



The Myth of Donizetti's Three Queens Further Thoughts on the Composer

Gaetano Donizetti's Three Queens Trilogy is a modern invention. I know of no evidence that Donizetti, working with three different librettists, had any such unified creation in mind. The operas *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux* were written over a period of eight years, from 1830 to 1837, with 29 intervening operas by this phenomenally prolific composer.

And what of that virtually unknown fourth opera from 1829, *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (*Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle*)? The work is a musical delight that concludes happily, while the more famous operas all end with a bloody beheading. *Il Castello* has been championed by no less than Joyce DiDonato and Mariella Devia. The fact remains that over the years Donizetti wrote four, not three, operas about the Tudor queens, principally Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. All this argues for the Romantic era's fascination with sixteenth-century British history rather than any deliberate construction of a sequence of "The Three Queens."

Old women in love are rarely the protagonists of operas, yet *Roberto Devereux* revolves around an aging Queen's disastrous obsession with a much younger man who does not return her love. Donizetti's 47th opera is tightly constructed. The drama moves along briskly, uninterrupted by long passages of extended virtuosic display. Although a love quadrangle in which the four strong characters including the Duke of Nottingham, Sara his Duchess and the eponymous anti-hero all express a range of emotions, it is Queen Elizabeth who reigns over the drama. Her longings, her jealousy, her rages and the final disintegration of her regal presence dictate the course of the action. This work should rightfully be entitled *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* (*Elizabeth, Queen of England*), even though Rossini had composed an opera with this title in 1815, 38 years previously. Thieving titles was

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the least of the borrowings prevalent in Italian opera of the early nineteenth century.

Donizetti's prominence in the world of opera and his astounding speed in turning out music is best exemplified by a caricature by C-J Tavies lampooning the operatic composers of the day. It was published by the Parisian review *Panthéon musical* in 1843. Donizetti, placed at the top and center of the composition, appears beside a steam engine belching smoke as he flings pages of music right and left into the air. He wears court dress, a cutaway jacket with a flower in his lapel and breeches revealing a noticeable bulge at the crotch. The assortment of other composers below, dressed in ordinary everyday clothing, include Meyerbeer, Adolph Adam, Berlioz in his function as critic, Ambrose Thomas and a host of minor figures, now forgotten. The caption reads in part "Donizetti making under steam a multitude of popular scores throughout the universe and a thousand other places" (a quotation from Dulcamara's boastful entrance aria in *L'elisir d'amore*). No wonder many Parisian composers were jealous of his success.

Donizetti was gifted with enormous talent, inventiveness and the capacity to work long hours with intense concentration. And he worked incessantly like a man possessed, completing a staggering output of 70 operas and (including juvenilia) at least 599 songs, pieces of religious music and instrumental compositions in the 30 years between 1816 and 1845. Perhaps he knew that his creative time was limited, for he had contracted syphilis as a young man, and it eventually ravaged both mind and body. In the tertiary phase of the disease, when placed before a keyboard, he showed not the slightest recognition of the instrument.

Gaetano Donizetti died a hideous death in 1848 at the age of 52. His body now lies buried in his native town of Bergamo. Today his comic, tragic and semiseria operas delight audiences and perpetuate the memory of a man whose music flowed so freely.

- Rachel Stuhlman for the Opera Guild of Rochester