

Donizetti Double Delight

La zingara and *L'assedio di Calais*

Charles Jernigan, October 30, 2017

La zingara

Donizetti wrote over 70 operas in the 26 years or so of his career, and about 4 or 5 of them are in the regular repertory of opera houses all over the world, with another half dozen on the fringes of the standard repertory. The chance to see any of the other 60 or so of the works he wrote comes along every now and then, but the chance to see two of those rarities in three days is worth a trip for the true bel canto lover. That chance occurred on October 26 and 28th of this year in Boston and New York where there were productions of #7 or #10, depending on how you count, the obscure *La zingara* (*The Gypsy Girl*) and #55, *L'assedio di Calais* (*The Siege of Calais*). Both works saw the light of day in Naples, but one dated from Donizetti's early career (*La zingara*, 1822) and the other came from his full maturity--1836, a year after *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

La zingara is the greater rarity. It was Donizetti's very first opera for Naples (he came from practically another country--Bergamo in far northern Italy), the city which would see the premieres of more of his works than any other, and it was a big hit, receiving around 50 performances in its first year at the Teatro Nuovo. It made it to Germany (in 1823) and as far afield as Havana (in 1859) according to William Ashbrook. It was first heard in our times in 2001 at the Festival della Valle d'Itria in Martina Franca, Italy. It had never been heard in the United States until little Amore Opera revived it last spring in a "gypsy" pairing that included *Carmen* as the main draw. The spring performances were successful enough that two further performances were offered in October. Amore Opera used the performing edition which Swedish musicologist Anders Wiklund had prepared for Martina Franca 17 years ago.



Andrea Howland, *La Zingara*

Amore Opera, the inheritor of New York institution Amato Opera, performs in a small theater within the Riverside Church complex, near Manhattan School of Music and Columbia University. It is an innovative labor of love, often pairing standard works with bel canto rarities. Among those rarities previously done are Donizetti's *Olivio e Pasquale*, Mercadante's *I due Figaro* and Peter von Winter's *Das Labyrinth*.

Andrea Leone Tottola's libretto for *La zingara* has been derided as a hopeless mess, but a second look might find it more clever than not. The plots (plural) can be summarized this way: 1) The Rescue Opera: Don Ranuccio, the despotic ruler of a castle in Spain has imprisoned the elderly nobleman Don Sebastiano in the dungeon, making his servant Papaccione (a buffo bass) the jailer. Later, Ranuccio will urge his henchman Antonio to kill the prisoner in order to get his hands on Sebastiano's fortune, but the Gypsy Argilla foils the plot, releases the prisoner and restores him to his friend the Duke of Alziras. 2) The Love Plot: Ranuccio wants to force his daughter Ines to marry Antonio, but she is in love with Fernando (the tenor); Argilla sees to it that true love triumphs. 3) The Comic Descent to the Underworld: in order to get the silly jailor Papaccione out of the way, Argilla convinces him that a treasure is hidden at the bottom of a cistern which he must climb down to retrieve; while down there he is beaten black and blue by her confederates, whom he believes to be devils in the underworld. 4) The Mistaken Identities: all ends well when Fernando the tenor-lover turns out to be the Duke's brother and Argilla herself turns out to be Sebastiano's long lost daughter (through a medal she carries and a convenient birthmark); thus both Fernando and Argilla are wealthy nobles, and everyone feels good enough about the outcome to spare the villainous Ranuccio's life.

Thus Tottola's plot-heavy piece includes several standard tropes from baroque opera and opera of the early nineteenth century. Certainly the rescue plot resembles not a little Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Mayr's (Donizetti's teacher) version of the same story, *L'amor coniugale*, but also Rossini's *Torvaldo e Dorliska* and *Matilde di Shabran*. All of these works feature an "aria in catene" (a "chains" aria) for the prisoner, and so does *La zingara*. The love plot is standard opera cliché, with the relative or protector trying to dictate the heroine's husband (e.g., *The Barber of Seville*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*). The descent into the "underworld" echoes Orpheus operas like Gluck's, but also more timely works performed in Naples like Paisiello's *La grotta di Trofonio*, and that trope was still enjoying variations as late as Meyerbeer's *Dinorah*. The mistaken identity plot goes all the way back to ancient comedy, and enjoys famous operatic examples, seriously in *Il trovatore* and parodistically in Gilbert and Sullivan.

New in Tottola's plot (at least to me) is the figure of the Gypsy who comes out of nowhere to the castle to solve all these problems and untie all the knots. She might be compared to Alidoro in *La cenerentola* or Prosdócimo the Poet in *Il turco in Italia*, but essentially, she is new, and Donizetti recognized that in his letters at the time, giving Tottola the credit for the original soprano's success because she portrayed a new sort of character. In any case, Argilla seems to be the avatar of Spanish gypsies in opera, a distinguished line including Azucena and Carmen.

