grim concentration of the music is closer to Verdi's opera than to Rossini's. *La Favorite* has a mezzo-soprano heroine, another dominant baritone in the king, and a Grand-Inquisitorial bass in the prior of the monastery. It was Donizetti who established the type of dramatic baritone that Verdi was to put to such splendid use.

As early as *Anna Bolena*, and much more later, Donizetti's operas show a growing preoccupation with the darker emotions of guilt, jealousy and remorse. They inspired some of his finest

music and, especially in the late works written for Paris and Vienna, are reflected in a greatly enriched harmony and orchestration, the result no doubt of contact with French Grand Opera. The bold, restless harmonic style of parts of *Dom Sébastien*, his last opera (1843), is closer to middle-period Verdi, even the Verdi of the Requiem, than to Bellini or Donizetti's own operas of a few years earlier. *La Favorite* shows how little justification there is for criticising Donizetti's accompaniments for their 'thinness and conventionality'. Not that the Italian operas lack either fulness or individuality in scoring: witness the trio in *Maria Padilla* accompanied by cor anglais alone, the long introduction for bass clarinet and harp to Act II of *Maria di Rudenz* and the original obbligato for glass harmonica in the *Lucia* mad scene.

The sombre orchestral introductions with which Donizetti liked to begin an act or important scene are often memorable in themselves and very effective in setting an atmosphere. The introduction to Act II of *Lucia* is a familiar example, and *Poliuto* and *Maria Padilla* each have more than one of outstanding quality. There is a hint of Florestan's dungeon in the C minor Andantino that begins Act III of *Torquato Tasso*. Some of these introductions suggest other Romantic composers, and not always earlier ones: for example the extended Schumannesque syncopations that begin Act II of *Sancia di Castiglia* or the startling anticipation of Mahler's First Symphony in the prelude to *Dom Sébastien*, which recurs as a funeral procession in Act III of the opera. The opening bars of Essex's scene in the Tower in *Roberto Devereux* were actually borrowed by Verdi; they might equally be early Wagner. One theme in the introduction to Act IV of *La Favorite* has a strong flavour of *Tannhäuser*; it may or may not be a coincidence that the first edition of the vocal score was arranged by Wagner. Donizetti's use of the horns, generally four of them, to evoke a sinister or Romantic atmosphere has not a little in common with *Der Freischütz*, for example in the prelude to *Maria Padilla*; it is worlds apart from *William Tell*, where Gessler's horns—an important element in the drama since for two acts they are all we hear of the tyrant—sound neither sinister nor romantic but merely jolly.

One feature in which Donizetti is nearly always at his best, and consistently superior to Bellini, is the construction of ensembles, especially the slow pieces that concentrate the action at the beginning of a finale. Everyone knows the sextet in *Lucia*, but there are plenty of others of equal quality, sextets

in Act I of *Belisario* and Act III of *Maria Padilla*, the quartet in Act III of *La Favorite*, a magnificent septet in Act IV of *Dom Sébastien*, and a complex trio-cum-quartet in Act II of *Gemma di Vergy*. If a headlong stretta follows, which is not always the case, it is sometimes arrested at the climax, by a recitative in which the hero surrenders his sword in Act I of *Ugo, Conte di Parigi*, by a death sentence and a drop from 'vivace' to 'maestoso' in Act III of *Dom Sébastien*. Towards the end of his life Donizetti tended to abandon the stretta and adopt unorthodox ends to acts and whole operas. In *Dom Sébastien* again, an opera whose principal feature is its uncompromising dramatic honesty, he concludes Act II with a romance without cabaletta, its second stanza enriched by new chromatic harmony, and the whole opera with a free recitative such as Verdi employed at the end of *Simon Boccanegra*. The lovers are shot just when they think they are safe; instead of giving them a duet of hope or farewell Donizetti cuts them off before they can open their mouths, and the opera ends with a defiant cry from the loyal poet Camoens. The whole scene occupies three pages in the vocal score. This is nearly twice as long as the astonishing last scene of *Maria di Rohan*. After B flat has been established as the key, there is a violent plunge into D major for the climactic recitative; B flat is regained for a single bar, whereupon the tonality collapses into E flat minor during the quick nine-bar coda, and only just gets back in time for the curtain. An earlier and weaker opera, *Marino Faliero*, also ends with a dramatic recitative, punctuated by the fall of an executioner's axe. The finale of *Belisario* is on the face of it a big solo scene for the soprano, the commonest type of conclusion in Rossini and Bellini. But the cantabile is separated from the cabaletta—another slow one—by a beautifully managed episode, a conflation of funeral march, ensemble and recitative during which Belisario is carried in mortally wounded; the voices are superimposed conversationally on the march rhythm without interrupting it, and Belisario's death triggers off the cabaletta, sung by his treacherous but now penitent wife. This opera also contains a prime example of the patriotic *Risorgimento*-type aria, 'Trema, Bisanzio', which has the same accompaniment figure as 'Di quella pira' in *Il trovatore*.

