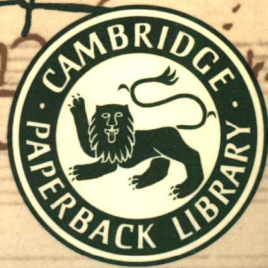


Donizetti and his Operas

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William Ashbrook

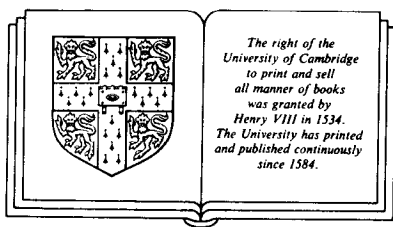
Non portrai più per me mine



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Donizetti and his Operas

WILLIAM ASHBROOK



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Preface

Donizetti instinctively dramatized his involvement with his life and work. Many of his most jovial letters fall into the form of imaginary dialogues. To adapt his technique for a moment:

What? Another book on Donizetti?? . . . Sissignore . . . But, isn't that subject a little - ? . . . Not at all, believe me!! . . . But not too long ago didn't you yourself? . . . I did, but you see, as his operas are more and more known, there's an irresistible temptation to find out more, to look a little closer . . .

When I first started off on the traces of Donizetti nearly twenty years ago, I was embarking on an area that then was rather generally regarded as almost disreputable but with an abiding feeling that if it only could be seen in a fair perspective its true value would be more generally appreciated. This is not to imply that the Donizettian trail had not begun to be blazed usefully even then. But in the intervening years, thanks to the continuing efforts of scholars, conductors, singers, enthusiasts, the figure of Donizetti has come to assume something approaching his just place in the history of nineteenth-century opera.

My earlier book on Donizetti has been out of print for a number of years, and some time ago I was approached about a reprint of it. Knowing that it contained some errors and covered too much ground too broadly, I decided to revise it, concentrating only on Donizetti's operatic output. The final form of this book owes much to the very helpful and encouraging suggestions made by Julian Budden. The first part deals with Donizetti's career as an operatic composer, and is not intended to be a full-length biographical portrait. The second part begins by setting off Donizetti against his principal contemporaries who wrote for the Italian stage; throughout Part II, but particularly here, special attention is paid to Donizetti's position in relation both to Bellini, his chief rival in the years 1827-35, and to Verdi, whose development as a composer can scarcely be grasped without some notion of the influence of Donizetti upon him. After a

preliminary overview of the formal conventions within which Donizetti worked, there follows a descriptive discussion of the completed operas in chronological order. The result is a book that has been almost entirely rewritten. Hopefully it will prove more useful than its predecessor.

There is still much work to be done on Donizetti. There is a great need for scholarly editions of his major scores, and work is already afoot to fill that need. There are corners of his life, details concerning his use of sources, his compositional processes, his non-operatic works, a wealth of topics that need further study. This volume is an attempt to fulfill two perhaps not entirely reconcilable functions: first, to give the general reader a good deal of information about the composer and his operas; second, to serve as a point of departure for further, more detailed studies.

The more one works on a subject, especially in these helpful days of international conferences devoted to the work of a single composer, like the stimulating one held on Donizetti in Bergamo in 1975, the more keenly one is aware that scholarship is a corporate effort. My indebtedness for information, ideas and encouragement run deep and some of them are of such a long-standing character that it is difficult to find adequate words to express my gratitude. Without these people, this book would never have come about: John Allitt, Rudolph Angermüller, the late Joseph Ashbrook, Leo Balk, John Black, Claire Brook, Tito Capobianco, John Carter, Kent Christensen, Carlo Clausetti, H. Robert Cohen, Marcello Conati, Jeremy Commons, Francesco Degrada, Max de Schauensee, Rosemary Dooley, Patricia Falk Feely, Philip Gossett, Clemens Höslinger, Tom Kaufman, Jan Kryzwicki, Walter Lippincott, Luisa Mismetti, Maria Teresa Muraro, John Nadas, Sergio Paganelli, Luciana Pestalozzi, Andrew Porter, Michael Recchuiti, Gabriela Roepke, David Rosen, Valeriano Sacchiero, Patric Schmid, Wolfgang Suppan, the late Raffaele Tenaglia, Sir William Trethowan, John Watts, William Weaver, the late Herbert Weinstock, Don White and Richard Woitach. I wish specially to mention the many helpful suggestions made by Julian Budden, who has read this work at many stages and to whom I am indebted for its final form. But my greatest gratitude is to my long-suffering wife. Further, I have received valuable assistance from these institutions: the Museo Donizettiano, Bergamo; Casa Ricordi, Milan; the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the library at the Conservatorio di San Pietro a Majella, Naples; the Fondazione Cini, Venice; the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; and the Library of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. The editorial help of Rosemary Roberts

on the text and of Desmond Ratcliffe on the musical examples has placed me permanently in their debt.

