

A Visit to Donizetti

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Recently I obtained a copy of a document written by one of Michael Balfe's grand-daughters, Lina Jephson, circa 1910, when she was about fifty-years old. She was named Lina after Balfe's wife. In her document she talks about the many people who visited the Balfe's home in London, singers, musician, writers, etc. She also makes mention of her grand-mother recalling a visit to Donizetti during his tragic final illness. I thought perhaps that the brief reference might be of interest to some of the Society members.

There is documentation to show that Balfe (1808-70) knew both Rossini and Bellini and sang in several of their operas. However, until recently I've never found anything that directly linked Balfe in any way to Donizetti, even though the two were more-or less contemporaries and he sang in Donizetti operas in Italy in the 1830s. In the concluding pages of the document Lina focuses on Balfe's wife Lina Roser-Balfe (1806-88) with great fondness. Lina Roser-Balfe in her day was an excellent singer having sung opposite Pasta in Milan, Malibran in Venice and Ronconi in Turin. She also had sung the leading soprano roles in several Donizetti operas in Italy in the 1830s. She was singing at the Teatro Carcano when *Anna Bolena* premiered there in December 1830. She and Balfe later married in Bergamo in 1831. She was the daughter of Franz Roser an important Austrian born composer who had studied music with Mozart and who also worked in Vienna and Pest where daughter Lina was born in 1806.

Grand-daughter Lina mentions that her grand-mother spoke about what must have been an extraordinary visit to Donizetti. Balfe and his wife were in Paris for the premiere of his opera *L'Etoile de Seville* in December 1845. Lina Roser-Balfe when talking to her grand-daughter of the visit to Donizetti said "he was out of his mind, and how he wept and repeated 'Povero Bellini, povero Bellini' under the impression that it was his friend and fellow composer who was thus afflicted." Indeed, the experience obviously left a lasting impression on the Balfes and its retelling on grand-daughter Lina who thought enough about it to mention it in her-document thirty years after her-grand-mother's death in 1888. Balfe of course had died in 1870.

[Editor's note: By the time of the visit of Balfe and his wife Donizetti was in seclusion at Ivry and this solicitous occasion has not been recorded. Lina Roser-Balfe's moving testimony is of real value to his unhappy and confused state of mind. It is not inconceivable, however, that poor Gaetano's reaction to the appearance of his Irish colleague brought to his mind the fact that Balfe had sung(as a baritone) in many of Bellini's stagings and that this indeed may have precipitated the touching account (above) related so movingly so many years later.]