

Three Donizetti Rarities at the 2023 Donizetti Festival, Bergamo

Charles Jernigan, January 2024 *

*In late 2023 we reached the point when all of Donizetti's 70+ operas have been produced in one form or another in our time. I qualify "in one form or another" because the composer revised many of his operas, some several times and the music of many of them were also set to different libretti. Not all versions of all the operas have yet to see the light of day in our time. Also, "in one form or another" because some of his works have been recorded but have yet to have a modern stage production. Three of the rarities, *Zoraida di Granata*, presented at the Wexford Festival and *Il diluvio universale* and *Lucie de Lammermoor* at the Donizetti Opera Festival in Bergamo, are examples of works with one or more revisions. Only *Alfredo il grande* in Bergamo was never revised.*

Alfredo il grande

A little over eighteen months after *Zoraida di Granata*'s successful premiere in Rome, Donizetti debuted at Naples' Teatro San Carlo, at that time the pinnacle for operatic production in Italy. (In the meantime he had produced *three* different operas for other theaters in Naples and in Milan!) The vehicle was *Alfredo il grande*. It lasted one night—opening and closing on May 12, 1823. The flop was so total that *Alfredo* was never heard again until November, 2023, two hundred years later. (Ever enterprising Opera Rara had, however, recorded a tenor aria and the finale.)

Knowing the importance of the San Carlo, Donizetti had worked hard on *Alfredo il grande*, and he was severely disappointed by the failure. Hearing the music for the first time after 200 years, it is clear that the problem was not Donizetti's; much of the music is in fact splendid. Unfortunately the opera has a terrible libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola. The story originated in an opera called *Emma e Eraldo*, with libretto by Gaetano Rossi and music by Donizetti's teacher Giovanni Simone Mayr. That work had debuted at La Scala in 1805 and was subsequently played in Florence. Set in "Normannia, today called Norway," according to Rossi the story was taken from an anecdote drawn from the struggles between the Danes and the Norwegians in the middle ages (in the ninth century?) Almost two decades later in 1819, Mayr debuted his own *Alfredo il grande* at the Teatro Sociale in Bergamo. The libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli, Donizetti's fellow student in Mayr's school in Bergamo (and author of the libretto for Donizetti's *Zoraida di Granata*), was a reworking of Rossi and Mayr's *Emma e Eraldo*. Merelli now put the tale into the context of the ninth century struggles between the Danish Vikings and the English AngloSaxons under King Alfred. In both works, the king (Eraldo/Alfredo) is disguised as a minstrel and rescues his beloved (Emma/Alsvita) from their enemies. That opera was a great success; it was recorded by Naxos in 2019.

Leone Tottola was evidently inspired by Merelli's libretto for Mayr, but his libretto for Donizetti's Naples' debut is completely different than Merelli's work, except for its basis in the struggle between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons around 878 AD. In Donizetti/Tottola we first meet Alfred's wife Queen Amalia, who is searching for her husband on the island of Atheltry. Alfredo appears, fleeing his enemies (Danish Vikings), and is welcomed by local shepherds. He disguises himself as a shepherd, but is soon discovered by Atkins, the Danish general who pretends that he is a follower of Alfredo. Amalia spurs her beloved husband on to fight the Danes, and he does, defeating them at the end of Act 1—but then freeing them so that they can fight on the battlefield. Roughly the same series of events happens in Act 2: Alfredo is dressed out for battle; there is a battle (which gives the *seconda donna* the chance for her *aria di sorbetto*). Amalia is briefly captured by the fleeing Atkins and is about to stab herself when she

is rescued by Alfredo's forces. Alfredo wins and vanquishes Atkins; he and Amalia are crowned with great pomp.