The big double arias and duets by no means always adhere to the conventional plan of a cantabile followed by a two-stanza cabaletta; in the late operas they very seldom do. Almost all the set pieces in *Caterina Cornaro*, *Maria di Rohan* and

*Dom Sébastien* and many in earlier operas (the father-daughter duet in *Maria Padilla* is an outstanding example) are free and unpredictable in design, abandoning symmetry to follow the dictates of the plot. This is far too complex a matter to explore here, but Donizetti's duets and trios in particular, and a comparison of his methods with those of Verdi, would make a rewarding study. A very effective stroke that Donizetti made his own, though it was not peculiar to him, is the introduction of the second voice in a duet with a change of mode as well as new material. There are two beautiful examples in *Poliuto*. In Act II the baritone Severo has a regular sixteen-bar stanza in E minor with short agitated phrases, at the end of which Paolina (who formerly loved him but is now married to Poliuto) enters with a much broader melody in E major beginning on a long-held top E. The fact that her words are sad ('Ei non vegga il pianto mio') enhances the impact. A similar stroke, in the same key, distinguishes the duet for Paolina and Poliuto in the last act: she urges him, in the minor, to escape a horrible death by renouncing his Christian faith; he proclaims his belief in a happier afterlife in the major, again entering on the top E. One thinks inevitably of 'Ah! che la morte ognora' in *Il trovatore*, especially as the accompaniment changes to triplets at the same time. There is a similar moment in the duet for the two sisters in Act II of *Maria Padilla*. Other personal traits—again not unique—are Donizetti's habit of vacillating between major and tonic minor in the course of a melody, to produce an effect of plaintiveness or pathos, and of modulating unexpectedly just before the end of a paragraph. In Camoens's cavatina in Act I of *Dom Sébastien* he goes from F to A in the third bar of a nine-bar tune, regains F in the fifth and is in G flat by the seventh. In the same character's Act III romance, a much longer melody, he suddenly moves from E flat to G flat two bars before the cadence, and then after regaining the tonic adds a second paragraph in E flat minor. Neither of these arias has anything approaching a cabaletta.

Donizetti makes happy use of Rossini's trick of a running tune in the orchestra, sometimes repeated in different keys, while the voices carry on independently, but he invests it with a more powerful irony, for example in Act II of *Lucia*, where the almost flippant A major melody during the recitative before the signing of the marriage contract returns with mocking effect when Edgar learns of the wedding. There is a very striking instance of this sort of texture in the little duet

for two spies in Act I of *Lucrezia Borgia*, where a sinuous tune winds its ironical way through the orchestra, punctuated by pairs of staccato quaver chords, while the voices hatch a plot in free parlando. This was almost certainly the inspiration for the colloquy between Rigoletto and Sparafucile, which is identical in layout and dramatic context and conveys the same impression of dirty business afoot, and more remotely for the entry of the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlos*.

Anyone who considers Donizetti's choruses may at once recoil from the tiresome jauntiness of the wedding guests in *Lucia*, one of the most prehensile tunes ever written. But he can do much better than this. *Belisario* contains choruses of puzzled senators in the first act and exiles in the second that are not only impressive in themselves but go a long way towards establishing these bodies as living characters in the drama instead of a mere background. The scene in Act II of *Roberto Devereux* where the courtiers await the outcome of Essex's trial, based on an ostinato figure and a long winding melody in the orchestra, is a marvellous compound of lyricism and suspense. The unison prayer for male voices, 'Divo spirito', in Act II of *Pia de' Tolomei* is fully the equal of the famous prayers in *Mosé* and *Nabucco*. *Lucrezia Borgia* has three vivid choruses of ruffians, at once swashbuckling, furtive and sinister, that play an important part in the plot, and *Caterina Cornaro* a chorus of assassins so fraught with menace that it reduces Banquo's murderers in *Macbeth* to the status of a child's puppets.