WILLIAM ASHBROOK

Strafford, Pennsylvania,
23 July 1980

Contents

PART I

1	1797-1821: The beginnings	page 3
2	1822-1830: <i>Zoraida di Granata</i> to <i>Imelda de' Lambertazzi</i>	22
3	1830-1835: <i>Anna Bolena</i> to <i>Marin Faliero</i>	62
4	1835-1838: <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> to <i>Poliuto</i>	94
5	1838-1843: <i>Les martyrs</i> to <i>Dom Sébastien</i>	136
6	1843-1848: The last years	190

PART II

7	Donizetti's operatic world	207
8	Donizetti's use of operatic conventions	235
9	The operas: 1816-1830	283
10	The operas: 1830-1835	317
11	The operas: 1835-1838	375
12	The operas: 1838-1841	418
13	The operas: 1842-1843	467

Appendix I	Synopses	533
Appendix II	Projected and incomplete works	578
Appendix III	Librettists	582
Notes		595
Bibliography		701
Index		709

PART I

1797–1821

The beginnings

Gaetano Donizetti was born in Bergamo in the province of Lombardy on 29 November 1797. His baptismal certificate, dated 3 December 1797, is to be found among the parish records of Santa Grata inter Vites, the church that stands not a stone's throw from the house in which he was born. The notice reads:

Dominicus Cajetanus Maria filius Andreae Donizetti et Domenicae Nava Legitimum Iulium natura die 29 9mbris in hoc suburbio, hodie baptizatus a me Antonio Mauro Bonzi Praeposito – Patrino Dominico Iraina ex Zanica.

At the time of Gaetano's birth his parents had been living for about eleven years in the basement apartment at Borgo Canale, no. 10 (now renumbered 14), a street that slants down the north-west shoulder of the hill occupied by the old town of Bergamo Alta. Today the house is marked by a plaque and has been designated a national museum. The dark, cramped quarters eloquently testify to the poverty in which the family lived. Donizetti never forgot the place. He described it a few years before his death in a letter to his teacher and benefactor Simon Mayr: 'I was born underground in Borgo Canale. You went down cellar steps, where no glimmer of light ever penetrated. And like an owl I took flight . . . never encouraged by my poor father, who was always telling me: it is impossible that you will compose, that you will go to Naples, that you will go to Vienna.'¹

For many years local tradition identified the wrong house in Borgo Canale as Donizetti's birthplace. Not until Ciro Caversazzi made his exhaustive study of census reports and parish records (published in 1924) was the correct site identified.² The confusion is not surprising because many Donizettis lived in Borgo Canale: Gaetano's paternal grandfather Ambrogio had lived next door but one; his father's brother Giovanni had rooms in the same house and raised his family there; his father's half-sister, married to a musician named Giacomo Corini, lived next door.

About 1786 Andrea Donizetti married Domenica Nava and moved into the basement at Borgo Canale, no. 10. Here his six children were born. The eldest, Giuseppe (6 November 1788 – 12 February 1856), became a musician. The musical instruction he received from his uncle Corini and from Mayr equipped him to embark on a career as a military bandsman. After service with the French and Sardinian forces, he moved in 1828 to Constantinople, where he accepted an appointment as Chief of Music to the Ottoman Armies, first under Sultan Mahmud II and then under Sultan Abdul Medjid, by whom he was made a pasha. The second child was a daughter, Maria Rosalinda (1 May 1790 – 8 February 1811), of whom little is known save that she is supposed to have died of apoplexy.³ Next came Francesco (7 February 1792 – 20 December 1848), who grew up deficient in intelligence and initiative; his musical prowess encompassed no more than playing the cymbals in the civic band of Bergamo. After Andrea's death in December 1835, Francesco, through the intervention of Gaetano and Giuseppe, succeeded his father as porter at the town pawnshop, but he was to remain dependent upon the allowance his brothers gave him. Maria Antonia (20 September 1795 – 5 March 1823) married a local fellow named Tironi; after her death, from what was said to be tuberculosis, her infant daughter Beppina was taken in by her grandparents, later keeping house for them until their deaths. Fifth of these children was Domenico Gaetano, the subject of this study. Last came another daughter, Maria Rachele, who was born in March 1800 and lived barely a month.

