

## The Donizetti Festival, Bergamo (part 3) Donizetti's *L'Ange de Nisida*

Charles Jernigan, November 2019

The third opera at this year's Festival was, by a long shot, the last of Donizetti's works to premiere: *L'Ange de Nisida*, which had its first performance ever as a concert at Covent Garden in June, 2018, and its first staging at the Donizetti Festival this year, on November 16, 2019. Sort of. In Bergamo, this piece, which Donizetti never saw on stage, was presented in the *cantiere*, the construction site, of the Teatro Donizetti, which for the last two years has been undergoing a major renovation, with modernized stage areas, dressing rooms, foyers and bars. Work will be completed in time for the 2020 Festival. In the meanwhile, *L'Ange* was staged in the orchestra seating section (the stalls), all seats removed, while the audience sat in boxes or on the stage itself in a *tribuna*—a raised, tiered metal platform with fixed plastic seats. The orchestra was in the pit, but facing the stage, while the conductor faced the playing area so that the singers could see him. It was opera in the round. The unusual circumstances made for an unusual production, and in my estimation, *L'Ange de Nisida* still awaits a proper stage production so that we can see it as Donizetti probably imagined it. The staging we saw naturally had some problems with acoustics with difficulties posed by the placement of the singers and voice projection, but it was a fascinating attempt to stage this opera—a work in progress—in a space which is also a work in progress.

This opera has a complicated history. Donizetti wrote *L'Ange de Nisida* for the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris in 1840, but the theater went bankrupt between the beginning of rehearsals and the projected date of the opening, meaning that it was never staged. For reasons relating to regulations from the Napoleonic era governing the types of operas which Parisian theaters could perform, no other Paris house—the Opéra, the Opéra Comique or the Théâtre Italien—could take the work, and Donizetti knew that no Italian house would stage it due to the story, which reflected unfavorably on both the King of Naples, Fernand of Aragon, and the Church. In the end, he dismembered the score, placing almost half of it in *La favorite*, a French grand opera with a similar story which became a triumph at the Opéra, while part of an aria went into *Don Pasquale*. And so it remained for 180 years until musicologist Candida Mantica managed to reconstruct the score from autograph pages in the Bibliothèque National in Paris and from a microfilm copy of the autograph of *La favorite* (the autograph itself is currently “lost” too). The reconstruction gives us an opera with about 60% of the music used elsewhere (and therefore familiar to Donizetti fans) and about 40% which is “new.”

In order to get around the theatrical regulations of the theaters, a work for the Renaissance could not be a grand opera in French (the purview of the Opéra), a work in Italian (the purview of the Théâtre Italien) or a French work with spoken dialogue (the purview of the Opéra Comique). Thus the librettists Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz devised what was called a *genre* opera: a work in French but in the style of an Italian opera semiseria, with a plot which included a comic character within a serious story. *L'Ange*, however, differs from almost all Italian semi-serias, which always have a happy or rescue ending, while *L'Ange* ends with the death of the protagonist.

To make it even more complicated, Donizetti evidently used extensive portions of an existing Italian opera semi-seria which he had written, but which had never been staged, *Adelaide*, in the score of *L'Ange de Nisida*. Thus the librettist had to adapt new words—in French—to existing music composed for an Italian text!

The story, based on eighteenth century texts about the Comte de Comminge, concerns the Countess Sylvia de Linarès (soprano), a young Spanish woman ‘adopted’ by Don Fernand I d’Aragon, the King of Naples, in the fifteenth century. He has fallen in love with her and keeps her, as his mistress, most of the time on the island of Nisida, in the Bay of Naples. The people call her their angel (*L'Ange*) because of her kindness and good works. Leone de Casaldi, a young soldier who has been exiled after a duel, falls in love with her, not realizing that she is the King’s mistress. She loves him too, but implores him to forget her. The Church in the person of the Monk, declares that the King must renounce her and send her away, but Don Gaspar, the King’s chamberlain, plans a marriage of convenience for her. Leone becomes the chosen husband, but when he learns the truth, he renounces her in front of the Court and breaks his sword in front of the King. In the final scene, Leone, desperate, has become a novice in a monastery where the Monk is the Father Superior, but Sylvia has also come to the monastery disguised as a male novice. She is desperately ill, and when she reveals herself to Leone, he at first disowns her. Soon, however, love conquers his sense of offended honor, and they sing a love duet, hoping for a future together. It is too late. She dies in his arms, and he tells the Monk that he will follow her the following day.

Those who know *La favorite* will immediately see the similarities—a king with a mistress, an innocent lover who does not know her “history,” the opposition of the religious authorities, the last act in the monastery with the death of Léonor, the protagonist of that opera. When Donizetti refashioned *L'Ange de Nisida* as *La favorite*, however, he dispensed with the buffo bass Don Gaspar, who would have been unsuitable for a work at the Opéra. One part of the story which moved to the new opera intact was the final scene in the monastery. A much repeated story held that Donizetti wrote the music for that last act of *La favorite* in the white heat of a single night while suffering from a migraine headache. Of course that was baloney; he had written it the previous year for *L'Ange de Nisida*.

