

DONIZETTI AND THE MUSIC HALL, BIRKENHEAD.

by Brian Thornton

The proximity of Liverpool has undoubtedly accelerated the demise of cultural activity in Birkenhead. Unlike today, however, live theatre and music were well represented in the late nineteenth century and earlier than that it seems concert going was an important part of the life of the town.

The "Music Hall", "so designated in the classic sense only" was inaugurated on 21st January 1862. In 1893 it was seen as 'poor and dingy' and in 1913/14 it became a picture house. The decline of the cinema during the 1950's caused the hall to change it's function again and today bingo, disco and a social club are on the programme.

The building has little architectural importance and it has been painted with tasteless excess. Five heads set high on the wall in decorative panels have not escaped the garish treatment and Weber, Haenden (one or two erroneous strokes of the brush almost concealing Handel's identity) Beethoven, Haydn and Mendelssohn shine with pink tints and coloured hair. It is interesting to reflect on this choice made more than an hundred years ago. Beethoven, Handel and Haydn are no surprise; Mendelssohn and Weber had visited England within the previous 20 years and were popular. But what of Mozart, Schubert and Bach? Naturally the choice would be of composers providing the staple repertoire of orchestral concerts and reflect the preferences of the promoters of the new venture. Yet much lower on the building, set on a keystone as if in a special place, relatively untouched (perhaps a little worn by the elements) is a tolerable likeness of Donizetti. Time has probably put the answers to so many questions beyond us.

An advertisement of 1847 records an occasion that Birkenhead heard music by Donizetti. Mr. P. Robson's 3rd Annual Concert took place on Tuesday 26th October at the Craven Rooms. The audience who paid the princely sums of 2/6d. for reserved seats, 1/6d. for the "body of the hall" or 1/d. for the side gallery, heard a Mrs. Whitnall regale them with 'On the cold Shores of the Stranger' by Bellini. One would hesitate to presume the true origin of that number! Is Imogene's Act 1 Cavatina a candidate? Also on the programme was a Mrs. M'Dougall joining a Signor Sapio in the duet 'The Singing Lesson' by Fioravante (sic). (Presumably from Fioravanti's "Le Cantatrice Villane"). For her solo Mrs. M'Dougall "late Miss Rose Joseph" sang ("on her first appearance for two years") 'In questo semplice', always it would seem a popular item for sopranos.

One could certainly be excused for imagining this to have been Birkenhead's only taste of Donizetti if it wasn't for that curio on the Bingo Hall, witness to the respect or love of some musical benefactor of the 1860's.

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