The libretto is repetitious, and unlike Mayr, there is no place for that staple of opera, budding romance or even much character conflict. Amalia is a strong, faithful wife instead of the beloved who falls in love with a 'bard' not knowing that he is a king, as in Rossi/Merelli/Mayr; she seems more akin to Verdi's tough women, Abigaile, Odabella and Lady Macbeth. The libretto itself is more like one of the celebratory scenic cantatas glorifying the deeds of rulers which Rossini, Donizetti and others wrote to flatter the royal families in Naples, who were their employers. At least the Mayr opera had an actual Danish prince (Gutramo) as the antagonist. In Tottola the Danish general has the unlikely name of "Atkins" and his aide is the equally un-Danish sounding "Rivers."

Donizetti must have recognized that the libretto was really just a celebration of Alfred's military conquests because his score is filled with martial music, including the brief opening, full of brass and drums. The *Introduzione* opens with a frenzied duet between Queen Amalia and the English general, Eduardo, disguised as peasants looking for Alfredo, who has gone missing while fleeing from the Danes. The forceful stretta immediately establishes Amalia's character as a powerful woman who will be instrumental in urging her husband on to victory.

They soon encounter a group of happy shepherds and shepherdesses led by Guglielmo, Enrichetta and Margherita who welcome them not knowing who they are ("Su presto, alla campagna!"). It is an Arcadian scene vaguely reminiscent of a similar scene in Rossini's *Aureliano in Palmira*, another martial opera with repetitious battles and defeats. Musically, the extended piece is complex and melodiously satisfying. Towards the end of it the characters hear the Danes marching in the distance to a catchy martial tune which will one day become the regimental song in *La fille du régiment*. In counterpoint with the Anglo-Saxons singing in ensemble, it is a very satisfying ending to the *Introduzione*, and shows once again that Donizetti could come up with ear worm melodies very early in his career.

The disguised royals are given shelter by the shepherds and disperse. Now we are introduced to the "Dane" Atkins and his henchman Rivers. They are following Amalia and Eduardo, looking for Alfredo, and continue after them. The scene shifts to Guglielmo's hut where Alfredo is taking refuge, and we are introduced to him in his Rossinian cavatina "Non è di morte il fulmine" (once recorded by Bruce Ford on the Opera Rara disc, "The Young Donizetti," ORR 229). *Alfredo il Grande* has sometimes been criticized as Donizetti imitating Rossini in order to curry favor in the latter's home territory, and the Rossini imitation is mostly in the formal arias. This one is not bad, but it is not Rossini.

Now a chorus of shepherd girls, led by Enrichetta, the opera's mezzo, brings back Amalia and Eduardo in a graceful choral movement ("Il lasso fianco"), more Mayr than Rossini. Alfredo spies them and recognizes his wife and they are united in an ecstatic trio ("Sposo!..e fia ver?...qual gioia!") filled with Rossinian ornamentation. In the martial stretta ("Oh caro momento") they vow to fight on. Now Atkins returns, and pretending to be a loyal subject to Alfredo, he tells them that the Danes are hot on their traces and they must escape. Guglielmo offers a way out through a secret underground path. Atkins plans to ambush them when they emerge. In the following scene in a "dark valley overshadowed by high mountains," Atkins awaits them with an aria with chorus ("Solingo è il sito, amici") followed by a jolly cabaletta ("Oh cari! esprimervi").

Now the Act I finale begins as the fleeing group emerges from the subterranean escape route. Alfredo wants his wife to leave him, but she wants to stay ("Deh mi lascia, o sposa amata"). The duet is enlarged by Enrichetta and Margarita before the Danes with Atkins stop and seize them. Almost immediately Eduardo rushes in with the Anglo-Saxon soldiers and saves the day for the formal (and quite beautiful) slow movement ("Oh come dal grembo") led off by Amelia and

joined soon by everyone else. Foolishly, Alfredo frees the Danes because he would be “taking advantage” of them. Instead they will meet on the battlefield. Cue the conventional, but potentially exciting *stretta* (“Dell’impio l’aspetto”) to bring the curtain down. Had the real King Alfred behaved as his operatic progeny, he would be known to history as “Alfred the Dumb.” In the first scene of Act II, back in Guglielmo’s hut, Amalia and the English gird Alfredo for battle. The extended duet, eventually joined by the chorus is pretty Rossini-like (“Questo man, che un dì sull’ara”). The excited chorus which rushes in leads to the martial cabaletta (“La tromba m’invita”), itself led off by trumpet. It may be imitative, but it is good imitation, excitedly seconded by the chorus. Alfredo rushes off to battle.

