

Donizetti's *Gemma di Vergy* in London

Russell Burdekin, March, 2018

Donizetti's *Gemma di Vergy* is probably best known today for the recording featuring Montserrat Caballé in a concert performance at Carnegie Hall, New York, on March 14, 1976 that stemmed from a production the previous December in Naples. It has since been staged at Bergamo in 1987 and 2011. The Society's website recently received an email from a singer considering staging it in London and enquiring about its past performance history in the UK. In fact it has only been staged here once, in 1842, but the reactions to that throw an interesting light on performance priorities and on attitudes to Donizetti in mid-19th century Britain.

In the decade or so following its premiere at La Scala, Milan, on December 26, 1834, *Gemma* was one of Donizetti's most successful operas in Italy and was staged in several other countries. It fell out of favour along with so many *bel canto* operas in the latter half of the 19th century and was not revived until the 1975 Naples production. Its British production was at Her Majesty's Theatre, London, on March 12, 1842 where it continued to be performed for the best part of a month. *Gemma* was Adelaide Moltini, Ida di Greville – Madame Bellini, Conte di Vergy – Signor Santi, Tomas – Signor Guasco, Rolando – Signor Galli and Guido – Signor Panzini. The cast was not well known in Britain, only Madame Bellini and Signor Galli having appeared here previously. Benjamin Lumley, who was Her Majesty's Theatre manager at the time, wrote that the opera was the choice of the singers rather than his and reflects how singers were the main force in opera at this time (*Reminiscences of the opera*. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1864: 36).

To say that the opera was badly received in London would be an understatement. The main problem for critics seems to have been the opera rather than the singers or the production. *The Spectator* (Apr. 30 1842: 417) wrote that "To criticize such a wretched composition would be a waste of words. It has not a single musical excellence of any sort – not a gleam of sunshine – not a solitary bright speck." J.W. Davison in the *Musical World* (Aug. 25 1842: 269) wrote that it was "a very poor, weak, washy out-pouring of a very soul-less composer" and that Moltini was "a very clever singer, and a very sweet woman but utterly destitute of genius". *The Court Magazine* (Jan-June 1842: 403) noted that "no one greatly esteemed *Gemma di Vergy* – indeed everyone we believe was of opinion that it was one of the poorest things that Donizetti, no small proficient in poverty, ever brought forth". The best known critic of this era, Henry Chorley, after "Passing the music, as its composer's feeblest, and the story, as one of the most improbable and sickly which ever came out of the brain of enervated libretto-monger" quickly moved onto a lengthy appraisal of the singers, again emphasising their centrality to opera at this time (*The Athenaeum*, 1842: 260).

Other publications were more nuanced or at least more expansive in their reactions even if they did not like the opera. *The Evening Chronicle* (Mar. 14 1842: 3) after accusing Donizetti of scribbling with "railway speed", a nice reference to the new technology of the day, thought that the character of *Gemma* "far too fierce and vindictive to be interesting", a verdict that tallies with William Ashbrook in his modern appraisal of the opera (*Donizetti and his operas*. Cambridge: CUP, 1982: 365-368). Ashbrook saw it as an uneven work let down by the plot generating little sympathy for *Gemma* and composed while Donizetti was concentrating on an opera for Paris. The latter point could be seen as reflected, if rather harshly, in the report from *The Era* (Mar. 20 1842: 5):

Gemma di Vergy was repeated on Tuesday night, and the singers had the advantage of repose from the fatigue of travelling and rehearsals, acquitted themselves with spirit and effect. The

subject of this opera has much tragic capability, but is marred by the poverty of the poetry, and its want of construction. The incidents are huddled together, and the result fails to impart any lasting impression. The music is in Donizetti's usual manner, and though possessing *morceaux* full of feeling and taste, wants breadth of design, and simplicity of purpose. It is characterless, and might well serve for a libretto on a different subject; there is no originality; the ordinary number of solos, choruses, etc. occur in their usual places, and the same means are used to accomplish the same ends.

