

Donizetti's *Enrico di Borgogna*

Donizetti Festival, Bergamo

Charles Jernigan, November 2018

On November 14, 1818, Donizetti's first professional stage work debuted in Venice's San Luca theater. Two weeks later the composer would turn 21. *Enrico di Borgogna* came about because Donizetti was trying to start a career, having just finished two years of study at the Bologna Conservatory under the venerable Padre Mattei. In April of 1818 he ran into an old school friend, Bartolomeo Merelli, who had been commissioned to write a libretto for the Zancia company which was touring and would end its tour in Venice. The impresario Paola Zancia decided to give the 20 year old Donizetti a chance. The contract called for an opera semi-seria and listed the singers in the company who should have roles. The company included two comic basses, so Zancia wanted something that would utilize at least one of them. The libretto source was to be a play by August von Kotzebue, a popular German playwright, but before long, for some reason, Merelli and Donizetti settled on a different Kotzebue play, *Der Graf von Burgund*. Around the same time, the principal female singer in the company dropped out, and it was decided to give the lead role of Elisa to a young novice who had concert experience but had never been on stage. The new opera was to open the San Luca Theater, which had just been refurbished. The 800-seat theater, which originally opened in 1622, still exists today as the Teatro Goldoni, Venice's principal theater for spoken drama. The first night audience seemed more interested in the "new" theater than in the new opera, and Adelina Catalani, the novice mezzo-soprano, fainted from stage fright in the middle of the first act finale. A *comprimaria* had to sing her part, which meant that a good bit of the music in the second act was not sung at all. In other words, opening night might have been a disaster for Donizetti, however, as reported by a newspaper of the time, the public recognized an expressive personal style and talent and called the composer out at the end in spite of all the problems. A month went by before La Catalani recovered sufficiently to sing the whole role.

Merelli then produced a new libretto for the same company which Donizetti set: the one-act *Una follia*, now lost, but after that, without a new commission, Donizetti returned to Bergamo, where *Enrico* may have been performed at the Teatro Sociale (no written record has been found however), the site of our 2018 performances. Or perhaps the Zancia company performed it in Mantua. In any case, it was unheard again until 2012, when Anders Wiklund, the Swedish musicologist, revived it in Vadstena, Sweden, with young singers. The current Bergamo production is probably the first professional offering of what may be called Donizetti's first non-student work in two hundred years.

Merelli's libretto is no worse than that of many opera texts of the period. About twenty years before the action opens, the king has been killed by his brother, who then assumed the throne. The king's infant son Enrico was saved by two retainers, Pietro and Brunone and taken to safety. When the action opens, the usurper king has died and his son Guido has become the new ruler of Burgundy; Enrico has been raised in a pastoral setting near the Alps by Pietro without knowing who he really is. The evil Guido is intent on marrying Elisa, but

she has chanced to meet Enrico and they are in love. In the course of action, Enrico, Pietro and Brunone gather a force and attack Guido, who is defeated. Enrico and Elisa are united, Enrico forgives Guido, and all ends happily.

The opera has an unusual distribution of voices because of the company which Zancla had assembled. Enrico is a contralto pants role, while Elisa is a role for mezzo-soprano. Guido, the villain, is a tenor, but Pietro, the good retainer, is also a tenor, and his role is scarcely less important than the principals. Gilberto, an obsequious courtier to Guido, is a comic role for buffo bass. Taken straight, the opera seems like a serious work with a comic figure (Gilberto) grafted onto the story. It is not a traditional opera semi-seria. Listening to this first work of the young composer, one hears a lot of Mayr, his teacher, as one would expect. There is also Rossini. In 1818 Rossini was at the height of his Italian career, and many of his works were associated with Venice, where his career, like Donizetti's, had taken flight. *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* had both premiered in Venice only five years earlier, so it is no surprise that one finds a scene and words in *Enrico* that are almost a copy of the opening to *Tancredi*'s famous "Di tanti palpiti"; but when Rossini's pants-hero mezzo launches into "Di tanti palpiti," Enrico launches into his cabaletta "Mi scendi all'anima," and the melody is pure Donizetti. In fact it is so much in Donizetti's style that he will use the same tune twelve years later in the most famous melody in *Anna Bolena*, "Al dolce guidimi, castel natio." In other words, one can easily find the influence of Mayr and Rossini, but from the very start, Donizetti was Donizetti, an able and very personal melodist who could create song that stays in the ear like few other composers.

The directors in Bergamo decided to produce the opera on a stage within the stage, to let us see the opera as it might have been produced in 1818 by a small company with all the problems inherent in opera production—temperament, mechanical, vocal and financial. Some of it was amusing, some went too far. *Enrico di Borgogna* is really an heroic opera with a female lead in the hero's role; the production made it seem a comedy. One can argue whether a director needs to be faithful to a libretto like Merelli's, but it was a good show in its own right, based on all the problems of opera production. The small platform stage (with curtain and proscenium arch) revolved from time to time, showing us backstage and the wings. We saw backstage antics, singers trying to upstage each other, the harried impresario (a mute role not in the opera), and a black bear. I have no idea what the man in the bear suit was about, but he created havoc from time to time. There were inside jokes: everyone was in eighteenth century costume, the nobility with powdered wigs, except for some soldiers who seemed to be dressed as if they were out of a Rembrandt painting. The "opera company" evidently did not have the money for consistent costuming. Like many operas of the era, *Enrico* has only a men's chorus, because only the largest and most important houses could afford women for the chorus. One chorus in the libretto, about "virgins," seems particularly fitting for women, so the men donned tall powdered wigs and sang in front of a cardboard cutout of women's dresses circa 1780. There were cardboard painted flats which were raised and lowered, sometimes with comic effect. In other words this was a production with many (intended) screw-ups, not unlike the premiere performance of *Enrico di Borgogna*.



Stage within a stage

The singers seemed better to me on opening night (Nov. 23) than the subsequent Sunday performance we saw (Nov. 25). Anna Bonitatibus (Enrico) is a contralto who has enjoyed good press in recitals, but she has a smallish voice, sometimes even too small for the small Teatro Sociale. Also, Levy Sekgapane (Guido), who impressed me at the Inaugural Concert when we were in the second row, seemed small of voice from farther back. He has an aria near the opera's end which is very Rossinian with much difficult coloratura, which he accomplished with ease, however. Sonia Ganassi (Elisa) is a mezzo-soprano who has been a leading singer for several decades, and she still has a big, appealing voice, but it is not quite as accurate as it once was. Francesco Castoro sang the role of the faithful retainer Pietro. It is a role of some consequence since it has a scene and aria in each act—the first a pastoral lament for his dead wife and the second a call to arms. Castoro was quite good once he was warmed up in Act II. I was most impressed by Luca Tittoto, who sang the comic bass role of Gilberto. Like Pietro, Gilberto has a buffo aria in each act, the second one a misogynistic rant which seems to have nothing to do with the opera's plot or characters. Tittoto carried off both arias with a deep resonant voice and a good bit of élan.



First Act Finale

Alessandro De Marchi led his Academia Montis Regalis orchestra (about 35 players) with his usual mastery and the male chorus of the Donizetti Opera sang and acted well. Silvia Paoli

was the director who presumably had the idea to stage the work as an opera-with-an-opera. Andrea Belli designed the set and Valeria Donata Bettela did the costumes. The production was done jointly with Venice's La Fenice, so I imagine that it will move to the city of its birth at some point. I enjoyed the music, which has flashes of the Donizetti's own voice, and the performance. But perhaps, before it gets to Venice, they will take the black bear out.