It is not known for sure exactly how Andrea supported his family during the early years of his marriage. At the end of the eighteenth century many families who lived in Borgo Canale were engaged in the trade of weaving, and perhaps for a time Andrea may have worked at it. Caversazzi suggests that he may have been at one time a tailor or even a musician.⁴ The latter possibility seems unlikely considering that his son Giuseppe received his first musical training from his uncle Corini rather than from his father. Further, Andrea's notorious lack of enthusiasm for Gaetano's career, his repeated urging that his son check his ambition and seek regular employment as a village organist or music-master, indicates Andrea's failure to appreciate his unusual talent. In 1808 Andrea assumed the humble duties of janitor and later of porter at the civic pawnshop, the Monte di Pietà. Since this post entitled him to an apartment on the premises, he moved his family into it.

From these undistinguished roots Donizetti sprang.⁵

The influences that his hometown of Bergamo exercised upon the growing boy were a stimulating antidote to the drabness of his home. Chief among these influences was the church of Santa Maria Maggiore; architecturally a striking example of Lombard Romanesque style, the church could boast musical traditions that extended back to the fourteenth century. Here Donizetti made his earliest contact with serious music; here his beloved teacher Mayr was *maestro di cappella*; here he sang in the choir, first as a contralto and later as a bass.

During Donizetti's youth Johann Simon Mayr (1763-1845) was the most influential musician in Bergamo. Born in Bavaria, Mayr had launched his career in Venice, and then in 1802 had moved to Bergamo upon his appointment at Santa Maria Maggiore. A born teacher and convinced of the need for well-founded musical instruction, Mayr persuaded the local authorities to subsidize a free music school under his personal supervision, to be known as the *Lezioni Caritatevoli*. This school still exists, but now it is named, after its most famous student, Istituto Musicale Gaetano Donizetti.

Although there had been musical instruction in Bergamo from at least the early sixteenth century, the suppression of the religious orders at the close of the eighteenth century by the French had disrupted the old traditions. The primary purpose behind Mayr's proposal to found the school was to provide trained choristers and instrumentalists for the services at Santa Maria Maggiore. The first students at the *Lezioni Caritatevoli* were enrolled on 6 May 1806, and the third name on the list is that of eight-year-old Domenico Gaetano Donizetti, admitted on a three-month probation as a student of voice and *clavicembalo*⁶ to the classes, which were held in Mayr's house.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Mayr's influence upon Donizetti. In Mayr he found a teacher, a benefactor and a friend, who offered assistance and encouragement unstintingly as long as he lived.⁷ Mayr's satisfaction in his pupil's success was never corrupted by jealousy, nor was Donizetti's loyalty to Mayr. So deeply did Mayr care about Donizetti's development that he refrained from addressing him by the often glibly used title 'Maestro' until he felt that his former pupil had truly proved himself a 'master composer' - with *Anna Bolena* (1830); and although he had already written more than thirty operas, Donizetti so valued Mayr's good opinion that this compliment, so long delayed, was more significant to him than many another more easily won.

Mayr was one of the first in Italy to make a thorough study of the works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and he was eager to promote performances of their works. In his memorial urging the establishment of a music school, he pointed out that Haydn's oratorios and Mozart's Requiem had not yet been performed publicly in Italy because of the lack of adequate choral groups. In Bergamo in 1809 Mayr directed the first performance in Italy of Haydn's *Creation*. This performance, in which Donizetti almost certainly took part, was given for the founding of another project dear to Mayr's heart, the Pio Istituto Musicale, designed to aid indigent musicians and their widows and children. Through Mayr, Donizetti had further and more extensive opportunities to become familiar with the music of the Viennese masters, as he often accompanied his teacher to the home of Alessandro Bertoli, where, from 1814, a group met regularly to play the chamber music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Reicha and Mayseder. As a proficient viola-player, Mayr was a devoted participant in these evenings of chamber music, which made such an impression upon Donizetti that he was moved to compose fifteen string quartets between 1817 and 1821. These experiences, coming to Donizetti at a most impressionable age, were then scarcely to be duplicated in Italy.

Clearly, it was Donizetti's amazing good fortune to come early into the hands of such a man as Mayr, whom wit and a warm heart saved from pedantry. His wide interest in other music than his own prompted him to the taxing labor of copying whole scores so that he could extend his own and his pupils' knowledge. Most important for Donizetti's future, Mayr was a composer of operas,⁸ a man with extensive practical knowledge of the theater and of the world of opera as it was then constituted in Italy. Throughout Donizetti's close association with Mayr, the older man was engaged in writing operas, sometimes turning out as many as five a year. Such productivity was not unusual then, and if at times Donizetti's operas were to tumble on each other's heels with astonishing rapidity, a persuasive example was close at hand. To a remarkable extent Mayr had the uncommon humility to recognize his own limitations. When he had taught his star pupil Donizetti all he could, he made all the arrangements to send him to study counterpoint and fugue with the famous Padre Mattei at Bologna, the man who had been Rossini's principal teacher. Mayr enlisted patrons to help defray the cost of this further education, even contributing what he could himself. From such a man as Mayr, generous with his learning, his experience, and his resources such as they were, an eager and talented youngster could

not fail to profit. Small wonder that Donizetti loved Mayr as a second father.

