

GAETANO DONIZETTI (1797 - 1848)

On Saturday August 8, 2015, the Merola Program presented the opera “Don Pasquale” to rave reviews. Since September is traditionally “opera month” at Il Cenacolo, I thought it would be good to do an essay about the composer of this and other popular operas, Gaetano Donizetti. He was part of an early Italian operatic generation, a leading composer of the bel canto opera style during the first half of the nineteenth century, and one of the composers who popularized Italian opera in Europe. I hope you find it informative and interesting.



DOMENICO GAETANO MARIA DONIZETTI was born in 1797 in Bergamo’s Borgo Canale quarter, located just outside the city walls. The youngest of three sons of the caretaker of the *monte di pieta* (the municipal pawnshop), Donizetti began his musical studies with Giovanni Simone Mayr, a Bavarian priest who was musical director of Sta. Maria Maggiore, Bergamo’s chief church, and also a successful composer of opera. He had founded the Lezioni Caritatevoli School in Bergamo in 1805 for the purpose of providing musical training for choirboys, including classes in literature, beyond what choirboys ordinarily received up until the time that their voices broke. In 1807, Andrea Donizetti attempted to enroll two of his sons in the school, but the elder, Giuseppe (then 18), was considered too old. (Giuseppe went on to a musical composition career of his own. In 1828 he became Instructor General of the Imperial Ottoman Music at the court of Sultan Mahmud II). Gaetano (then nine years old) was accepted into the program. As a choirboy Donizetti did not shine, but Mayr perceived in him a nascent musical ability and

secured his entry into the Liceo Filarmonico (the music school) at Bologna, where he had a thorough training in fugue and counterpoint. His father had hoped he would become a church composer, but, though he did compose a vast quantity of sacred music, his natural instinct was for the theater.

After some minor compositions under the commission of Paolo Zanca, Donizetti scored his first success with *Enrico di Borgogna*, which first appeared in 1818 at the Teatro San Luca, in Venice. With his fourth opera, *Zoraida di Granata*, he impressed Domenico Barbaia, a prominent theater manager, and Donizetti was offered a contract to compose in Naples. Writing in Rome and Milan in addition to Naples, Donizetti achieved some notoriety (his 75 operas written in the space of just 12 years were usually popular successes, but the critics were often unimpressed).



*Donizetti as a schoolboy
in Bergamo*

In 1830 his *Anna Bolena*, produced in Milan, carried his fame abroad to all the European capitals and eventually across the Atlantic. Two years later he scored another lasting success with *L’elisir d’amore* (*The Elixir of Love*), a comedy full of charm and character, considered one of the masterpieces of comic opera. *L’elisir’s* libretto was by Felicia Romani, the best theater poet of the day.

This was soon followed by *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), also with a libretto by Romani, which consolidated his reputation at La Scala in Milan and elsewhere. Then, like the opera composers Gioacchino Rossini and

Vincenzo Bellini before him, he next gravitated to Paris, where he presented *Marino Faliero*. This opera, although not a failure, suffered from comparison with Bellini's *I Puritani*, which had been produced a few weeks before. Upset by the response it received, he returned to Naples for the production of his tragic masterpiece, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835). This opera, based loosely on Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*, became his most famous opera, and one of the high points of the *bel canto* tradition, reaching stature similar to Bellini's *Norma*.

Donizetti continued to work in Naples until 1838, when municipal censors objected to the production of his *Poliuto*, which dealt with a Christian martyr, on the ground that the sacred subject was unsuitable for the stage. He thereupon returned to Paris, where the opera field had been cleared for him by Bellini's early death and Rossini's retirement. There he revived some of his best operas, though *Lucrezia Borgia* had to be withdrawn because of objections by Victor Hugo, on whose drama the libretto was based. *Poliuto* was renamed and produced in 1840 as *Les Martyrs* with a French text by Eugène Scribe. It was preceded two months earlier by his opéra comique *La fille du régiment* (*The Daughter of the Regiment*), which gained enormous popularity over the years because of the performances of various leading sopranos of the 19th century. Later in the same year the Paris Opéra produced *La Favorite*, Donizetti's first attempt at French grand opera.