The many direct anticipations of Verdi to be found in Donizetti's operas are not confined to the chance resemblances one would expect between two near-contemporaries using the same idiom and writing for the same audience.<sup>5</sup> Of course Verdi was influenced by Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti—it could hardly be otherwise—and sometimes used them as models. But I suggest that Donizetti was easily the most important of the three, for two principal reasons. First, when Verdi echoes him either literally (which is not to say deliberately) or in more generalized fashion, one constantly finds quite intricate parallels, not only in mood and material but in key and dramatic situation. Second, these echoes are far less common in Verdi's early operas than in those of his growing and complete maturity. There are very few before the

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller account see my paper 'Some Echoes of Donizetti in Verdi's Operas', *Atti del III<sup>o</sup> congresso internazionale di studi verdiani*, Parma, 1974, pp. 122-47

first version of *Macbeth* (1847) but a great many in the operas from then on, up to and including *La forza del destino*. It was when Verdi began to individualize his characters and explore their more complex emotions that he became most susceptible to Donizetti's influence. This is not as surprising a conclusion as it may sound. We are apt to look at the early Verdi with hindsight, knowing what he was to achieve later, and scarcely knowing Donizetti at all. But whereas the Verdi of the 1840s was a composer of immense energy and spasmodic insight, the Donizetti of the later serious operas was a more experienced and in many ways a more subtle artist. The early Verdi was simply not ready for him.

Direct echoes in the same keys are sometimes very striking, as between the last scene of *Anna Bolena*, where the queen's mind wanders into the past (Ex. 1a), and another queen in the same situation, Lady Macbeth sleep-walking (Ex. 1b).

## Ex. 1

(a) [Moderato]



(b) [Largo]



The virtually identical melody, harmony, rhythm and key in Exx. 2a and 2b correspond to their virtually identical dramatic situations and even their position in the operas. Both are ariosos of the characteristic Donizettian type, mentioned earlier, the first sung by Percy in *Anna Bolena* after he knows he has lost Anna for ever, the second by the duke in *Rigoletto* when he thinks he has lost Gilda. Another pregnant arioso is sung by Ghino in the first scene of *Pia de' Tolomei* when he thinks Pia has betrayed his love (Ex. 3). It is scarcely necessary to quote the parallel in *La traviata*. The duets in *Belisario* and *Luisa Miller* in which father and daughter decide to spend the rest of their lives in exile are similar all through in mood and layout, and built around the same keys, F major and minor and A flat major, though Donizetti's cabaletta is in F, Verdi's in A flat. Each begins

## Ex. 2

(a) [Lento] Andante

*Forcè*

no, no, no. An-na per me tui se-i An-na sol-tan - - - - to

## (b) Andante

DOTTI

*cantabile*

co-lei che pri-ma po-tè in ques-to co- - - re de-star la fiam-ma di coe-tan - - ti af-fet-ti?

## Ex. 3

Moderato assai

*con grande espressione*

GAMPO

Oh Pia men-da - - ce O - v'è, o-v'è il ri-go - - re

with a falling seventh; Belisario sings it to the words 'O figlia!' (Ex. 4a), Verdi leaves it to the orchestra (Ex. 4b). Or again, two tenors cursing, both (as in the last pair of examples) to words by Cammarano; Edgar in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, on

## Ex. 4

(a) BELISARIO

Moderato

Oh fi - - gia! Dun-que andiam; de' gior-ni mie-i tu sei l'an-ge-lo, tu il du-ce, tu fra l'om-bre sei la lu-ce del tra-di-to ge-ni-tor... E de-gli oc-chi che per-de-i tu mi sei più ca-ra an-cor!

(b) **Allegro assai moderato**  
(*con molta passione*)  
MILLER

*pp* An-drem, ra-min-gi e po-ve-ri, o-ve il des-tin ci  
por-ta... un pan chie-den-do a - gi'uo-mi-ni an-drem... di por-ta in por-ta...

Lucia's betrayal, and Rodolfo in the last act of *Luisa Miller*, cursing the day he was born, may sing in different keys, but rhythm, accompaniment and general shape are the same.

*Il trovatore* echoes at least five Donizetti operas—six if we count one melody that occurs in two works—of which three might be mentioned here. First, the duet for Elizabeth and Essex in Act I of *Roberto Devereux* (Ex. 5) is mirrored in the

## Ex. 5

[Vivace]

ELISABETTA

Un lam-po un lam-po ce-ri-bi-le

trio that ends Act I of *Trovatore*. Second, a prominent theme from the finale of Act II of *Poliuto* (Ex. 6), which also occurs

## Ex. 6

Larghetto  
POLIUTO

*p* Dio pro-teg-gi l'u-mil ser-vo a mo-rir per te qui ven-go  
*etc.*

in *Maria di Rudenz*, may have suggested part of the Count di Luna's 'Il balen'. And third, Riccardo's aria 'Alma soave e cara' in Act II of *Maria de Rohan* (Ex. 7), a late opera consistently prophetic of Verdi in mood, especially in the last two acts, has a parallel in Leonora's 'Mira, di acerbe lagrime', which has the same accompaniment figure and the same

harmony, including the soulful diminished seventh in the third bar.