Like any self-respecting Italian center of that period, Bergamo was addicted to opera. By the time Donizetti was ten, the town could boast two permanent theaters. The older, which opened in 1784 with a performance of Sarti's *Medonte*, was situated in the lower city and was called the Teatro Riccardi⁹ (it was renamed Teatro Donizetti on the centennial of the composer's birth in 1897). In 1807 a group of *dilettanti* in the upper city organized the Teatro della Società (or Sociale).¹⁰ To the rest of Italy at that time Bergamo's musical fame resided chiefly in a remarkable series of tenors who hailed from that region. (At the beginning of the nineteenth century principal male roles in serious operas were assigned to tenors, while basses – the term was then applied indiscriminately to baritones and basses – were used sparingly and secondarily.)¹¹ This famous constellation of Bergamasc tenors (the father and son Giacomo and Giovanni David,¹² Domenico Viganoni,¹³ Andrea Nozzari,¹⁴ Marco Bordogni,¹⁵ Domenico Donzelli¹⁶ and last, but scarcely least, Giovanni Battista Rubini)¹⁷ could not help but exert a powerful influence on the young Donizetti. Not only were they living proof of the prestige and material rewards that could be reaped in the opera house, but they were paragons of highly developed vocal art, a discipline that Donizetti could scarcely neglect as an Italian composer. The aura of success and fame associated with these tenors reinforced, if only indirectly, Donizetti's natural gravitation – once his marked aptitude for musical composition had manifested itself – toward the opera house as his chief arena of activity. In his day the musical stage was the principal road open to an Italian composer who wanted to establish his independence, and Mayr's influence was not the only force in Donizetti's environment that propelled him toward the theater.

Domenico¹⁸ Gaetano Donizetti came to the Palazzo della Misericordia in Bergamo on 20 April 1806 to be tested for his musical aptitude. The judgment of the examiners was that 'he has a good ear, his voice is not outstanding, and he should be admitted for a three-month probation'.¹⁹ This report is signed by the faculty of four at the Lezioni Caritatevoli: Mayr, Francesco Salari, Antonio Capuzzi and Antonio Gonzales. Salari (1751-1823), a Bergamasc by birth, had studied at Naples with Piccinni, and, after a lengthy stint as a singing-master in Venice, had returned to Bergamo as second *maestro di cappella* at Santa Maria Maggiore. Capuzzi (1755-1818), a

violinist from nearby Brescia, had been a pupil of Tartini. Gonzales (1764–1830) was the organist at Santa Maria Maggiore.

When Donizetti started attending classes in May 1806, the rules of the institution limited the number of free pupils to twelve: eight to study voice and clavicembalo, four to study violin and cello. Donizetti's studies included lessons in singing and declamation with Salari, in piano with Gonzales (the first of his masters to recognize his unusual aptitude), and in the elements of music theory with Mayr. The first report of the faculty to the funding Congregazione, dated 13 September 1806, praises Donizetti's diligence and attentiveness, but notes that 'his voice is defective and throaty'. Seven months later Mayr claimed that Donizetti had progressed further than any of the other students.

Donizetti's vocal shortcomings were to jeopardize his continuing to attend Mayr's school. In September 1808, when Salari reported that in spite of Donizetti's perseverance 'it has not been possible to correct his defective voice', the Congregazione demanded his dismissal. Unwilling to lose such a promising pupil, Mayr contrived to keep him at the school; he even assigned him a small singing part in his oratorio *Sisara*. In March 1809 Donizetti was again threatened with suspension, but this time Mayr arranged to have the regulations amended to permit boys whose voices were changing to continue their keyboard studies. Later that year Mayr reaffirmed his confidence in Donizetti by assigning him a small role in the farce *Alcide al bivio* (really a pasticcio with spoken dialogue), which he had put together for the concert to mark the end of the term.

At one point Donizetti's hopes of completing his musical education reached such a low ebb that he applied to the local art school, the Accademia Carrara, for admission among the *dilettanti* to study design and figure.²⁰ On 15 November 1810 he was informed that he had been admitted to the Accademia Carrara, but how often or for how long he attended classes has not been ascertained. All his life he showed a facility in sketching, but whether this resulted from training or from natural aptitude would be difficult to determine.