*L'Ange de Nisida* undoubtedly has a lot of first rate Donizetti music which is otherwise unknown, including Don Gaspar’s Act I buffo aria with chorus (“Ma puissance n’est pas mince”) with its concluding cabaletta (“Et vous Mesdames”) which will become “Un foco insolito” in *Don Pasquale*; Leone’s cabaletta-like “Quelle ivresse et quel délire” in Act II when he thinks Sylvia is his; the King’s “O mon Ange que j’implore,” which is a solo couched in a trio, which concludes Act II; the duet between Don Gaspar and the King in Act III; the Chorus “Déjà dans la chapelle” in Act III, and much else. A small percentage of the music either was never composed or is lost. For the London concert (and the Opera Rara recording) it was newly composed in Donizetti’s style by Martin Fitzpatrick, including a Prelude, or in the case of a cabaletta for Sylvia, it was borrowed from an additional piece which Donizetti wrote for *Maria di Rohan*. The Bergamo performances tried to stick as close to Donizetti’s score as possible: a few passages of recitative without music were mimed silently, the Fitzpatrick additions were discarded and Sylvia’s Act III cabaletta was taken from an early, never heard version of the Léonor’s analogous cabaletta from *La favorite*.



The isle of Nisida in *Recovered Music*

Instead of scenery as such, the production opened with sheets of music covering the oval playing area in the shape of the small island of Nisida. At other times, the chorus, singing in the top tier of boxes, dropped sheets of music from the opera to the playing area (some were caught by audience members sitting in the boxes below). The idea honored the work as a musicological reconstruction rebuilt from the scattered leaves of the score. Otherwise projections (by Angelo Sala) on the playing floor took the place of sets. All of this worked well.



Company in Period (Paper) Costumes

Costumes by Margherita Baldoni consisted of modern attire for most of the opera, but in the second part (Act III of the original) the chorus came in wearing colorful medieval costumes, followed by the principals in equally spectacular period dress—all made of paper printed with medieval or Renaissance designs, paper which was ripped apart and discarded as the act progressed. The symbolism seemed to suggest that the period did not matter—a woman abused by the men around her is a timeless theme.

Whether by design or not, Francesco Micheli, the director of the Bergamo production, carried out that theme by making the characters symbol-cyphers rather than “real” people whom we are

supposed to believe in—except for Don Gaspar. Thus the innocent waif-victim, Sylvia wears angel’s wings when we first see her and is clad in a simple shift. The singer herself (Lidia Fridman) was so thin and waif-like that she personified the helpless female victim, controlled by the whims and actions of the men—the King who would use her sexually, the Monk who would condemn her for “immorality” and Leone, who loves her image, but has no idea who she really is. She does not emerge as a real woman, except perhaps when her committed singing suddenly involved the listener. The lovers were never allowed to touch each other. Even in their final passionate duet, they circled from a distance and sang towards each other. In the third act a huge, plaster cast wedding dress was built around the inert Sylvia and imprisons her. The symbolism of a woman who is used and imprisoned in her role was obvious. The disposable, paper costumes that almost everyone wore in this act also reduced them to symbols, Only Don Gaspar was “real,” and only he did not wear a paper period costume.



The Ripped Apart Paper Costumes

Micheli decided to solve the problem of a buffo bass in a serious opera by making Gaspar a kind of Mephistophèles, manipulating the strings of these puppet characters, thereby removing his comic nature. Instead of being pompous and foolish like Ser Cuccupis in *Pietro il Grande*, he came across as a satanic ring master. I doubt that is what Donizetti and his librettists intended, but it worked reasonably well.

Singing was first rate, better in my estimation than is found on the Opera Rara recording. French baritone Florian Sempey (Don Fernand d’Aragon) was consistent in his range, powerful, with a manly tone; his smooth voice showed real attention to bel canto techniques—and his French was of course excellent. Lidia Fridman (Sylvia de Linarès) was

new to me, and I feared that she would be unable to compete, so thin is she: where could the breath come from? No need to worry; she demonstrated a clear, pure soprano, rising easily to powerful high notes. Tenor Konu Kim (Leone) was a revelation—powerful, great high notes, the ability to sing softly, fine technique; he was so pleased with himself (with reason) that he leapt in the air, punching his fist at his curtain call). Tall Roberto Lorenzi (Don Gaspar) was also very good—and he was the one allowed to act; in his white suit he strutted (sometimes with a cane) around the stage, showing who was in charge. Federico Benetti as Le Moine was not as forceful as he should have been, and a very young Father Superior at that. He sang well in the big ensembles (he does not have a solo aria), but he could have showed more authority. The 43 person chorus of the Donizetti Opera was superb and the Donizetti Opera Orchestra conducted by Jean-Luc Tingaud revealed a better opera than I had heard in the Opera Rara recording.



Leone and Sylvia

Will *L'Ange de Nisida* enter the repertory? I doubt it—I think that *La favorite*, which reuses so much of the music, is a better opera, but it is more than a musicological curiosity, and I would bet that there will be more productions which treat it as a finished work and not as a work in progress. All of us who love bel canto are indebted to Candida Mantica, the young musicologist whose work has allowed us to see and hear a work that no one in Donizetti's lifetime saw or heard. She took a fully deserved bow at the curtain calls along with the cast and the technical staff. And then the spotlight shifted to a large bust of Donizetti placed at the front of the stage above the orchestra. Everyone in the playing area and the audience in the boxes and on the *tribuna* turned to it and the applause grew deafening. One-hundred and eighty years after the composer completed the score (in December, 1839), *L'Ange de Nisida* had come home.