## Ex. 7

*Cantabile* CHALAIS

Al - ma so - a - ve ca - - ra

che al tuo Fat-to - re a - scen - di

There are two remarkable reminiscences of *Roberto Devereux* in *Un ballo in maschera*. In key, harmony and both its principal phrases the introduction to Essex's scene in the Tower (Ex. 8a) was virtually taken over by Verdi for the opening of Ulrica's incantation (Ex. 8b). There is a more subtle relationship

## Ex. 8

(a) *Larghetto*

(b) *Andante sostenuto*

between the two big love duets, whose dramatic situation is identical: the tenor is keeping a secret assignation with the

wife of his closest friend, and this leads directly to the catastrophe. The closest thematic resemblance is between a secondary idea—not the main theme—in the slow  $\frac{3}{4}$  sections near the beginning, bars 5–8 in Donizetti, 13–16 in Verdi. Each composer repeats the phrase, but Verdi—now in full maturity more than ten years after Donizetti's death—makes more of it. There is an interesting tonal link here. Donizetti's movement is in D flat, Verdi's in F; but when Amelia takes the phrase over from Riccardo she steers it into Donizetti's key with the harmony it had on its first appearance in his opera but not in Verdi's.<sup>c</sup>

One might suppose that by 1862, the year of *La forza del destino*, Verdi would have outgrown Donizetti. Far from it, though he does of course enrich him. There are three surprisingly close parallels. One is the scene which occurs in both *Forza* and *La Favorite* where the heroine (Leonora in each case) comes to a monastery, hears monks praying accompanied by an organ, and longs for sanctuary and forgiveness. The whole treatment of voices and accompaniment, as well as one phrase sung by the soprano, is remarkably similar. When Verdi's Leonora thanks the Father Superior for giving her sanctuary and calls on the angelic choir to welcome her, the music echoes the duet from *Poliuto* in which hero and heroine claim the blessing of the Church in their martyrdom (Ex. 9). The tune is not the same, but almost everything else is; key, rhythm in the voice parts (steady  $\frac{4}{4}$  crotchets), accompaniment with triplet arpeggios on the harp, and even some of the words (a few bars later Verdi's Leonora sings 'Plaudite, o cori angelici, mi perdonò il Signor' to a variant of the same melody). And the overture to *La Favorite*, produced in 1840, must surely have been at the back of Verdi's mind when he wrote the overture to *Forza* more than twenty years later. There are resemblances between all three themes in both works, but the most notable feature is the similarity of atmosphere and design: an agitated nervous main theme in the minor, then a soaring melody with a climax in the major, starting quietly against tremolo accompaniment and rising higher at the second statement before falling back to a recall of the opening. The climax of both overtures is a *fortissimo* statement of the major melody at the end.<sup>d</sup>

There is one significant point about these examples. None of them is musically trivial. They tend to show both composers at their best and most characteristic, taking into consideration the period when they were written. The conclusion to be

## Ex. 9

(a) [Allegro vivace]

PAOLINA

Il suon dell' ar - pe an - ge - - - li-che in -

- tor - no a me già sen - - - to

(b) [Moderato] Più mosso

LEONORA

Tua gra - - - zia, o Di - - - o, sor -

- ri - de al - la re - jet - - - ta!

drawn is that there was a quality in Donizetti's imagination that appealed to the maturing Verdi, who responded in much the same way to similar dramatic stimuli. His unconscious memory did the rest. From *Rigoletto* on of course he far outstripped Donizetti. But the man who inspired Verdi in this way was a considerable artist in his own right.

The following recorded illustrations were heard during the lecture:

- a Part of the cabaletta 'Quel sangue versato' from Act III of *Roberto Devereux*.
- b The cavatina 'Una voce al cor d'intorno' and cabaletta 'Egli riede?' from Act I of *Gemma di Vergy*.
- c The opening  $\frac{6}{8}$  sections of the duets 'Dacchè tornasti, ahi misera!' from Act I of *Roberto Devereux* and 'Non sai tu che se l'anima mia' from Act II of *Un ballo in maschera*.
- d Part of the overture to *La Favorite*.