

Marie into *Maria*

There are one or two things unique to *Maria di Rohan*. We know the libretto had been mooted earlier in Donizetti's career but apart from purely musical considerations was there something more immediate in this choice of plot for Vienna? The *background* to the choice of any plot is never given much consideration by musical historians. For example, was it suggested by contacts at the Viennese court? In the immediate circle of Prince Mettenich was Victor-Louis-Mériadec, *prince* de Rohan-Guéméné, now an Austrian Vice-Marshall. The *Fürst* Rohan [1766-1846] - as he should be called - came from the same senior branch of the family as did Marie-Aimée de Rohan-Montbazon, *duchesse* de Chevreuse - as too did his heir Camille-Joseph-Philippe-Idesbald, *prince* de Rohan-Rochefort [1801-1892] either or both of whom could have re-awakened the Cammarano text in the mind of the composer. Maybe in conversation, or maybe by their mere presence at the court to which the Bergamasc was musically accredited, could the past adventures of the heroine of the Fronde have been recalled to mind? Did one or another of these exiled princes (the latter was a Knight of the Golden Fleece) assist - as the French say - at the *prima*? No one seems to know. Perhaps one day the Rohan archives will throw some light on this dusty corner of musical history.

Even more formative, if one takes this kind of conjecture further, may well have been the Hotel Manchester. Donizetti wrote much of the score of *Maria di Rohan* in this hotel. It had once been the *Hôtel particulier* of the Earl of Manchester, one-time English Ambassador to the Court of France and a gentleman who had figured among *Maria*'s more flamboyant conquests. Since the Revolution, like the Rohan dynasty, it too had moved on and was now a hotel where anyone could stay.

It was situated on the corner of the rue de Grammont and the rue St. Dominique and Donizetti lodged there repeatedly up to the time of his final illness. Though remodelled and rebuilt, at least part of this house would have been known to the light-footed duchess. Maybe the composer sensed an echo of her presence? This too we are unlikely to know as it seems never to have been discussed. It is relevant to point out, however, that the emotive sites of the opera were all on his doorstep, he depicts the Louvre with enough urgent topographical detail to be sure that he went there many times and that he knew *precisely* where the action of his opera was to be placed - the sites, the sounds, the settings and striking clocks, the claustrophobic grandeur of this palace and what, where and when all these things should be required in his music.

Act I opens before a horseshoe staircase with one flight to the King's apartments and another to those of the Queen, it is night and in the distance can be heard the sound of revels (in the Galerie d'Apollon). A curiously threatening exploitation of distance dominates this score, it is what is happening off-stage - the King in procession, the dying Mme de Chalais in an adjacent room, friends calling from outside, a messenger from the Queen, the duel, the permanent shadow of the *éminence grise* of the Cardinal de Richelieu - all the major players and events, including the final fatal shot - are on the perimeter of the action. Can this be viewed - not only as *tinta locale* for the real-life events he is depicting - but as an autobiographical depiction of Donizetti's own mental and physical state? Maybe it was a plot that highlighted his awareness of fate-beckoning from outside? Its import increasingly ominous. A real-life tragedy indeed is on the edge of this offering to the stage which may well be why it is uniquely moving.

Donizetti may have taken care to have an authentic setting for *Maria di Rohan* but historically the plot is nonsense. Marie was no nubile spinster but the widow of the

connetable de Luynes (and a mother) when she married the *duc* de Chevreuse who was twenty years older than she was. Her main interest in life was political intrigue at which she was a major player in France. This second marriage was dynastic, not a love affair, and both were free according to the convention of the day to take lovers *ad infinitum* (and both did). The jealous rage of Cammarano's *duca* is comic in terms of history. Marie met Chalais long after her marriage to Chevreuse and he did not commit suicide (nor was he shot) but decapitated by Richelieu. So much for the text. Cammarano merely fabricated a romance within the experience of his audiences.

Most people will agree that the refreshing impact of the original score (revised by Luca Zoppelli) has added a new dimension to the opera. Frankly, the Paris edition frittered away some of the original clarity of *Maria di Rohan*. Gondi makes no sense as a mezzo, the brilliant Act III cabaletta added for the Parisian Maria (Grisi) - wonderful as it is - is quite incredible dramatically after her preghiera of despair, and its lilting melody, with the original Viennese text 'E tu, se cado esanime' makes far more effective drama as a cabaletta for the tenor in Act II (after 'Alma soave e cara') - a slow cabaletta to be sure - Donizetti's trade-mark - sensitive and touching and true to the shaping of the plot. As an added bonus there are all sorts of other changes and modifications which add fascination throughout the score (the cabaletta ultima - if only of musicological interest - is nonetheless a wonderful discovery).

