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Not quite as monstrous a *régiment* as all that

If any opera can be said to owe its existence solely to the prima donna it is *La Fille du régiment*. You have only to look at all those charming prints of Jenny Lind, Patti and so on, no one remembers the name of anyone else in the cast. Donizetti's opera was an excuse for the sacred monsters, large and small, to stomp and salute to the end of the nineteenth century. '*Tous les trois réunis*'? - not on your life (Tonio dismissed in a flurry of trills below the belt). Disdained by critics, Marie triumphed in spite of cannonades from stage managers and rival composers. Her earliest echoes date from before the flood, that is, in operas like *Il paria* and *Il diluvio universale*. Other bits emerged now and then before 1840. Does that mean that *La Fille du régiment* had a long genesis? Not at all. It was simply that Donizetti, like all his contemporaries - and not only his Italian contemporaries - practised Good Housekeeping (though how, exactly, and in what kitchen cupboard such *brani* were filed-away mentally eludes any research).

And then military ladies had been around for some time; Orlandi's *La dama soldato* (1818) stormed the stage for some years (Donizetti certainly knew the La Scala revival of 1837); Giannini's ballo *La finta militare* (1827) had brought audiences to attention, as did the Ricci's *Il colonnello* (1835) with a mini-furore at the Fondo of Naples when a media-buzz attendant on Malibran's last-minute defection and her replacement by Carolina Ungher in top boots and spurs had of course lodged itself in the mind of the Bergamasc. Luigi Ricci's hysterically funny *La serva e l'ussero* of much the same date (1836, and based on Pushkin) had flaunted a double travesty - the Huzzar of the title managing to dress-up as a housemaid in order to spy on his girl-friend's suitors (and finding himself in the arms of her randy father) while the girl-friend in question stamped up and down the kitchen in his shako and sword.

It was fun for monsters to masquerade as men in borrowed drawers with a naughty Parisian designer-label. No one is shocked any more. Nowadays we are reduced to relishing the po-faced introductory essays of diligent musicologists in opera house programmes desperately searching for an inner-meaning to the Marquise and Sulpice (Da Vinci Code beware), denouncing the *ancien-régime* intimations of the former and the proto-sociological implications of her old flame while trying not to hear the audience laughing. But an emancipated Marie is back, with a high profile Natalie Dessay sharing - paradoxically in this feminist era - her

fatigues with a male colleague not in any way to be eclipsed. Did Donizetti intend his opéra comique to be bagged by sopranos? It seems improbable judging by his original cast, the first Marie was Juliette Borghèse, not exactly a star of the first magnitude, but her Tonio was the reverberating Mécène Marié de L'Isle who alas outlived it seems an earlier reputation for virtuosity. Indeed his only distinction seems to have been that he sang out-of-tune throughout at the première and that later in life had the proud boast of fathering the very first Carmen. (!) In France the opera tended to be a festival/provincial offering, big stars shunned it, and when - thanks to the Swedish Nightingale - it glittered *outré-manche* (London 1847) she alone shone indelibly, her Tonio (Italo Gardoni) was worthy. Reviews ignore him. But does anyone know what these Tonios sang? What was the performance practice? Those top notes for example: did the blighted performance of Mécène Marié ("*M. Marié est à peu près supportable*") downgrade all his successors? We know that Donizetti himself pruned the Tonio flights in the Italian *La figlia del reggimento* he supervised soon after the Paris début, describing them as "*too French*" and the scores I have in my possession would confirm that Tonio blew his top almost immediately. The Schonenberger full-score of 1841 for example prints sweetly at the head of the Romance No. 9 'Pour me rapprocher de Marie' "*On passe cette Romance au théâtre à Paris*". So much for the unfortunate ténor. As for that real obstacle-course 'Pour mon âme quel destin' with its Himalayan peaks of top C's my Schonenberger vocal score of 1848, full of pencilled-in cadenzas for the prima donna, has pinned-together the entire item, 14 pages omitted with an insert mark both before and after; ie no cavatine, tempo-di-mezzo or cabaletta. As Louis XIV might have observed, the Himalayas have been abolished. And the 'Pour me rapprocher de Marie' in this vocal score is an object lesson in mutilation: the first 18 bars survive, then there is a monstrous cut of cross-hatched pencil marks until nine bars before the end, the ténor is permitted one single *do* "di petto?" and one single vocal flourish which is instantly capped by a pencilled-in echo - a trifle higher - for the soprano.

That Marie claimed the battle honours in the nineteenth century is clear. Those Tyroleans who sang Tonio vis-à-vis Adelina Patti are forgotten (Pietro Neri-Baraldi, Giuseppe Fanciulli and Iginio Corsi). When did the worm turn? This is vague, and in any case the tenor retrieved his top notes, not as a result of eager-beaver musicologists pressing authenticity upon the public, but because the *can belto* tenor ran out of steam in the mid twentieth-century.

Ironically indeed, Tonio recovered his mountainous *acuti* as a consequence of the rediscovery of the music of Rossini - despite the overquoted quip of the latter to the tenor Tamburlick that he "*hang his do di petto in the cloakroom*" and take it away with him on leaving!