Now there is an interlude while the battle gets ready offstage, which gives Enrichetta, our resident shepherdess-mezzo-soprano a chance to shine with a piece which is a little too grand to be a simple *aria di sorbetto* (“Quando al pianto ed all’affanno”). The cabaletta (“Di pace in grembo”) has a particularly grateful melody and really involved Rossinian ornamentation.

Now we are heading towards the conclusion. On a “vast plain” Alfredo is joined by his army and bands of shepherds, ready for battle. A martial chorus with lots of snare drums and brass (“All’apparir dell’astro”) introduces Alfredo’s big scena (“Che più si tarda? all’armi!”), also accompanied in the first part by drums and brass and a heavy dose of tenorial coloratura. An attractive adagio (“Celeste voce ascolto”) is followed by good news from Guglielmo—the Danes have been vanquished—giving Alfredo the excuse for his martial *stretta* (“Se questo, amico Nume”), a piece which is arch-Donizetti in cut and melodic development. We will hear many variations on this catchy, *popolaresco* piece in Donizetti operas in the coming years. There is a nice diminuendo on the melody too, as the chorus and characters march out and the instruments fall off one by one.

Now, in a final attempt to save his hide, we find Atkins fleeing in the forest. He runs across Amalia with Enrichetta and tries to take her captive, but she seizes a dagger and defends herself. In a trio (“Traditor! Di un ferro ancora...”) they struggle, and when Amalia threatens to kill herself, Eduardo rushes in with Guglielmo and the trio becomes a quintet of joy and triumph: “All’inattesa aita”) with an exciting and satisfying ending.

The final scene is one of triumph and celebration, complete with choruses of warriors and shepherds and onstage *banda* (“Viva Alfredo! Il grande! Il prode!”). The martial chorus yields to Amalia for a Rossinian rondo finale (“Che potrei dirti, o caro”). The infectious cabaletta (“Torna a gioir quest’alma”) returns to the martial music and the stage band to express everyone’s joy. It may be imitative of the Rossini of *La donna del lago* and other operas, but it is a very, very good imitation of Rossini at his best. (Della Jones recorded the finale for Opera Rara on “100 Years of Italian Opera—1820-1830,” ORCH 104, which was reissued on “Della Jones Sings Donizetti,” ORR 203). Both are still available.

Musically, the Bergamo production is very satisfying and reveals an impressive lost score, one of the best of Donizetti’s early operas. No wonder he was so disheartened by its failure as he wrote to Mayr, “I have done my best.” Gilda Fiume is an excellent Amalia, easily tossing off the coloratura with a strong voice everywhere except in the lowest notes. She sings as if she really believes in the opera and the character, no matter how poor the character development is in the story. Listeners are likely to have heard Antonio Siragusa (Alfredo) in the past; he is a regular in the lesser known operas of Rossini and Donizetti (more power to him) and he definitely has the technique to sing this difficult music. Whether one likes the tenor of his tenor, as it were, will be up to the listener. It is not a beautiful voice, but it is a capable one. The other singers, particularly Lodovico Filippo Ravizza as Eduardo are fine; Adolfo Corrado sang Atkins and Valeria Giradello was good as Enrichetta. Guglielmo was Antonio Gares, Margherita was Floriana Cicio and Rivers was Andr  s Agudelo. Corrado Rovaris led the Donizetti Opera Orchestra and the chorus of Radio Hungary with care and   lan.