The comment about fatigue shows that the singers turned up only a few days ahead of the performance, in fact Guasco did not arrive until the day before having been held up by a hurricane in the Channel (*The Examiner*, Mar. 12 1842: 171). Moltini had sung the role at Bergamo and Piacenza and Guasco at Udine but the group do not appear to have sung together in any previous production so one can only surmise that the staging must have been very rudimentary and centred on the individual singer's performances. This idea is supported by Chorley's (*ibid.*) observations that "The orchestra is now superb; and the chorus improved, though still too circular in its disposition, and too statue-like in its utter renunciation of stage business". The scenery would, no doubt, have been put together as indicated in the libretto or from instructions sent ahead from Italy. There seems to have been no comment on it as was often the case in reviews at this time. We can also note that no reviews mentioned the conductor, presumably Michael Costa the theatre's chief conductor, showing how peripheral his contribution was considered.

There were more favourable notices. *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* (Mar. 20 1842: 5) thought it "dramatically effective" and that Donizetti had treated it "with becoming spirit and excellence". The *Gardener's Chronicle* (Mar. 19, 1842: 199) that clearly spread its interests beyond plants reported that "Moltini... is a fine woman, with an expressive countenance and handsome person. Her voice is a clear soprano, of large compass; her style is good, and her intonation true. She was energetic and impassioned; and her performance elicited frequent applause". The other singers were also complimented. "The choruses were well sung, and there was a good deal of applause at the fall of the curtain.... The house was well filled, and many persons of distinction were present."

Overall, Lumley's (36) verdict rings truest:

Gemma di Vergy, although abounding in melody and effects, both dramatic and musical, was not esteemed one of Donizetti's finer compositions, albeit a favourite opera in many parts of Italy. Donizetti, likewise, had found, up to this time, but slight favour with the English public, or, at all events, with the English press. He occupied, then, in this country, a position similar to that which afterwards fell to the lot of his successor, Verdi; and even among a great portion of the numerous critics, amateurs as well as 'professionals', he was pronounced, by many arbiters of taste, "flimsy", "meretricious", "noisy", "unsound", "plagiarist" and so on.

Gemma was unquestionably a failure; as, indeed, it would have proved under these prejudices with even stronger claims to approbation. I may take occasion to remark, that a criticism is still extant condemning the *Barbiere di Siviglia*, when first represented in England, as utterly "worthless". Rossini is now classic, but in his early days he was treated with as little respect as Donizetti and Verdi at later periods.

One might ask why Donizetti and later Verdi received such a negative press. The answer lies in a number of factors. There was the identification of Italian opera with the upper classes at a time when the middle classes, the origin of most music critics, were pushing hard for political influence recently reflected in the 1832 reform act. Further, the upper classes were seen as being primarily interested in the social aspects of opera going rather than any musical values,

“Let an opera be only new, and the fashionable crowd will flock to it, expiring in affected rapture over the poorest commonplaces” (*Evening Chronicle* Mar. 14 1842: 3). This was at a time when musicians were trying to raise the status of music from being seen as mere bought in entertainment to being considered on a par with other arts. Central to this was an advocacy for German/Austrian music, both opera but increasingly importantly “pure”, non-vocal, music that was seen as involving serious musical thought and intent as against ephemeral, crowd pleasing, Italian opera. *Ainsworth’s Magazine* (1842: 254-255) touches on this in its dismissal of *Gemma*, whose only virtue in its opinion was that it was not as offensive as *Lucia di Lammermoor* with its “desecration of Scott’s most exquisite ‘tale of tears’”:

It will be easily admitted that times are changed; and that so, in like manner, is what was called the taste of the town; when we find that the earnest, sublime music of Handel and Mozart is appreciated, and night after night, throughout a season, applauded by crowded audiences consisting of the humble classes of society; while the clattering noise of Donizetti is provided constantly as the appropriate entertainment for the ears of the higher classes.

Donizetti, probably more so than Verdi, was unfortunate to be active at a time when these various forces were at their height. Hopefully, any future London performance will get a more sympathetic hearing.