

Gli esiliati in Siberia, exile, and **Gaetano Donizetti**

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How many times did Donizetti write or rewrite *Otto mesi in due ore*. No one has ever been quite sure: at least five times, perhaps seven - it depends how the changes he made are viewed. Between 1827 and 1845 he set and reset the music of this strange but true tale of heroism - of the eighteen-year-old daughter who struggled through snow and ice for eight months to plead with the Tsar for the release of her father from exile in Siberia, making endless changes - giving it a handful of titles, six different poets supplying new verses (including the maestro himself), with-and-without spoken dialogue, with-and-without Neapolitan dialect, with-and-without any predictable casting (the prima donna could be a soprano, mezzo-soprano or contralto at will), and with-and-without any very enduring resolution at the end so that this extraordinary work has an even-more-fantastic choice of synopses than usual. It was this score that stayed with him throughout his years of international fame even when *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Don Pasquale* were taking the world by storm. It is perfectly possible in fact that the music of his final revision of *Otto mesi in due ore* was the very last to which he turned his stumbling hand before mental collapse put an end to his hectic career.

How did it come by its peculiar title? In 1806 Sophie Cottin published a memoir in London and Paris of a real-life Russian heroine which she called 'Elisabeth, ou Les Exilés de Sibérie'. In 1818 the *romanticismo* Guilbert de Pixérécourt (who wrote so many plays his friends called him *Shakespiérécourt*) staged a *mélodrame* based upon Mme Cottin's semi-factual romance which he called - semi-ironically - '*La Fille de l'exilé ou Huit mois en deux heures*' (Elisabeth's arctic trek taking some two hours to relate on stage). In 1820 the famous actor-manager Luigi Marchionni made an adaptation of this latter as '*La figlia dell'esiliato ossia Otto mesi in due ore*' for use by his touring company which tearjerker supplied the basis - two years later - of a Five Act ballet called '*Il trionfo dell'amor filiale*' by Gaetano Gioja. These various titles furnishing some of the curious names under which the Donizetti variants would be known.

For the composer in self-imposed exile in Naples *Otto mesi in due ore* was a milestone. In 1827 Gaetano found himself for the first time with a measure of stability, but at a price. Marriage was in prospect so he accepted a terrible contract from the all-powerful Domenico Barbaja "Prince of Impresarios" whereby he was to write twelve operas in three years. He was admired, envied, in demand certainly, but the rack upon which he had allowed himself to be stretched would have destroyed a less resolute composer. He found himself creating two or three scores at the same time, permanently deluged by a blizzard of contracts and business deals, scribbling songs, letters to friends and insert arias for the operas of his rivals in among a stream of festive cantatas for royal occasions - for the arrival and departure of the sovereigns of Naples and for the weddings, birthdays and namedays of their children. At the same time assuming - as a condition of his contract - the Direction of the Teatro Nuovo, the most popular of all the Neapolitan theatres with everything that implied of stimulation, opportunity, annoyance and distraction.

None of this prevented him from expanding his repertoire. Novelty was essential for survival. These were the years of lachrymose heroines with auto-destructive lovers (usually tenors), and brutal husbands (usually baritones or basses), anguish and remorse had taken hold of the stage, extended instrumental solos evoked a romantic threnody, which, echoing the voices, invested travelogue plots with colour and emotion and launched a stream of exotic settings that burst forth into sunrises, storms, tsunami and *terramoti*. One opera by a contemporary composer actually depicted the Aurora Borealis (quite successfully). The fact that so many new plots owed their genesis to a dance synopsis (and it is certain that Donizetti actually saw Gioja's ballet) ensured

that a species of pantomime was far from unwelcome. If the *prima donna* felt upstaged as a result she could always be compensated by the florid roulades which were a Rossinian legacy.

