



Gaetano Donizetti's
Anna Bolena
(The first of the Three Donizetti Queens)
by
Rosalba Pisaturo
Docent
Opera Guild of Rochester
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OPERA GUILD OF ROCHESTER

Guild Address

*P.O.Box 92245
Rochester, NY 14692*

Guild Website

<http://www.operaguilddofrochester.org>

Guild Contacts

*Dr. Agneta Borgstedt, President (585) 334-2323
Art Axelrod, Vice President (585) 377-6133*

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)

Anna Bolena

Tragedia lirica in two acts

Libretto by Felice Romani
after Ippolito Piedemonte's *Henry VIII ossia Anna Bolena*
and Alessandro Pepoli's *Anna Bolena*,
both recounting the life of Anne Boleyn,
the second wife of England's King Henry VIII

Opera Premiere: December 26, 1830
Teatro Carcano in Milano

Recorded live at the Vienna State Opera, April 2011

Conductor: *Evelino Pidò*

Chorus and Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera

Staged by *Eric Genovese*

Henry VIII , King of England (bass)	<i>Ildebrando D'Arcangelo</i>
Anne Boleyn , his wife (soprano)	<i>Anna Netrebko</i>
Giovanna Seymour Lady-in waiting to the Queen (mezzo-soprano)	<i>Elina Garanča</i>
Lord Rochefort , Anne's brother (bass)	<i>Dan Paul Dumitrescu</i>
Lord Richard Percy (tenor)	<i>Francesco Meli</i>
Smeaton , page to the Queen (contralto)	<i>Elisabeth Kulman</i>
Sir Harvey , official of the King (tenor)	<i>Peter Jelosits</i>

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Anna Bolena is one of four Donizetti's operas which deal with the Tudor period of English history; in composition order, the four operas are:

Il Castello di Kenilworth of 1829, *Anna Bolena* of 1830, *Maria Stuarda*, named for Mary, Queen of Scots and which appeared in different forms in 1834 and 1835, and last *Roberto Devereux* of 1837, named after a putative lover of Queen Elizabeth I of England. The leading female characters of the last three of these operas, *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Queen Elizabeth I* are often referred to as "The Three Donizetti Queens" or the "Tudor Queens Trilogy." As a group, these operas stand as a fascinating testimony of Donizetti's interest for English subjects, and they are representative of an important tendency in the

history of Italian opera. *Anna Bolena*, the 31st opera composed by Donizetti, is the strongest of the "Tudor Trilogy," for its glorious quality of the many sequences of arias, cabalettas, ensembles and lyrical passages. It is a jewel of "*bel canto*" opera, and it turned out to be the composer's first overwhelming success. From the very night of its premiere in 1830, the composer emerged as one of the three most important names in the world of Italian opera, alongside Bellini and Rossini. The opera tells the life story of the second wife of England's King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, who is also the mother of the great future Queen Elisabeth I.

Historical opera plots appealed to the audiences of the 1820's for several reasons, one of them being that historical characters were particularly romantic and attractive, and they also gave opportunities for sumptuous and elaborate costumes.

Another reason was that the plots featuring royalty in those days gave prima donnas the role of queens as an appropriate confirmation of their status in the musical world. Then, due to the fact that Italian censors were very touchy about local history, Italian subjects were not very common and opera composers wrote operas in the hope that they would export them to the stages of London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna, cities that offered better rewards for opera composers. In fact, the success that *Anna Bolena* enjoyed outside of Italy gave Donizetti's career a new direction.

Donizetti's "historical" operas are not very accurate in their presentation of events; although *Anna Bolena* is reasonably faithful to history, but given the fact that we do not go to the opera to learn history; we experience, on the contrary,

that an opera writes history for the sake of dramatic effects and to offer something moving and convincing in the revelation of characters and conflicts through its music. In the end, the characters, as historical persons, stand out as effective operatic figures.

Anne Boleyn, an intelligent, well educated and strong-willed young lady, became the second of the six wives of King Henry VIII in 1533, when his marriage to his first wife Queen Catherine of Aragon had not been annulled yet. The only accusation against Anne could be that she plotted with the King to marry her and crown her Queen of England while he was still married. This caused problems with the Church, but she mainly did it to secure that their soon to be born child would be a legitimate one. As a mother she did nothing wrong and can be forgiven. This child would later become

England's great Queen Elizabeth I, who was only 2 and ½ when her mother was executed in 1536, after only three years on the throne.

Among other reasons for which King Henry VIII had six wives, the most crucial one is perhaps the fact that he wanted a male heir to his throne. After Anne had given birth to a girl and she had miscarried twice, the King started courting Jane Seymour, Anne's friend and confidant, while fabricating accusations of adultery, incest and witchcraft against Anne to dispose of her. None of these accusations were ever proven true, and it is an historical fact that Anne Boleyn died greatly.

The opera *Anna Bolena* is not a bad version of the English history; aside from the mad scene, Felice Romani's libretto is simple and the point, it is Donizetti's melodic genius and ability to characterize in music, that make this opera a superior

dramatic gem with a great "*bel canto*" display of dark and brilliant rendering of a face-to-face conflict between the Queen Anna on her way to the scaffold and Jane Seymour on hers to the throne. It is about the dignity and the pride of a Queen who chooses to die greatly in refusing to admit to false accusations, which would risk having her daughter declared illegitimate. It is about finding comfort in wandering back to happy days when there was true love and no suspicion of reversal of fortune.

