

# Donizetti's *Zoraida di Granata*

Charles Jernigan, January 2024 \*

Photographs by Clive Barda Arena Pal, courtesy of Wexford Festival Opera

*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 was never revised.*

## The Team

Zoraida	Claudia Boyle
Almuzir	Konu Kim
Abenamet	Matteo Mezzaro
Ines	Rachel Croash
Almanzor	Julian Henao Gonzalez
Ali Zegri	Matteo Guerzé
Dancers	Luisa Baldinetti Miryam Tomé
Conductor	Diego Ceretta
Director	Bruno Ravella
Sets and costumes	Gary McCann
Lighting	Daniele Naldi

Technically, *Zoraida di Granata* had three versions—the two-tenor version which Donizetti first composed to a libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli; a seriously truncated version for tenor and mezzo which was forced on the composer at the last minute when one of his tenors suddenly died—and which was the actual score performed at the premiere in Rome in 1822; and the revised 1824 version composed with a famous mezzo in mind for the role of Abenamet, with much new music and an extensively revised libretto by Jacopo Ferretti.

In 1999 Opera Rara issued a four CD set featuring the original 1822 version with an appendix containing the new pieces from the 1824 version, but the Wexford performances constituted the first actual staging of the opera in modern times to my knowledge. Jeremy Commons, in his superb and thorough essay for the CD set (ORC 17), comments on the quality of the 1822 score, Donizetti's first *opera seria* and his first major success. The composer was 25, presenting his fifth opera, and still heavily influenced by the style of his great teacher Giovanni Simone Mayr. It is a carefully wrought score, showing great attention to word setting and without a lot of ornamentation, although it lacks those ear worm melodies which will define

Donizetti's later, more mature style. Zoraida's two arias in the second act ("Rose, che un dì spiegasti" and "Se non piango") are particularly effective and Almuzir's Act II aria "Amarla tanto" clearly shows his conflicting emotions as he is torn between love, indecision and a desire for vengeance.



Picture: Clive Barda

Abemenet and Zoraida



Picture: Clive Barda

Zoraida and Almuzir

The plot, although set in the Moorish court in Spain is a typical operatic triangle and could be set anywhere; the struggles between the Christian Spanish and the Moslem Moors form a fairly distant background for the tale, and the music is without 'local color'. Almuzir, the Moorish king (based on the historic figure Boabdil), is in love with Zoraida. She, however, loves Abenamet, a Moorish warrior who has bravely fought the Spanish but has been demoted by Almuzir in his quest for Zoraida. When the Spanish threaten again and the populace is unwilling to fight without Abenamet, Almuzir promises him Zoraida if he will lead their army. He is victorious, but through treachery loses track of the standard which Almuzir has given him to carry into battle. When he can't produce it, he is condemned as a traitor and imprisoned. Zoraida arranges to free him in exchange for giving herself to Almuzir, but soon she is arrested for helping Abenamet flee and sentenced to be burnt at the stake if no champion comes forth to save her. Abenamet appears, masked, and fights Almuzir's man Ali in single combat. He wins and Ali confesses the plot to discredit Abenamet and declares Zoraida's innocence. In an unlikely finale, all is forgiven, Almuzir reconciles with Abenamet and gets to keep his throne, and the lovers are united.



Picture: Clive Barba

### Ali Battles Abemenet

In 1822 in Rome, the opera was a great success and Donizetti hailed as a bright new star in the firmament of Italian music, in spite of the last minute cuts and changes necessitated by the death of the tenor who was to sing Abenamet. In spite of the remarkably unlikely happy ending, the libretto works fairly well on stage, and Merelli gave Donizetti several effective situations to set to music.

The Wexford staging was mostly unobjectionable in spite of a boring updating to the present with guns and with the male chorus (it didn't matter whether they were soldiers or slaves) all wearing the same camouflage outfits, complete with body cameras. Important points in the story — the lost standard (the banner representing the kingdom) and the Unknown Defender both come from courtly medieval custom and literature and make no sense in a modern context. The unit set represented a destroyed (bombed out) building which could have been Moorish; it was uncomfortably close to the awful scenes from Gaza that we see nightly on the news. All of the scenes were played against this background of bombed out destruction no matter what the libretto required. Zoriada's aria inspired by a fading rosebush offered no rosebush, but did have rose petals floating down from the flies, a cliché. Sets and costumes were by Gary McCann. Bruno Ravella directed the stage action.





Picture: Clive Barda

### Curtain call

The principals' acting was often static, although they tried not to be too 'operatic'; at times the chorus members acted with more fluidity and emotion. The singing, however, was solid, although not on the same level as the Opera Rara CD with Bruce Ford, Paul Austin Kelly and Majella Cullagh. In Wexford the cast included Konu Kim as Almuzir, Matteo Mezzaro as Abenamet, Matteo Guerzè as Ali, Rachel Croash as Ines and Claudia Boyle as Zoraida. Both tenors (Kim and Mezzaro) were good vocally. Claudia Boyle managed the coloratura, but her voice seemed to sometimes go harsh on the higher notes. I wondered if she had a cold. Diego Ceretta conducted the Festival Orchestra well as far as I could tell. One interesting choice was to give the finale a slow tempo. The 1822 version has a so-called "vaudeville finale", led off by the soprano, with the other singers adding their verses to the same tune, one by one. Standard practice would have the happy ending music sung at a sprightly allegro (as in the Opera Rara CD under David Parry), but this slower version hinted at the doubt the characters must have about the sudden, unexpectedly happy ending. It was a nice touch.

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\* These comments are based on multiple viewings of the opera streamed on the internet, and not on a performance seen live in the theatre. Alan Jackson kindly corrected my spelling errors.