Otto mesi in due ore, true to its odd title, was full of extravagance even in its very first edition. And not just in respect of the plot though tales of *real-life* events were rare on the Italian stage. The mood of this *opera romantica in tre atti* - one of the first operas to be so described - was novel to such an extent that the many later versions never quite eclipsed its initial impact. Staged at the Teatro Nuovo on 13 May 1827 with an important starring-role for Gennaro Luzio - the celebrated *basso buffo* who was the supreme draw under that impudent proscenium - it succeeded in combining comedy, sentiment and picturesque pantomime all at the same time, replete with a magnificent snowstorm (you have to be in Naples in summer to appreciate such a spectacle) spectacular Tartar hordes and a heroine swept away on a floating tombstone clutching a cross, and coming to a heart-warming dénouement embellished with the kind of humble prostration before magnanimous authority that ensured its approval by the unrelenting Neapolitan censorship. The narrative of the opera was unusual even for that theatre where bizarre fantasy was almost the rule, it did not have a cumulative argument but a chain of vignettes rather like a primitive film script; Elisabetta's arctic trek brings her into contact with a series of contrasting prototypes each one drawn quite differently - each turn of events - each act introduces new voices and further entry-arias of an imposing kind designed to bring even the most impatient audience to its feet. For this zany exordium Donizetti took the opportunity to essay a species of portraiture he would once have considered daring, it was to be a *carte-de-visite* for his new status when both his courage (like that of its heroine) and his command of the stage would take a big step forward. And so it proved. The opera was greeted with joy and began a long circuit of the peninsula and abroad.

This notwithstanding, Donizetti changed everything in the next few years. Even the central focus of the drama, Elisabetta's momentous journey, had to submit to additions and subtractions which drastically modified its original plan. There are alternative arias for most of the principals and a choice of ensembles. The composer was ready to discard effective theatre without a second thought if a new staging seemed to demand it. A new cast, a new stage, or the proximity of the other scores he was writing at the same time all changed his mind about the topos of the score. Elisabetta herself went through many transformations - a tomboy in the first version, she becomes weepy and modest later - but then reappears in bold and decisive guise; her father Potoski makes his début as a wimp, but is later energetic and positive; the egregious Michele - originally a figure of fun, an amorous fat boy doting on Elisabetta and an easy target for her madcap schemes with his mixture of infatuation, boasting and bashfulness becomes heroic in later versions (and turns from *basso buffo* into a tenor); Elisabetta's *mother* the contessa Fedora, turns into her *sister* in the first Paris version; the treacherous Iwano - responsible for Potoski's disgrace and who too has been exiled - is credited with a remorse that comes and goes and he drowns in the 1839-40 version, while the villainous Gran maresciallo - a bully in the initial opera - is later written-out of the score. As for the Emperor ("*Pietro il Grande*" he is sometimes called - the only Russian Tsar known to Italian audiences) not only loses his crown but his singing voice too, he is demoted to *Grand duc* and spoken dialogue in Paris. So much for the integrity of the original score.

Almost all these extraordinary changes came about as a result of Donizetti's dissatisfaction with Act III. For an operatic proposition of this daring the final scene as first conceived was not only banal it was absurd: in the 1827 opera, at the very end, Elisabetta's parents are transported to Moscow as if by the wave of a fairy-wand, the inconsequence of such a dramatic non-sequitur after the ultra-realistic arctic journey of Act II was too much for the composer to bear. For a few years this dénouement survived, but in 1832 he suggested to Jacopo Ferretti that he should replace Domenico Gilardoni's Act III with a more effective scenario in which her father should follow his

daughter (risking summary execution of course) and arrive in Moscow in search of his vanished offspring, in this way being on the spot for imperial rehabilitation.

This resolution remained conjectural until 1834 when an entirely new version of the opera was prepared for a staging in Turin. Much of the new text was set to music but for various reasons, the planned performances never took place. Only in 1839-40, and in Paris, when he first set about re-inventing *Otto mesi in due ore* as an *opéra comique* did such an effective quadro become a reality.

Esiliati

In between staging two other operas (*Fausta* at the Teatro S. Carlo of Naples on 12 January 1832, and *Ugo conte di Parigi* at La Scala of Milan on 13 March 1832) and in fifteen days, Donizetti revised *Otto mesi in due ore* during a Roman stopover making one of his most drastic revisions in the comfort of his wife's family home. His friend on the spot, Giacomo Ferretti, was recruited to modify the recitatives and supply the text for for several new pieces for a production on 4 February 1832 at the Teatro Valle in Rome, under the novel title of *Gli esiliati in Siberia, ossia Otto mesi in due ore* (which had in fact been used twice before). The orchestration was refreshed and the roles were readjusted, especially that of the heroine. These changes form the basis of the Montpellier edition.

