

## Donizetti and Adolphe Sax

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Teasing out the definitive version of many of Donizetti's operas can be quite a difficult task due to Donizetti reacting to last minutes hitches often caused by censors and singers but occasionally also by the orchestra. The best known instance of the latter is the replacement of the glass harmonica by the flute in *Lucia di Lammermoor* because of the lack of a player or at least of one at a fee the management were prepared to meet.

Recently, the Brazilian director Walter Neiva raised another possible instance which proved to be a thornier matter to resolve than first appeared. I'm indebted to Professors Roger Parker, Alexander Weatherson and Mary Ann Smart for much of the information below.

Neiva had been reading some articles (e.g. [www.saxgourmet.com/adolph-sax.html](http://www.saxgourmet.com/adolph-sax.html)) on the Belgian Adolphe Sax, best known as the inventor of the saxophone family but who also produced a wide range of instruments including a much improved bass clarinet. As well as being a highly gifted instrument maker, Sax seems to have had a prodigious talent for quarrelling and a liking for litigation, at one point suing the singer Marie Sasse for using the stage name Sax. After falling out with people in Brussels he left for Paris in 1841 where he attracted opposition from established instrument makers with whom he engaged in interminable patent suits and who, later, were suspected of having instigated a fire at his factory. Not surprisingly, orchestras also got drawn into the fray. Add Berlioz as Sax's champion in the press into the mix and one can understand that the 1840's were a particularly volatile time for Sax.

Sax claimed, after Donizetti's death, that Donizetti had planned to use the saxophone in *Don Pasquale*, presumably at the start of Act 2 as the introduction and accompaniment to Ernesto's lament "Povero Ernesto", but that the orchestra refused to allow it, forcing him to use the trumpet instead. The claim cannot be immediately dismissed as Sax had begun his work on the saxophone family in the early 1840's, although only the bass saxophone was definitely around at the time of composition and that would not have been an obvious instrument to have used.

In *Donizetti and his Operas*, William Ashbrook recorded that the trumpet solo was on a separate sheet from the main score and hence was assumed to have been added later so might there not have been a saxophone version in the interim? Perhaps more beguilingly, one can credit that the mellower saxophone could be a more fitting colour for Ernesto's glum self pity. On the other hand, there are no known references either to the incident or to the intention in Donizetti's letters or other sources. On balance it does not seem to be true. However, if you are at *Don Pasquale* in Amsterdam this autumn, which is to be directed by Neiva and think that there's something a little strange about that introduction then that will be because Neiva has decided to give credence to Sax's version of events.

To move on a year to *Dom Sébastien*, Sax made a similar claim that Donizetti's wish to use his bass clarinet was thwarted in a similar manner. Although the autograph score does not include bass clarinets, the score in Paris does and it seems likely that they were used in the Act II ballet and the Act IV Inquisition scene, as happened in the recent concert performance at Covent Garden recorded by Opera Rara. In this instance Sax's story does have support for it was reported in the newspapers that Donizetti had a contract to use Sax's instruments, despite the fact that Berlioz's support of Sax might have been thought to deter Donizetti, given the criticism that Berlioz heaped on him. The newspapers also reported that the orchestra, led by the second clarinetist Buteux, complained and the instruments were withdrawn. Thus, presumably, non-Sax bass clarinets were substituted in *Dom Sébastien*. It would be interesting to know whether the performance at Covent Garden used Sax bass clarinets and thus, no doubt unwittingly, fulfilled Donizetti's original intention.