After seeing Amore Opera's production, I decided that Tottola was writing parody (even though the opera is officially an opera semiseria). All of these plot and character types (except for Argilla) would have been quite familiar to a Neapolitan audience in 1822, and that sophisticated

opera audience would have understood the references to previous operas and would have appreciated the humor of the clichés which Tottola piles atop one another. The official buffo roles in the opera, Papaccione and Fernando's servant Sguiglio, originally went to Carlo Casaccia and his son Raffaele, part of a family which had been serving up comedy in Neapolitan dialect for generations. Theirs was another sort of inside comedy that the Neapolitans would have expected and understood. The grubby, ill-paid Tottola himself was the subject of an epigram which became a famous bit of opera lore that held that he was "no eagle, but a nottola": "Fu di libretto autor, chiammosi Tottola/Un' aquila non era, anzi fu nottola" ("Tottola was a libretto writer/No eagle he, but a bat-like nighter." A "nottola" is a bat or night-owl, but there are several comic references in the libretto to night-owls in dialogue between Argilla and Papaccione, and one wonders if poor Tottola was parodying himself! "Don't you know that the little owl and the gypsy are the same thing?" asks Argilla. Perhaps Tottola the Nottola imagined himself as Argilla the Gypsy, who resolves all plots and makes everything come out right.

Donizetti's music in this score, while owing a lot to Rossini (which would seem to be inevitable in Naples in 1822) shows the spark of his own genius. One can hear snatches that will reappear reworked in *L'elisir d'amore* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* over a decade later. And if Argilla's rondo finale owes a lot to Cenerentola's "Non più mesta," it has its own structural uniqueness by moving back and forth between a prima donna's rondo finale and the vaudeville finale, which all the singers share with the chorus by singing the same tune. Both types were used by Rossini to provide the finales of his own comedies; in *La zingara*, Donizetti uses both types in the same piece, and adds a short soprano-mezzo duettino to the mix. Most impressive are the ensemble pieces including the Act I sextet "Ah! Come sul mattin," the Act II trio for Fernando, the Duke and Sebastiano "Miralo: è il tuo germano," and the Septet "Oh colpo! Io fui tradito." Donizetti's music also clearly parodies Gluck's famous Chorus of Furies from *Orfeo e Euridice* when Papaccione descends into the cistern. And there is a very nice duet ("Lascia, ch'io taccia") for the lovers as they resolve a lovers' spat.



Robert Garner as the villainous Don Ranuccio

Whether Tottola intended the opera to be a parody of the operatic tropes and variations of his time or not (and Donizetti's own musical parody would seem to support the theory), a modern audience could not be expected to understand references and the inside jokes two centuries old. Thus Amore Opera pushed their production towards farce, which has not changed very much since the Casaccias produced laughs with their pratfalls playing the Neapolitan fool in the early 1800's. Typical of operas written for the Teatro Nuovo, this one uses spoken dialogue between the musical numbers, and Nathan Hull, Artistic Director (and stage director), shortened and rewrote the dialogue in English, while all the sung parts were in Italian or Neapolitan as the score specified. The production was simple and amusing, with the dungeon on one side of the small stage and the cistern on the other. Characters were moved effectively, and the mostly young cast seemed to have an immensely good time with the silliness. Many of the roles were double-cast for the two performances. We heard pretty and vivacious Andrea Howland as Argilla and Mary Thorne as Ines. Perhaps surprisingly for young singers, the tenors stood out--especially Jeremy Brauner as Fernando and David Bailey as the Duca d'Alziras. Also funny were Bennett Pologe as the servant Sguiglio and Robert Garner as the villain Don Ranuccio. Douglas Martin conducted the small orchestra with verve, even though the presiding dynamic was forte, a little too loud.

Obviously the shoe-string production was an act of love (appropriate for an opera company named Amore!) and the company deserves great credit for bringing such an amusing rarity to local audiences. For this lover of bel canto, it was particularly interesting to see a work which heralded Donizetti's career and which proved that the twenty-four year old composer knew what he was doing from the beginning.

L'assedio di Calais

At the same time Amore Opera was doing *La zingara* in New York, Odyssey Opera, another innovative company, was performing *L'assedio di Calais* in Boston. This season Opera Odyssey's productions and concert operas revolve around the theme of the Hundred Years' War. *The Siege of Calais* is based on an incident at the beginning of that conflict in 1347, while the other operas, none repertory pieces, are all on the great French warrior-saint Jeanne d'Arc, who was active towards the end of the war: Tchaikovsky's *Maid of Orleans*, Norman della Joio's *The Trial at Rouen* and Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco*.