The most conspicuous feature of this *rifacimento* was the addition of a *sinfonia*, replacing the brief *preludio* of the prima, but there was also a new *concertato* to end Act I and a brilliant terminal *stretta con coro* to end the climactic ensemble of Act II with its waterborne hyper-dramatic exit of the primadonna. These additions - attractive as they are - seem not to have given the composer much satisfaction, later he dismissed the *sinfonia* as “*academic*” (which it is not) and returned to the *preludio*; the revised conclusion to Act I removed the originality of the ending as first conceived whose nocturnal colouring when Elisabetta and Michele ran out into the Siberian night was especially radical, it is certain that he regretted its disappearance as we know well; as for the new *stretta* to the climactic ensemble - we know it nowadays for its reappearance in *L'elisir d'amore* three months later - as a result it sounds rather inappropriate to our ears if not perhaps to his.

Certainly this Roman edition marks a mid-point in the evolution of the score. The instrumentation has matured, the intrusive buffo element of the Naples version has been pruned and the original local colour dimmed to give a new breadth to the whole, but the definition of the roles has lost its edge and they now sound not dissimilar from that of many other operas on the Italian stage. At mid-career the opera has now more sophistication but the contours have become a bit blurred.

Act I

The *sinfonia* indeed has a conventional form, the modified autograph - found at Covent Garden in 1984 as part of the very last revision of the opera in which Donizetti seems to have changed his mind about its lack of originality - is more icy and compact but the version for Montpellier (which also includes the Tartar chorus) features a final dancing little coda that is enchanting. Shivering strings and a Cossack-sounding male chorus introduce the successive cavatinas of Elisabetta's parents: that of the *contessa* Fedora with its curling clarinet echo followed by that of *conte* Potoski which is rather more robust and strongly rhythmical with a full reprise. Both serve to herald the arrival of Elisabetta who has a new *aria di sortita* in this Roman edition written especially for Carolina Ungher. The presence of this important diva not only ensured a Roman triumph for Donizetti but imposed all sorts of changes to the conception of the principal role, Elisabetta is no longer a teenager but a more mature woman (like Ungher), her cavatina ‘Nel

vostro sen, fra voi ritorno' is less defiant than the peremptory 'Dal palpitar cessate' of the Naples original but has survived into almost all the later editions of the opera. It contains several amusing references (at least, they probably amused Donizetti!): its initial phrasing was used again later to introduce another Elisabetta, that of *Maria Stuarda* (clearly a Donizettian pun), but its general contour recalls that of several of his current *cavatine* - bringing together such diverse heroines such as those of *Gianni di Parigi* (1831), *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* (1832) and the Genoese revision of *Il diluvio universale* (1834) all of which contain *brani* written for soprano heroines whose passing attractions Gaetano found irresistible. Are we to presume that the music of this *sortita* is a coded comment upon the attractions of Carolina Ungher? (If so it came to nothing). Michele's music, like that of Elisabetta too is more generic in this Roman edition, less characterful, his cavatina is much modified as is his following duet with Elisabetta. He too has become more mature and though some Neapolitan quirks remain the *buffo* portraiture is less insistent and fails to invite derision as in earlier versions (and in general is intended for a less challenging voice).

In compensation, perhaps, the purely emotional elements surrounding their departure together into the icy wastes to begin their journey are more protracted in this edition. The various prayers and benedictions (Rome was worth several masses) are more moving, Elisabetta is more devout, Michele more circumspect and Michele's mother Maria's exhortations to desist from their dangerous plan are more urgent. But following their disappearance into the night the Roman concertato is something of an anti-climax, effective certainly - a burst of colour with full orchestra and percussion supporting a unison vocal line and a good tune - it ends the act brilliantly and was praised but fails to endorse the emotional flair and intimacy of earlier editions of the opera. That Donizetti regretted the original *pianissimo* conclusion we know as he turned to it again when he made his first Parisian edition of *Otto mesi in due ore* as *Elisabeth ou La Fille de l'exilé* in 1839-40

Act II

Act II succeeded in retaining many of its original features throughout the series of editions. The opening aria of Iwano however - which was published immediately and became extremely popular - was something of an embarrassment to the composer who subsequently tried to modify its omnipresence. For a production at Palermo in 1828 he wrote a prefacing chorus and retouched the recitative, further recitatives followed both for Rome and Turin, for the Paris versions he removed the aria altogether. For this Roman edition he provided a prefacing instrumental introduction which scarcely survived into later editions. The function of this 'Morte! Ah vieni ad involarmi!' however, is not simply histrionic, Iwano has a key role in the argument and without its text both the action and the culmination of the act lack substance while his dead daughter, the lamented Lisinska - Elisabetta's deceased counterpart - provides the emotional and physical prop for the climax of Act II.

