

Ugo, conte di Parigi

Alexander Weatherson and John Black

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Donizetti's *Ugo, conte di Parigi*, given its La Scala début in the same season as Bellini's *Norma* and with much the same starry cast was subject to such radical changes that the librettist disowned it. The oft-repeated explanation - dating from some decades later and with no real confirmation - is that the Austrian censorship mutilated the plot. The manuscript score, however, leads to another conclusion: that the prima donna was responsible. The following extract is paraphrased from the paper published in 1984 by Alexander Weatherson and John Black upon the genesis of *Ugo* - a sadly neglected tragic melodrama of Donizetti's maturity never given its due and now to have its first modern stage presentation at Bergamo in October 2003:

... What then occurred to require such a drastic remodelling of the text that Romani refused to acknowledge it? We wish to propose that it was not because of the censors' objections, but because of those of the singers. Or more precisely, those of one specific singer, Giuditta Pasta. Consider how the season at La Scala had progressed. Pasta and Grisi had appeared together in *Norma* (34 performances) and in *Anna Bolena* (8 performances). Each had also sung in another opera. Thus on all 42 occasions in which the two sopranos had appeared together they had sung in scenes of confrontation between Pasta, as the older rival, and Grisi as the younger, ultimately successful one. Yet in 1832, Pasta was only thirty-three years old (Giulia Grisi was twenty-two). We believe that Pasta had had enough of playing this role vis-a-vis Grisi, and in *Ugo* she was being asked to do it again - and as Grisi's mother-in-law into the bargain.

We contend that Pasta said, in effect, enough is enough. Pasta was a formidable woman and her temper was strained during this season; Duprez, the great tenor who encountered her several times in Milan during the arduous stagione makes the comment that "*Pasta était d'un voisinage difficile; elle prétendait régner en souveraine absolue, ne souffrant à côté d'elle personne qui pût provoquer une comparaison.*" It would indeed have been in character that she insisted on a total reconstruction of the libretto and the music.

To what extent does Donizetti's autograph score support this conjecture?

The composer laid out the score in two parts and there is a clear difference in the state of the manuscript of these two halves. The first is typical of Donizetti - full of false-starts, scribbling, erasures, blots and major alterations to the music. The second - at least until the aria-finale - is almost devoid of correction. It gives the impression of having been written in one breath and is numbered continuously from page one, unlike the first half in which individual sections are paginated separately, if at all. The most baffling feature of this first half is, however, that, with the exception of three short sections, all of the vocal line appropriate to the Queen Mother Emma is headed 'Bianca' and that of the younger contender, Bianca, is headed 'Emma'. Where reference is made to these characters in the text, there is a corresponding interchange: ie 'Bianca' has been subsequently crossed-out and replaced with that of 'Emma', and vice versa. No such confusion reigns in the second half of this autograph score where names and roles are indicated as they were sung at the prima. What a puzzle this is. How is it that Donizetti thought that the older queen was called 'Bianca' and the younger 'Emma'?

The state of the manuscript does at least suggest that the bulk of Donizetti's first half was written at an early date, at a time when the composer may well have been under the impression that the two ladies bore each others' name. It also suggests that he has later rewritten or recopied the whole of the second half. The uncharacteristically neat state of this second section inevitably suggests that he was making a fair copy from pages already composed, if this is so, the difference between the original, and final states must have been really extensive since he never hesitated to forward to the unfortunate music copyist [who made the performing edition] pages whose condition can only be described as "foul". Indeed, virtually indecipherable. It certainly indicates a revision of a massive order.

From this autograph, however, an alternative hypothesis to the censorial blue-pencil may be deduced. That, at the earliest planning stage when Donizetti first approached the plot with only the merest outline of the story in his hands he set about composing an opera called *Bianca d'Aquitania* [which title in fact appears in the maestro's handwriting at the head of the overture] with Pasta in mind for the title role as 'Bianca, Queen Mother of France', replete with pathos, guilt, murder, treachery, remorse and dramatic confrontation. But Pasta's refusal even to consider the role of yet-another "older" woman threw a major spanner into the works. A hasty rethink was imposed. In the change-around that ensued,

Bianca became the younger queen (in effect a princess-fiancée with her eye on another man) and laid claim to a considerable portion of the young 'Emma's' music (she also demanded, and got, an aria-di-sortita to enhance it) while the music of 'Bianca' (now Emma the Queen Mother and henceforth a comprimaria role only) was drastically cut, and that of Adelia (once insignificant but now to be assumed by Grisi), was expanded hugely. Clearly the twenty-two-year-old Grisi could not be expected to sing the role of Pasta's mother-in-law.

To the dismay of both composer and librettist there were more losses than gains in this fudge. The new Bianca lost the high drama she could have been expected to exploit in a magnificent scene of confrontation between the two Queens (note that *Ugo* stands mid-field between the goal posts of *Anna Bolena* and *Maria Stuarda*) - the scene in question now is nothing more than an oddly-timed, rather unbalanced, aria con pertichini at the end of the opera instead of the staggering centre-piece it might once have been. The entire upending was a blow, above all to Donizetti's self-esteem. Indeed it was this mutilation which - in a bitter protest of his own - may well lie behind Donizetti's decision now to bestow the title of the opera upon the tenor rather than upon the prima donna soprano as originally intended, an inimitable comment upon the 'convenienze teatrali' whose capriciousness he had been obliged to accept upon bended knee. Unlike Felice Romani, the tetchy librettist, he was unable to disclaim complete responsibility for his own work.

That the opera was no triumph as a result of all these changes is a matter of history. Though containing some stretches of music that are unforgettable, compelling in fact, as almost never before, *Ugo, conte di Parigi* left the stage after the most modest of showings. That Donizetti was disgusted is clear to anyone who takes the trouble to look at his autograph score: he has rather endearingly sketched a schoolboy anathema - a derisory but implacable skull-and-crossbones on the final page alongside Pasta's expiring sigh.