Bartolomeo Merelli had become director of La Scala and also of the Kärnthner Theater in Vienna. He engaged Donizetti to compose an opera for La Scala. The work, *Maria Padilla*, was produced in 1841 only a few weeks before the famous premiere of Verdi's *Nabucco*. Merelli also commissioned an opera for his Viennese theater. There, *Linda di Chamounix*, a romantic opera, was produced in 1842 and dedicated to the empress Maria Anna. Donizetti had already been brought to the attention of the emperor Ferdinand I by his chancellor, Prince Metternich, and had conducted Rossini's *Stabat Mater* in his presence. He now received the appointment of official composer to the Emperor, which obliged him to be in Vienna for six months in the year, but left him free to work elsewhere during the rest. At the same time Rossini, who had always furthered Donizetti's interests in Paris and entrusted to him the first performance of his *Stabat Mater* at Bologna, urged him to undertake the vacant directorship of the *Liceo* in that city. But Donizetti felt that he could not undertake this responsibility and preferred to continue his profitable operatic career. Back in Paris, he produced at the Théâtre Italien the delightful and witty comic opera, *Don Pasquale* (1843).

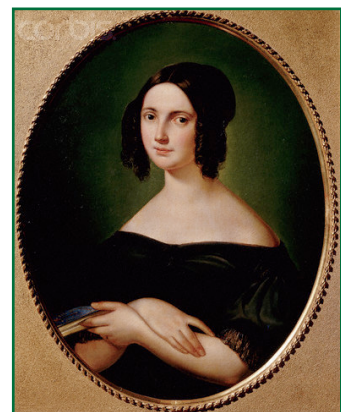
Donizetti also conducted opera in addition to composing masterpieces. In March, 1842, at the specific request of Rossini, he conducted the Italian premiere (it had had its world premiere in Paris in January, 1842) of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* in Bologna. Donizetti reported the public's reaction: "*The enthusiasm is impossible to describe. Even at the final rehearsal, which Rossini attended, in the middle of the day, he was accompanied to his home to the shouting of more than 500 persons. The same thing the first night, under his window, since he did not appear in the hall.*"



Catherine Hayes and Sims Reeves
at La Scala in Donizetti's
Lucia di Lammermoor in 1846.

PHYSICAL BREAKDOWN

In 1828 Donizetti had married Virginia Vasselli, the sister of one of his closest friends in Rome; they made their home in Naples. He was deeply devoted to her and never really recovered his spirits after her death from cholera soon after the stillbirth of a son in 1837. His distress was exacerbated by the fact that her death came within a year of the death of his parents. He also was distressed since none of the three children born to them survived birth. It seems clear that syphilis was already taking its toll on his family.



Virginia Vaselli

By the 1840s, Donizetti was already well in the grip of his fatal disease. He produced his last important opera, *Dom Sébastien*, with a libretto by Scribe, at the Paris Opéra in 1843 under the strain of constant headaches and occasional lapses of mental capacity. He suddenly aged, lost his good looks and his equability of temperament, which had hitherto seen him through the trials of operatic production. *Dom Sébastien*, though unfavorably reviewed in the press, was nonetheless a success with the public.

The remaining years were a story of degeneration into hopeless insanity. As a patient in a private asylum near Paris, he had considerable difficulties with the French police, who were supported by the doctors. After visits from friends, including Giuseppe Verdi, Donizetti was sent back to Bergamo, his hometown accompanied by his devoted nephew Andrea, son of his eldest brother, Giuseppe. He died in the house of the noble family Scotti on April 8, 1848, a victim of general paralysis which afflicts the syphilitic insane, deprived of willpower, speech and physical control.



Donizetti and his Friends,
by Luigi Deleidi, 1840

After his death Donizetti was buried in the cemetery of Valtesse, but in the late 19th century his body was transferred to Bergamo's Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore near the grave of his teacher, Johann Simon Mayr. It was a pitiable end for such a happy, carefree, and handsome man who, unlike Bellini, was never envious of the successes of other composers and at all times displayed an openhearted generosity. To

the French composer Hector Berlioz, for example, whose criticisms in *Le Journal des Débats* were consistently hostile, he spontaneously sent a letter of introduction to Prince Metternich when Berlioz was about to leave for Vienna.

Donizetti always won more favor from the public than from the critics. During his lifetime his success was enormous and the rewards considerable. His popularity continued until the end of the 19th century, but by 1914 his operas had almost disappeared from the operatic repertoire, overshadowed by the more substantial masterpieces of Verdi and Richard Wagner. In the 1950s there was a revival of interest in his works, after which it seemed unlikely that, at least, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *L'elisir d'amore*, and *Don Pasquale* would ever be allowed to pass into oblivion.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from Classical Cat Website; Dyneley Hussey article on the Encyclopedia Britannica website; Donizetti Society website; and Wikipedia.