The Bergamo production, such as it was, by Stefano Simone Pintor, was determinedly cartoonish and mostly stupid. It was sort of three-fourth staged, with characters wearing charity shop costumes (by Giada Masi) over evening clothes and offering rudimentary stage action most of the time. It came off like the sixth grade play being performed for a history project on medieval Britain. The elementary school ambiance was backed by now-ubiquitous video projections of everything from medieval-ish illuminations to pictures of contemporary wars and the storming of the US capitol building on January 6, 2021. None of the contemporary photos had anything to do with the opera.

Further, someone involved with the production discovered that aside from fighting the Viking hoards, King Alfred had founded monasteries, much as his illustrious role model Charlemagne had done, for the purpose of copying manuscripts and educating the populace. Alfred even decreed that primary education should be in the spoken Wessex dialect rather than Latin. The opera production seized on this “cultural” aspect of Alfred’s reign by having books everywhere. Characters held them, they were placed on the stage, they were passed around. Of course they had nothing at all to do with the opera’s story or music, but they did add another layer of befuddlement (and perhaps served as prompt books for singers who forgot their lines). Instead of clarifying, the production made a bad libretto even worse. If you experience the opera on Donizetti Web TV, my advice is to listen with your eyes closed.



Alfredo il Grande, Finale

Il diluvio universale

The Donizetti Festival’s next rarely performed offering was *Il diluvio universale*, Donizetti’s take on the biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood. The opera was the Lenten offering at the Teatro San Carlo in 1830. As we know from Rossini’s *Mosè in Egitto*, which is surely Donizetti’s

primary model, operas could only be performed in Lent if they dealt with edifying material based on stories from the Bible. Donizetti thought of the work as an 'oratorio', although it was staged; the story combines the biblical myth with operatic melodrama concerning conflicts within the House of Cadmo, the ruler who ridicules Noah's (Noé in Italian) prophecy — and who comes to a watery end. Cadmo's wife Sela is attracted by Noé's God and believes his prophecy of coming destruction. Ada, another of Noé's wives, wants to supplant her in Cadmo's affections and plants the seed that Noé is trying to take her from Cadmo to give to one of his own sons. Sela can't convince the jealous Cadmo to give up his profligate ways; he rejects her and refuses to let her see their son. Sela, desperate, tries to placate Cadmo, but he will only take her back if she curses Noé and his God. With great hesitation she does this, bringing down the destructive cataclysm. Sela's agony, torn between Noé and the Hebrew God on the one hand and Cadmo and her son on the other provides the drama while the story of Noah and the Flood provides the biblical edification and moral lesson which made the opera's production during Lent possible.

Donizetti thought a lot of *Il diluvio universale*. He himself worked out the scenario and the drama and gave it to the poet Domenico Gilardoni to versify. It did not go well on opening night, perhaps because the Sela, Luigia Boccabadati, entered the Act I finale twenty or thirty bars early, causing a complete botch of the powerful ending of Act I. The opera did recover, however, on subsequent evenings and there was a revival in Genoa in 1834, for which Donizetti provided several changes with new music, dropping some of the original. It appears that it was also revived in Paris in 1837, but that was it. It was never heard again until it was revived in Genoa in an edition prepared by Rubino Profeta in 1985. Next, Opera Rara revived it in a London concert in 2005. The Genoa performance was recorded live and issued as a CD by Bongiovanni, and Opera Rara issued their concert version as ORC 31. Both of the recorded versions rely on the 1834 score revised by Donizetti for Genoa. Bergamo, however, offered the original Naples version, presumably for the first time since 1830.

There is an excellent essay/analysis of the opera in the ORC 31 booklet by Jeremy Commons, and I will not repeat what he says about the opera's history and the music. Rubino Profeta thought that the music was superior to that in *Anna Bolena*, which comes later the same year, and which was of course Donizetti's international break-out hit. In fact some of the music from *Diluvio* finds its way into *Anna Bolena*, (a slow section from the Cadmo/Sela duet "Non profferir parole" at the start of Act II) and every commentator notes that Noé's "Si, quell'arca" in Act I uses the melody (in slower tempo) which will end up as the regimental song "Chacun le sait, chacun le dit" in *La fille du régiment*; what they didn't know was that the tune had already appeared as the Danish march in *Alfredo il grande*. Donizetti obviously knew he had a catchy tune on his hands. It just took him awhile to find the proper place for it: a Viking march? No... a prophetic jeremiad from the Bible? No... The arch-comic military melody sung by a female soldier in an opera comique? Obviously the right place.