We are promised a critical edition, which will be quite fascinating I imagine (not usually the case). I am hoping it will throw a light on some of the elusive issues which this Venetian edition has augmented. (I trust too that an effort will have been made to study the score at Covent Garden with interleaved autograph sections by Donizetti; this was used for the London staging on 8 May 1847 (with Alboni and Ronconi) it seems that Sir Michael Costa [Michele Costa] who had known the Bergamasc since the 1820's in Naples, must have obtained these pages himself from the maestro sometime after the Paris revival.) And then there is the Salvi mystery. Dr Zoppelli, in his exceptionally lucid programme note for Venice, tells us that the extra music added to the *entrata* of Chalais in Paris was written by Matteo Salvi and is certainly spurious:

"I cambiamenti intervenuti, poi rispecchiati nell'edizione Ricordi dello spartito ... una cabaletta per tenore (certamente spuria, opera di Matteo Salvi) nella cavatina iniziale ..."

Can it really be true that Donizetti would have allowed music by his pupil to be interpolated into his opera? And printed as his own work? He is referring - it seems - to the two strophe cabaletta:

A te, divina imagine,
 Sacro gli affetti, il core:
 Un raggio dell'amore
 Brilla sul mio destin.
 Nè temerò del turbine
 L'ira fatal, vorace,
 Se un angelo di pace
 Sarammi ognor vicin.

This puts us are on very strange ground indeed. Ricordi certainly published the music of this cabaletta, it was given a publishing date of February 1844 in the Ricordi catalogue of 1857:

DONIZETTI. *Maria di Rohan*, Opera per Canto
 15820 - Cabaletta della Cav., *A te, divina immagine (sic)*, per T. . (Fr) 1 -

Page 3: Henri de Talleyrand, *comte* de Chalais, a thorn in the side of Cardinal de Richelieu, who gave Donizetti a similar amount of trouble it seems - if the various versions of his music are to be taken into account

The text of this cabaletta was not printed in the only Paris libretto I have had access to (courtesy of John Black: Act I Sc.II to follow 'Quando il cor da lei piegato') it is true but it appeared in subsequent libretti published by Ricordi and its music also in the complete vocal score published by Girard as unequivocally by Donizetti [*Cabaletta della cavatina nel I atto, per tenore e pianoforte, aggiunta in Parigi pel Sig.r Salvi.*"] See the appended title page for this edition [on page 6] where it appears first in the section **Pezzi aggiunti in Parigi**

6639 CABALETTA della CAVATINA del 1^o ATTO. A te divina imag(ne) T 15

This cabaletta was frequently sung in later performances of Donizetti's opera. Would it have been remotely conceivable had the music been written by someone else? In support of its authenticity we have the affidavit of the composer in a letter of 15 November 1843 (the day after the Paris prima) quoted in Weinstock p364; when he included proudly with his report to the Marchese Ricci a cutting from one of the first of the post-Paris prima reviews:

"Théâtre-Italien - Maria di Rohan has done the honours of the week at this theatre...the new pieces that have been announced were sung...In the first act there are couplets of exquisite freshness for Salvi which the singer rendered with perfect taste"

Must we exhume Agatha Christie and her only operatic *whodunit* THE CASE OF THE TWO SALVI (Lorenzo Salvi sang Chalais in Paris : Matteo Salvi had been in Paris with Donizetti earlier as is well known, but went to Milan in October 1843 for the rehearsal of his *Lara* [successful prima at La Scala 4 november 1843])? Maybe there is more to this music than meets the eye - and ear?

And then there is a further completely puzzling item in the Ricordi catalogue of 1857, which appears in two entries, in May and July of 1845:

16719 DONIZETTI. **Maria di Rohan**, Opera per Canto. Nuova Cav., *Ah la speme di quest'anima*, per T., (scritta a Napoli). Fr. 1 80

Ah, la speme is that one day we shall be able to understand all these mysteries! Let us hope the critical edition will not only have all the answers but offer the possibility of hearing all these changes to a score which seemed unassailable artistically even at birth.



Alexander Weatherson

This original Viennese version of *Maria di Rohan* was staged at the PalaFenice in Venice between 30 January and 9 February 1999, with the following casts: Jorge Lopez-Yanez and Fernando Portari (*Chalais*); Carlo Guelfi and Giovanni Meoni (*Chevreuse*); Giusy Devinu and Gabriella Costa (*Maria*); Gianluca Sorrentino (*Gondi*); Roberto Gierlach (*De Fiesque*); Enrico Cossutta (*Aubry*); Paolo Rumetz (*di Suze*); Cesare Lana (*un domestico*). It was conducted by Gianluigi Gelmetti with the Orchestra and Coro della Fenice. A recording (of the second cast) will be issued soon by Agora/Ricordi of Milan