This production of the Vienna Opera Orchestra conducted by Evelino Pidò truly leaves us breathless, its splendid rendition from the musical, dramatic and technical standards makes it a masterful vivid presentation of a splendid opera. Anna Netrebko made a comment in a recent interview that Anne Boleyn must have been quite a lady to make a king change the religion of

an entire country simply to be able to marry her, so she must die gloriously as the great queen she was. And Netrebko's performance, with her brilliant acting and her phenomenal voice is as magnificent and as exquisite as the dignity of the queen. She sings the role of the unjustly accused second wife of King Henry VIII, veering between indignant fury and tender acceptance, while demonstrating a new level of confidence in her technique. After her sensational role debut in this performance, they say that Netrebko took one giant leap forward to claiming the title of "diva assoluta" (Opera News) with a performance of rare vocal and dramatic power. Her voice gains composure and strength dominating the stage from beginning to end. Her rival, Jane Seymour, is the bright toned mezzo-soprano Elina Garanča, whose voice shines like a diamond.

ACT I

As the opera begins in the Castle of Windsor, the courtiers are wondering why the King is ignoring the Queen, who is troubled and showing her sadness, as she is reflecting on the empty splendor of her royal position. Smeton, the Queen's musician, who is secretly and madly in love with the Anna, sings of her unhappiness perhaps being caused by thoughts of some former love. Jane, Anna's confidant and close friend, is feeling guilty and remorseful for having a relationship with the King, and she is afraid that the Queen might suspect her secret. (Chap. 7, 8)

When all leave, the King enters to find Jane protesting to him that her honor forbids her to continue their relationship, she is consumed with remorse and begs him to stop seeing each other. The king instead has already planned to get rid of Anna and

promises Jane the throne as she will be his next wife. (Chap. 10)
Next thing to happen is that Lord Rochford, Anna's brother, meets Percy who had been in exile, and who has now been ordered back to England by the King, who also invites him to attend court more frequently. Anna and Percy had been in love with each other in the past, and it had been the king who had contributed to the end of their relationship when he started courting Anna himself. In the castle Percy is greeted by the King, but he is agitated to see Anna whom he still loves. Rochford advises him to be cautious, while Anna struggles to keep her composure after Percy had kissed her hand. The king orders Harvey, his guard, to observe every move of Percy and Anna. The scene ends with a wonderful quintet when all, except the King, hail a day marked by an act of clemency. (Chap. 17,18,19)

Rochford later begs and convinces his sister to have a short meeting with Percy. She reluctantly accepts to shares with her former lover her anguish for not being loved by the King, her crown, she tells him, is in reality a crown of thorns, but as the King's wife, she orders Percy not to speak of love and to stay away. Percy, who still loves her, refuses and draws the sword to kill himself. Hiding in the hall is Smeton, the musician, who is trying to return a locket he had stolen from the Queen. Thinking that Percy is hurting Anna, Smeton comes out to fight him. An Anna faints, the King arrives to see a scene that tells him that all of them have betrayed him. While Smeton tries to explain the truth, the locket is revealed. "Ecco il tradimento," the king proclaims, showing the locket to Jane and he orders the offenders to the dungeons.

At the end of Act I, the Judgment Scene, Anna's fate is sealed. The drama now focuses on the Queen's innocence and, as she is trying to gain control the situation, her voice keeps building up to dominate the stage until the final Mad Scene of the opera. Like Donizetti's ability to build an impressive climax, Netrebko rules the stage with her ability to explore a variety of emotions. Her famous line "Giudici, ad Anna?!" when the King tells her to save her story for the judges, is as intense and fearful as to remind us of Maria Callas, the best Anna Bolena ever, and the music expresses the characters' emotions so vividly that the singers can use it to electrify the audience. (Chap. 25, 26, 27, 28)

ACT II

Jane will suggest to Anna that her life can be spared if she confesses her guilt and renounces her royal title, she also tells her that the King is planning to replace her with another woman. Outraged at the thought of a rival, Anna calls on heavenly punishment on this woman and says that her own ghost will haunt her. Soon, as she realizes that her rival is Jane, she will blame only the king for this forbidden love and forgives Jane. The legendary and brilliant duet between Anna and Jane is simply a great moment in the history of opera. In a most satisfying scene, these two glorious voices harmonize together in their impressive and outstanding showdown. (Chap. 4, 5, 6)

In the final scene, Anna's state of mind leads to the last climatic outburst which shows the opera's ability to explore several human dimension. As she is waiting her execution, she goes through a variety of emotions and mental conditions, including fear, illusory calm, and confusion bordering on hallucination. The Mad Scene of *Anna Bolena* is different from the Mad Scene of Donizetti's later opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Anna's madness is not yet lunacy like Lucia's because she is not totally mad and out of control. Here we have a woman whose mind wanders in and out of reality, whose reason is cloudy and delirious, but who at the end snaps out, invokes justice upon the guilty couple, asks for mercy, and with a lucid state of mind marches to her execution, full of pride and with head held up high. Anna Bolena dies tragically and magnificently, while they announce the marriage of King Henry VIII to Jane Seymour and the infant Queen Elizabeth I stands in the background. Nebretko's performance is superb.
(Chap. 19,22,23)