The most novel feature of the opera follows this important aria. This is the *discesa di Elisabetta* - the mimed descent with orchestral commentary as she enters alone from above, stumbling and falling repeatedly, towards the bank of the river Kama. Not that its music was sacrosanct, in fact the length of the pantomime varies remarkably in various surviving scores, as does its expressiveness (according to the ability of successive theatres to stage this challenging scene). Her encounter with Iwano - the now-exiled courtier responsible for her father's disgrace remains fairly consistent in the various editions, in it Donizetti found a new fluency and few changes were ever contemplated it would seem, in the *gran duetto* 'Che ascolto! Che discopro!' Donizetti finds parallel musical structures with the tremendous duet written for a guilty baritone and innocent soprano in *L'esule di Roma* - the themes of these neo-contemporary operas - exile and remorse - running side by side. The threatening Tartar Chorus 'Tartaro masnadier' which is the next

number (and recalls snatches of Russian music from Mayr's library) features in every edition of the opera including the French *opéra comique*. It is introduced by a curious instrumental passage with a very surprising "Pastoral" quotation, indeed these Tartars prove rather toothless when it comes to actual violence, their threats more verbal than real (reflecting Mme Cottin's romance) and the fact that their intrusion ends in a sparkling foretaste of *L'elisir d'amore* is not, in the event, quite as incongruous as it might seem. Whereas in *L'elisir* this ensemble brings the act to a close, in *Gli esiliati in Siberia* it merely prefaces the true ending to the act, one which provides the major spectacle of the whole opera: a storm blows up, the river Kama floods, Elisabetta is stranded, she takes refuge on Lisinska's wooden tomb which floats on the rising tide - as she clings to her impromptu vessel tossed and turned in the stormy torrent she looks up to heaven and the cross on her breast is struck by a sudden ray of light from above, guided by a beam of divine radiance her strange raft glides serenely into the wings as the curtain falls. This perfectly extraordinary ending receives some of Donizetti's most imaginative instrumentation. The length and effectiveness of the scene differs in all the surviving scores in parallel with the resources of the theatre for which it was intended but a major evolution was planned for the *opéra comique* of 1839-40: in this belated version 'Elisabeth' indulges in far more pantomime, 'Ivan' tries to save her from the waters but is drowned, the storm is longer and more violent and there is no commenting chorus from the heights of the hill on the opposite bank of the river. Instead, with its deft handling and emphatic orchestral exposure this the fantastic Parisian *stretta* to Act II might well have been the most sensational of all had it ever been performed.

Act III

In every edition this last coup was the absolute climax of the opera and most of the subsequent problems the composer encountered came about as a consequence. None of the early editions of *Otto mesi in due ore* manage to avoid a bathotic loss of impetus. Even before the proposed Turin *rifacimento* of 1834 all sorts of tinkering took place in an attempt to make Act III more credible: Fedora got an insert aria in some of the versions; the Gran maresciallo was at times required to open the act with a *scena ed aria*; in others Act III begins with the Tartar chorus or the Imperial Hymn which is repeated again on the entry of the Tsar. Both Paris editions open with a drinking chorus.

In this Montpellier version there is a compromise, some of the projected changes envisaged for Turin (the music partially rediscovered in London) are inserted, these permit Count Potoski to return covertly to Moscow to sing a long and taxing aria which is both patriotic and heroic. It is prefaced here by one of the two drinking chorusses contained in the various manuscripts - rather oddly in fact as otherwise the rest of the action takes place in or near the Imperial Palace. Potoski's aria is a confection, its manuscript contains both French and Italian pages with a very conventional recitative followed by an *aria con coro* of some sophistication but capped by a cabaletta borrowed from the *sortita* of Settimio in *L'esule di Roma*!