Musically, the Bergamo production is quite satisfying, perhaps more so than the two existing CD recordings of the revised 1834 version. In this original version we lose a good duet for Cadmo and Ada in Act I, but we get a dramatic tenor aria for Cadmo ("Impudica! e ancora respira") with a catchy cabaletta. We lose a bravura aria for Ada in Act II ("Ah non tacermi in core"), but we gain an extended Act I finale. The Bergamo cast under Riccardo Frizza, the Festival's Music Director, is certainly up to the task. Particularly good is Giuliana Gianfaldoni as Sela. Her attractive soprano and fine technique made her the center of action more than Noé. She dispatched her big last act aria "Senza colpa mi scacciasti" with real aplomb, ending with gorgeous high pianissimi. She followed the aria with a dramatic and unusual "cabaletta" where she must curse God at Cadmo's order. Gianfaldoni did justice to Donizetti's most unusual scene. (I remember being impressed by her in Foroni's *Margarita* in Wexford a few years ago).

Enea Scala's clarion tenor was almost too good for the corrupt Cadmo; he sailed easily through the coloratura. Nahuel Di Pierro was a noble Noé, although one would wish for a little more

sonorous authority in his grand religious aria-prayer, “Dio tremendo, onnipossente” which sets off the climax of Act II. This aria is obviously Donizetti’s attempt to emulate the great success of Rossini’s “Dal tuo stellato soglio” in *Mosè*. Everyone else in the large cast was good too. And special lauds to the Coro dell’Accademia Teatro alla Scala under Salvo Sgrò. There is a lot of interesting choral music in this opera, as is appropriate for an opera which is sort of an oratorio, for instance the highly unusual “Gli empi ‘l circondano” in Act II or “Stirpe Angelica, ti bea” which leads off Act III.

The musical excellence of the performance and musicological interest of the original version of a very rarely performed opera was severely undercut by a staging by a video installation group called MASBEDO, which was one of the worst pieces of crap ever to be seen in an opera house. The production supposedly adhered to the Festival’s enunciated mission to make Donizetti’s operas appealing to twenty-first century audiences by drawing connections between the opera and the biblical story with climate change disasters. That connection seems obvious, but the production hammered it home in every scene. Much worse was the constant and awful video projections on a theatre sized screen behind the singers. It made it almost impossible to concentrate on the singing and the action that the brave singing actors tried nevertheless to carry on in front of ludicrous video imagery. Needless to say, there was no ark and there was no flood in spite of the fact that CGI video projection could be used to enhance the story as it is done in films all the time these days. MASBEDO’S version of this was sophomoric, and the best that can be said of the production is that the production team was greeted by vociferous boos at the final curtain—boos captured and not edited out in the Web TV streaming.

Lucie de Lammermoor

The final offering of the Festival was the less well known French version of one of Donizetti’s most familiar operas. As Donizetti fans know, the composer produced a revised version to a French libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz in 1839 for the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris, a version which circulated for years in the French provinces and which figures prominently in Flaubert’s iconic 1856 novel *Madame Bovary*.

