

THE LETTERS OF ADOLPHE NOURRIT ON DONIZETTI
by Robert Potterton

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ADOLPHE NOURRIT (1802-1839) was the leading tenor at the Opéra from 1821 until 1833 and appeared in many important premieres including *Les Huguenots*, *La Juive*, *Robert le Diable* and *Guillaume Tell*. When Gilbert-Louis Duprez replaced him as leading tenor he left for Italy and settled in Naples where he was befriended in turn by Donizetti and Cammarano whom he helped adapt Pierre Corneille's play *Polyeucte* into *Poliuto* for Donizetti. When the opera was banned by the Neapolitan censor, Nourrit already an extremely sensitive artist, suffered from melancholy and morbidness and committed suicide by throwing himself from his apartments into the courtyard below in March 1839.

Editors note.

TURIN 28th. December 1837, to Mme Nourrit (Paris)

'the rest of the morning was taken up with a visit to Donizetti, whom I was delighted to see again and who welcomed me very warmly'.

from the book on Nourrit by Etienne Bouter de Monvel: '... Nourrit, after a days visit to Pisa, arrived in Rome in the company of Donizetti, who had already made the journey from Venice to Florence with him - this companionship was soon to change into a close friendship.

ROME 17th. February 1838, to Mme Nourrit (Paris)

... From the Academie Francaise, I went down to the courtyard, where the Carnival was beginning - already the carriages were lined up and floats were going on their way, Donizetti made me get up into the carriage for a moment, I am still all white from the 'Honorable splashes' that the passers-by covered us with their confetti made of flour - In a few minutes the famous horse races are going to begin but I begged Donizetti to give me an hour or two of spare time, he didnt want to let me go, but I took advantage of a moment, where the procession of carriages had stopped, to open the door myself and jump out!

NAPLES 6th. March 1838 to Mme Nourrit

'I have started work already with Donizetti, and you can judge the advancement I've made in confidence and progress when you learn that I have done with him, what I've never done, and would never have done with our french composers who know me best and with whom I've the most confidence - I sang him one of my pieces with the book open, with full voice and much expression, I would have been obliged to watch at the same time the notes and the musical phrase, the sense of the words and the accent and pronunciation. I have set myself the task of really becoming a pupil, and now that I've started putting myself on this footing, I can say I'm pleased with myself.

17th. March

It's really a lesson and more that I have with Donizetti, despite the progress that he sees I've already made, and that which is to come rapidly, yesterday he pulled me up at nearly every word, even almost every note !, I assure you that every one of his observations was quite justified - to tell the truth, I wasn't very pleased with myself yesterday when I left Donizetti. I should have waited another day before taking up my studies - my voice was not altogether recovered, to expose it to the fatigue of such work as I do with him. My impatience has once again got the upper hand, it needed this new lesson to show me moderation, which I seek to acquire, and which no doubt will be slower in reaching me than the Italian accent.

30th. March

I'm really annoyed that this trip made me catch cold and forced me to miss two good lessons from Donizetti - He continues to be charming to me and I am pleased to be able to be useful to him today - it happened this way: He is having discussions with the management of the Theatre Italien in Paris, which has asked him to do a new opera next winter and he consulted me on the choice of the subject, while we were looking we came across a plot which pleased him and he asked me to write a scenario suitable for setting to music, taking notice of the artists he would have interpreting it, I spent all yesterday evening and several hours this morning planning the plot of an opera in three acts for him and I will now take it to him

over!

1st. March

I dont know now, whether you will come and join me in Naples, its only in Naples that I can do Italian and I couldn't decide to deprive myself of the precious advice of Donizetti for anything in the world, but my love, I dont want to make you share my life if you dont share my convictions.

10th. April

Donizetti takes more interest in me every day, he seeks for ways to make the work easier for me and worries about what could bring me more quickly, facility of the Italian accentation. He's just put me on the vocalises of Bordogni ! you can see I'm going back to my ABC!! Well! it gives me great pleasure. It seems to me that I am being born to a new artistic life, I've discovered a new world, and each step I take is a new conquest, but at the same time, it reveals to me a new domain to master. And so, I'm not in the least hurried about my debut, for I'm convinced that the later I make it, the more sensation it will cause, for I shall have more talent. When I appear at The San Carlo, I should like them to not only say " He sings Italian well for a Frenchman" but I want to hear them say " But you'd think he was a Frenchman". I can see already that Donizetti has confidence in my theatrical experience, he is pulling strings to have me engaged here, he's already spoken to the Supervisor of Theatres, you know moreover how Barbaja (director of San Carlo) has no tenor for the autumn, and there's no one available in Italy, besides everyone here is counting on William Tell, and if the police allow it, its in that I should start off.

29th. April

Theres now, no going back my dear; I'm now an Italian for another eleven months at least - yesterday I signed my contract with Barbaja, the conditions of payment arn't as good as those offered in Milan but the position is a hundred times better, and the opportunity of success much greater, since I am starting off in an opera by Donizetti, specially written for me and the subject of which I chose myself. Its the one I dreamt of on leaving France and its "Corneille's Polyeucte" in which I've found some fine musical situations, and you can imagine if I believe in the sentiments, which I shall have to express in this Martyrs role, with this work, I hope to enter entirely on a new career; a career such as I've always longed for. This subject pleased Donizetti even more, since its entirely new to Italy and because it gives him a chance to do something different from what he's done up to now, the Christians have gone to his head, and he's counting on the effect of religious chants in the midst of situations full of tragedy. We've not kept to the rather too noble drama of Corneille before the triumph of the religious sentiment, we have allowed the human passion to develop a bit and the sacrifice in consequence is all the finer. The poet working for Donizetti, has also adopted this plot confidently and is already working on the plan that I wrote for him myself in Italian.

15th. May

Our opera is going well. Donizetti has already written the introduction and has already had me sing a prayer which I'm to sing at the moment when I become a christian. The piece is well suited to my voice and of a nature to win the approval of the public for me and for the work. It is written so that if I'm ever nervous, I shall be able to sing it properly, the emotion even, that Im feeling will add to the effect. I am still more and more pleased with Donizetti, who shows true friendship for me and shows great confidence in me: He consults me on what he should do and he's looking for something new, he's very pleased to learn from me, what is effective in France - I've composed him two French ballads that he wants to write for Paris. They've been quite successful and he's already set one to music.

NAPLES 6th. July 1838 to M. Hiller

"Donizetti's opera is going very well and I've not yet inebriated the Italian atmosphere"

NAPLES 26th. July 1838 to M. Eugene Duvazer

' I feel myself that I'm less pre-occupied with my pronunciation and Italian accent and Donizetti only pulls me up now and again. A few more months and Italian will be my mother tongue ' .