

Books

John Stewart Allitt *Donizetti: in the light of Romanticism and the Teaching of Johann Simon Mayr*, Element, Shaftesbury 1991. XVIII, 301p.

Mozart's foibles have been extensively explored and his divinity dented in recent years; Bellini's angelic status too has been flawed irrevocably by the publication of his letters. Donizetti, conversely, has always enjoyed a bad press. According to received opinion he was an earthy if workaholic music machine, no saint, but a womaniser who discovered a tragic but understandable nemesis in Dementia Paralytica. John Allitt utterly rejects this carnal assessment, before you dismiss it, you had better read his book.

The career of the Bergamasco composer, looked at objectively, was a sort of miracle. Born of helpless parentage, poorer than poor, he was raised to a summit of fame by the inspired intervention of Johann Simon Mayr, a *deus* indeed, ex the *machina* of the international operatic circuit extending a salvaging hand to an insignificant child who could not even sing (the basic requirement of Mayr's Charity School of Music). His education at Bergamo and Bologna was not just unusual, it was fantastic, if the young composer - as a result - cherished notions of a sacred intervention on his behalf, should anyone be surprised? The cynicism of a Rossini, the hard-bargaining of a Bellini, the sanguine nonchalance of a Pacini all came about through a family grounding in music, Donizetti viewed his presence beside them as a gift of God. The generally accepted view, Ashbrook's view perhaps, is that he was a man of perfectly commonplace tastes and physical impulses, who happened to be a genius. It is always salutary to have such notions tested.

John Allitt's book breaks down into three main sections: a biographical section, engagingly and concisely written; a centre section of interpretation approaching the composer from a series of spiritual, psychological, and philosophic viewpoints, including a detailed examination of six operas - *Linda di Chamounix*, *Maria Stuarda*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Poliuto* and *Don Pasquale*; and a freshly comprehensive catalogue of works. Of these, the most striking and controversial is the centre section, written with an entirely personal passion. The author's motivation is not in doubt

"There is a danger of becoming overfamiliar with works of art. As connoisseurship creeps in there begins much discussion about this or that. Too often attention to the work and creativity of the composer are pushed to one side. Erudition takes its place..."
 "There is a genuine need to find fresh, new areas of knowledge in order for art to remain challenging..." "The secret is to remain vulnerable and open to surprise"

All and every study, at this level of personal commitment, will expose the author's vulnerability to dismissal. Not everyone will follow Allitt's spiritual progress, but there are rewards almost everywhere, even for the most sceptical. Invariably critics ask familiar questions: when and for whom such and such a work was written, *how* it was written, almost never do they ask *why*. In these pages for example, and for the first time, the precise sentimental and personal background to Donizetti's songs is explored. Musicologists neglect the songs of Italian composers to their peril, they are the immediate threshold of opera, a first sketch often enough, a final resort often, a melodic reserve always. Neither Donizetti, nor Bellini, nor Verdi made *emotional* distinctions between song and aria, as involutional material they bear the same kind of relationship to the *melodramma* as do drawings to the paintings of the Great Masters. Allitt's guidance is esoteric to be sure, but beware, often enough the facts fall into place quite disconcertingly. The blasé, those who elect to listen to music in luxurious *vacuo* will not want any of his theorising, content with trills and virtuosity neither the formative impulses nor the compositional decisions of great composers will engage their attention at all, but if we can bother with harmonic analysis, with the structure of

their music, we can also pay a little attention to a composer's motives in writing an opera in the first place, to his mind as well as to his craft. Donizetti elected to set to music those themes, those impulses, which were the prerequisite of an especially subtle man, their accomplishment, their sophistry, should not obscure the heart which created them.

Donizetti's relationship to Mayr, fervent as it was, remains tantalising. Allitt's claim that Donizetti is "*weakest when he is influenced by Rossini*" rings true both for him and for his contemporaries, Rossini was a source of mannerisms only (Rossini's own genius remained inimitable whatever the critics say), with the curious result that the young Donizetti - irrespective of his intentions - is furthest from Mayr whose fluency and resource only became freely accessible to the older man.

But Mayr as a inspiration for human conduct remained with him to the end, the good-natured, expansive, sunny behaviour of the maestro (no one, with any justice, could apply these adjectives to Bellini or Rossini) marked him out from almost every rival.

The extensive catalogue which completes this book is an inestimably valuable tool, better organised than Inzaghi, but with differing strengths. It is an incomparable font for the sacred works which are listed in Eucharistic order, complete with sources; the songs are admirably detailed, but require indexing for the kind of reference that would normally be applied; the theatrical works are the most fallible area, with occasional lapses (the relationship of *Otto mesi in due ore* to *Elisabeth* stumbles over the hazard of Fontana's *Elisabeth ou la Fille du Proscrit* via the long outdated "*Alcozer*" red-herring proposed by Ashbrook; and some printing errors - *Maria di* instead of *de'Rudenz*, for example) but well furnished with sources both autograph and printed.

This "Donizetti" is for the bed-side table. Those who seek *aperçus* on the life and works of the great Bergamasc will not look in vain.

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