At this point - in the French version of the opera - Potoski is reunited with Elisabeth and Michel, the Grand Maréchal is mentioned, but does not appear and the climactic *terzetto* dénouement takes place on the spot (an auberge being the *lieu par excellence* for the climax of an *opéra comique*). In this Montpellier version the Gran maresciallo is restored to his former prominence (though he does not have the scene which normally prefaces his appearance) and he sings the magnificent cavatina of the first version of the opera which Donizetti apparently despised. Like the cavatina of Iwano which opens Act II, this big aria serves to guide the action that ensues, and much of the rest of the act follows a well-worn path leading to a refurbished *terzetto* of dismay and apprehension followed almost immediately - in this instance - by the *lieto fine*. This much-rewritten trio has a remarkably composite nature but contains much clever and touching music. In the French edition of the opera Elisabeth gives a letter by Ivan revealing her father's

innocence to a young officer she encounters outside the Imperial Palace which she has been unable to enter (and who turns out to be the Tsar incognito). In the version of this Montpellier revival the plot is different: it embodies the same tension and anxiety about the reception of the letter but instead of the heroine it is Michele who has unwittingly delivered the letter to the Tsar (the libretto is not very clear) and brings about the happy ending. The trio (Elisabetta/Gran maresciallo/Michele) begins with Elisabetta's plea 'Signore, deh scusate', it has an exceptionally impressive centre-section beginning with Michele's tormenting of the outwitted Maresciallo 'I tamburri, le trombette' which is complemented by the Imperial Hymn 'Viva ognor del vasto impero' sung by a distant chorus as the Tsar makes his triumphal entry.

The monarch has no cavatina (although there are two alternatives he could have sung) he has merely a recitative praising Elisabetta's courage. Having read the letter (off stage) he sacks the Gran maresciallo and appoints Potoski in his place. Fedora and Maria are whisked from Siberia (in the early improbable fashion) and Elisabetta sings her aria finale - which is a *rifacimento* of that sung in 1829 by Annetta Fischer to end Donizetti's *Alina regina di Golconda*. Clearly this music was to the taste of Carolina Ungher, it begins with an *introduzione con coro*, capped by the aria 'Oh me beata! Dal piacer l'eccesso' followed by a rocketing cabaletta with the not especially apposite words 'Sull'ali de'sospiri' which brings down the curtain with suitably glittering vocal fireworks.

Exile

Donizetti's loyalty to this one opera far exceeds that of any other. The companion of so many years of struggle and exhaustion it may well have been Elisabetta's ultimate apotheosis that drew him to the tale. Even the very last attempt at an ultimate realisation - that bundle of tattered pages with a struggling hand found in disarray in the cellars of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden - clings to the theme of alienation that accompanied his mature years, especially those of his Parisian nardir when his creative journey was coming to its sad end. In the final version of *Otto mesi in due ore* - that of 1845 - it is still possible to identify fatal glimpses of *Maria Stuarda* (the Act III "Chorus of Exiles") and from the *scena penultima* of *L'esule di Roma*. No doubt it was those traumatic Neapolitan years that crystalised his longing for home. His operas in the galleys: *Alahor in Granata* (1826); *Otto mesi in due ore* (1827); *L'esule di Roma* (1828) and *Il paria* (1829) all deal directly with exile or isolation and the list may well include fringe torments like *Gabriella di Vergy* (1826) and *Gianni di Calais* (1828) as well as *Emilia di Liverpool* (of 1824 and 1828) - poignant site of traumatic departure for so many Italians (irrespective of the composer's strange ideas about its exact location).

That the nineteenth century reduced romanticism to an *idée-fixe* is not in any doubt. Other composers - Beethoven among them - returned doggedly time-and-time-again to a theme that was a challenge, an itch, an obstacle perhaps whose nagging persistence dominated years of revision and re-revision. But Donizetti's loyalty to this one theme is surely quite exceptional and goes far beyond any purely musical challenge. *Otto mesi in due ore* may well have been his own arctic odyssey never to reach its destination, whose storms, trials and betrayals depict his own painful pilgrimage never to be concluded - even with Elisabetta's heroic exemplar always before his eyes and ears.