It has been revived (and recorded) a few times in our day, but it differs sufficiently from the original version to find a place of its own on many lists of Donizetti’s compositions. The libretto gets rid of Alisa and Normanno, combining their duties in a more interesting character, Gilbert, who plays both sides of the struggle between Lucie/Edgar and Henri Ashton, her brother. Raymond (the minister)’s role is reduced and he loses both of the arias he has in the Italian version (“Cedi, cedi” and “Dalla stanza ove Lucia”). Arthur appears in the opera’s first scene, but he doesn’t have much more to do than in the original. Musically, Donizetti substituted “Que n’avons-nous des ailes?”, taken from his *Rosmonda d’Inghilterra* and translated into French, for Lucia’s entrance aria “Regnava nel silenzio.” The Wolf’s Crag scene remains, but transported from Ravenswood Castle ruins and shorn of its Gothic Romanticism. Donizetti made small cuts in the Mad Scene, and Caterina Sala sang a long unaccompanied cadenza there which was completely different from the Victorian-era cadenza accompanied by a flute that we are used to. A descending phrase in sixths in the love duet in Act I, which begins on high C (Lucie) and on an extraordinary Eb (Edgard) is in the score and was performed in Bergamo.

For most Donizetti fans the original 1835 version in Italian will remain the touchstone, but it is fun to see the French version once in a while.

The Bergamo production, directed by Jacopo Spirei with sets by Mauro Tinto and costumes by Agnese Rabatti, was fairly dull, but not as awful as the other two productions of this Bergamo season. Spirei’s announced intention was to focus on Lucie (and thus women in general) as

victims of male violence, and thus we got not one, but four Lucie/females in the first scene of the opera (even though Lucie is not supposed to be there, not even one of her); they appeared at the end, collapsed on stage. Beyond that, the Festival's often iterated intention to show how the operas are contemporary and deal with our problems today updated this *Lucie* to the 1950s or '60s, with the Edgard, Patrick Kabongo, looking like a Black James Dean, in jeans and a leather jacket. Lucie herself wore nondescript and unflattering clothes, and when she appeared for the mad scene, she was so drenched in stage blood that she looked like she had come straight from the abattoir. In the final scene, in the Ravenswood graveyard, there were no graves, but there was the burnt out carcass of a car. Thus, the production removed almost all of the Gothic Romantic elements that are such an important part of the opera and Scott's novel, which is its basis. The unit set, a forest, was unchanging though sometimes enhanced with picnic tables; there was no castle hall. Lucie's wedding to Arthur took place in the woods, the same place where Edgard's meeting with Lucie took place in the first scene. The automobile graveyard was in the same part of the forest too.



Lucie de Lammermoor, The Ravenswood Car Graveyard

We were left with a vision of modern 'ugly'—a cheaper cousin of the Metropolitan's trailer trash version of *Lucia* which played in New York last season to much derision. Musically, however, everything hung together. Caterina Sala (Lucie) was ill on opening night and able to sing only the first act, and that with difficulty, so that a substitute finished the opera (and the Mad Scene!) for her. Thus, the Bergamo authorities decided not to stream and record opening night. She seems to have recovered by the second performance, which was the one streamed. Her technique was impeccable, but there was not much beauty in her tone, and I wondered if she was still recovering. Patrick Kabongo had solid, sometimes spectacular high notes and easy technique, although his is a light tenor which I don't associate with Edgardo (although perhaps it was appropriate for Edgard). His French was always understandable (in contrast to Ms. Sala's mushy diction). Vito Priante was excellent as Henri Ashton. His is a smooth, beautiful baritone and he seemed comfortable on stage. David Astorga was a greasy, mobster-like Gilbert and Roberto Lorenzi saw to Raimond's reduced duties. Julien Henric brought an imposing tenor to the limited role of Arthur Bucklaw, and I wished that he had more to sing. Pierre Dumoussaud led the period orchestra Gli Originali and the chorus of the La Scala Academy, with perhaps too much drive, rushing through the slower, more lyrical sections.

Certainly it was not a great *Lucia* (or *Lucie*), but adequate vocally and worth a watch, perhaps with a thought to rereading *Madame Bovary*, and appreciating the irony of the novel heroine's response to the opera's romanticism when she goes to see a provincial performance in Rouen.

* These comments are based on multiple viewings of the opera streamed on the internet, and not on a performance seen live in the theatre. Thanks to Alan Jackson, who offered some suggestions and kindly corrected typos and other errors.