Between *La zingara* and *L'assedio di Calais*, Naples enjoyed 25 Donizetti premieres, but only two of the 15 operas he composed after *L'assedio* were for Naples. By the time he wrote *L'assedio* (1836), Donizetti was already planning his move to Paris, which by that time had replaced Naples as the center of the operatic universe. *L'assedio* was a subject which exalted French patriotism and it included ballet music, de rigueur for major serious Paris operas. Probably, Donizetti had planned to revise the work for presentation in the French capital. He wrote to Ricordi, "It is my most thoroughly worked out opera." In spite of the success, a raging cholera epidemic kept audiences away, and the opera fell into oblivion until it was recorded by Opera Rara in 1988; its first modern stage performance came in Donizetti's hometown of Bergamo in 1990. Since then there have been sporadic university performances until English Touring Opera presented a revised version in two acts in 2013. Glimmerglass presented the American premiere just last summer (2017). (I saw the ETO and Glimmerglass versions and reviewed them at the time, and I will not repeat all of the background information here.)

Donizetti recognized from the beginning that Act III was the opera's weakest, and would need revision. As written, *L'assedio* has a happy ending when the English King, Edward III, forgives the six burghers of Calais who are to be executed as an example to the populace at the behest of his queen, whom Donizetti and his librettist Cammarano call 'Isabella'. (Edward III's real wife was Philippe of Hainault, but Isabella was the name of the Queen Mother of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, of which Naples was a part, and the opera debuted as part of her name-day celebrations.).



Aurelio (Magda Gartner) kneeling, with the burghers of Calais

All three of the modern productions I have seen have tinkered with the opera in some way. English Touring Opera's was most radical, turning the happy ending into a tragedy by striking Act III with its ballet and moving the King's aria to Act I. That version, set in some unspecified place in modern times, had the heroic martyrs of Calais marching off to their doom at the end of the second (and final) act. Francesca Zambello's Glimmerglass production, kept the happy ending but ditched the ballet and appended a final joyous cabaletta for Eleonora, the wife of Calais' mayor, Eustachio. Donizetti had written this piece for a projected revision of the opera, but it is not a strong piece musically. (The Glimmerglass conductor claimed that he had "found" it in his research of source materials, but it was included in the Opera Rara recording back in 1988 as an appendix.).

Zambello set her production in the refugee camps of present-day Calais, making the pro-French, anti-English sentiment meaningless. Opera Odyssey restored the work to its original setting in medieval Calais and played some of the ballet music (not all of which is by Donizetti) as an entre-acte between Acts II and III. Wisely, they did not use the "appendix" cabaletta, and ended with a joyous chorus praising Queen "Isabella" and Edward for their clemency, just as Donizetti had done in 1836. One oddity of the production was turning the young son of Aurelio and Eleonora into a babe in arms instead of being a young boy, which makes Aurelio's pleas to his son to take care of his mother as he (Aurelio) goes off to supposed execution strange to say the least. When Isabella arrives in Act III, she is obviously very pregnant, and her own pregnancy is the cue for

her to sympathize with Eleonora and the Calasiennes since Eleonora also has an infant. One has to wonder, however, who the father is since she has been leading the troupes in Scotland for two years while her husband has been besieging Calais.



Eustachio de Saint-Pierre (James Westerman)



Lucia Cesaroni as Eleonora

Whatever directorial form this opera takes, its power and beauty are undeniable. It is, in my opinion, one of Donizetti's very best works, and its silence for over a century is unfathomable. In this case, Dan Daly provided basic scenic design of a place within and without the walls of Calais; Brooke Stanton provided rather tattered "medieval" costumes, both scenery and costumes obviously the result of a limited budget. Joshua Major's stage direction was effective and got better as the opera progressed. James Westerman was an imposing and powerful Eustachio de Saint-Pierre, the Mayor of Calais while Alan Schneider, Neal Ferreira, James Demler and Christopher Carbin were all effective as other burghers. Lucia Cesaroni was fine in her duets with Aurelio and Eustachio (although I got tired of her holding her doll-baby like a football), but the real standout of the cast was Magda Gartner as Aurelio, the musico pants role at the heart of the story. She is a mezzo-soprano of real note, handling the beautiful legato of her entrance cavatina and the intricate coloratura of its cabaletta, and she blended with Ms. Cesaroni for one of Donizetti's most melting soprano-mezzo duets. John Allen Nelson looked "every inch a king" as Edward, and sang well too. Deborah Selig was an intriguing figure as the pregnant Isabella, and Sumner Thompson and Luke Scott were just fine as agents of the king.

Gil Rose conducted a performance that increased in authority and excitement as it progressed. He certainly understands the nuance of bel canto, and he knows how to support the voices. I am also glad that he knows this beautiful opera and has brought it to the people of Boston. If we have had two different productions in the U.S. in the last few months, can others be far behind?