The clearest evidence of Mayr's determination to direct Donizetti toward a musical career turns up in the libretto he wrote for the pasticcio-farsa *Il piccolo compositore di musica*, performed on 13 September 1811 at the final concert of the academic year.²¹ The hero of this farce, 'the little composer' of the title, is Donizetti himself, and the other characters are his fellow students (Giuseppe Manghenoni, Giuseppe Pontiroli, Antonio Tavecchi and Antonio Dolci), all of them appearing under their own names in the list of characters. Of

these, Antonio Dolci (1798-1869) played a significant role in Donizetti's life: remaining in Bergamo, he taught at the music school from 1831 to 1866, and, with Mayr, he remained Donizetti's closest tie to his native town. The plot of *Il piccolo compositore* is, in sum, nothing less than Mayr's argument that Donizetti be allowed to continue his musical studies.

Beneath its humorous exaggerations, *Il piccolo compositore* gives some realistic details of life at the school. Donizetti, the first character to appear, has come to the school, even though it is vacation, to work in peace on an aria. Soon he is interrupted by his fellows, who chide him for his pretensions. Donizetti's reply is anything but modest, but his words have the force of prophecy:

Vasta ho la mente, rapido l'ingegno,
Pronta la fantasia, e nel comporre
Un fulmine son io.

(Huge is my mind, speedy my talent, ready my imagination, and at composition I am like lightning.)

Claiming that it has taken him only seven weeks to compose a little waltz, Donizetti goes to the piano and plays it. A note in the libretto affirms that the waltz was 'expressly composed' by Donizetti.

The plot alternates pranks with opportunities for the five students to exhibit their musical accomplishments,²² and culminates in Donizetti's arrival, edict in hand: 'Whoever is bold enough to discourage another's talent deserves rigorous punishment!' When he urges his schoolmates to join him in diligent study, they promptly second his sentiment. Obviously Mayr aimed this moralizing conclusion not only at his pupils but at the ears of the Congregazione.

From *Il piccolo compositore* one might assume that Donizetti's career at Mayr's school would progress smoothly, but problems lay ahead. On the positive side, he was nominated the outstanding piano student and allowed special classes in harmony; his voice settled to 'una sufficiente voce di basso', which allowed him to fill a second buffo role at the Teatro della Società and to sing an occasional solo at Santa Maria Maggiore. By 1814, however, the school reports mention his 'not too regular conduct outside school'. At sixteen Donizetti found certain aspects of his schoolwork oppressive: the newly instituted classes in mathematics, geography and languages, taught by a recent addition to the faculty, Abate Baizini, who seems to have been a pedantic authoritarian, Donizetti avoided like the plague; nor was he charmed by his lately acquired responsibility of teaching fundamentals to entering students. Soon the reports

speak of his 'negligence in all the responsibilities placed upon him' as 'verified', complain of his 'irregular life', and request that the Congregazione 'suggest and specify some means of correction'.

The threatened punishment was never imposed; instead Donizetti was awarded a prize of 18 *lire milanesi*, though at the same time he was 'to be seriously rebuked'. Considering Donizetti's high spirits and his abiding interest in the female sex, his restlessness at sixteen is not surprising. Contributing to his impatience was the atmosphere at home: his gloomy father had little sympathy with or understanding of Mayr's hopes for his youngest son. Andrea was principally interested in his boys as potential contributors to his support; Giuseppe had briefly returned from army service but had soon gone off again to join Napoleon's forces on Elba, and Francesco was soon to be called up. Gaetano's loyalty to his parents ran deep, but he had no illusions for he had to bear the brunt of their anxieties and fears. It was Mayr, whatever his feelings about his prize pupil's 'irregular life' might have been, who provided a means of escape from these frustrations and who furthered his progress.

In the month of October 1815 Mayr brought to fruition his scheme of sending Donizetti off to Bologna to study with the famous Padre Mattei; but not before he had overcome considerable opposition. Andrea had to be persuaded that the long-term gains from such an opportunity outweighed the desirability of his youngest son's promptly finding a modest post near home. Then there was the bad impression the Congregazione had received of Donizetti in the past year or so. To offset this there was the undeniable promise the boy had publicly demonstrated and the enthusiastic support of most of his teachers, especially Mayr. On 28 October 1815 Mayr addressed a warm-hearted appeal to the Congregazione di Carità of Bergamo, enlisting their support to help finance for two years Donizetti's acquiring 'the most solid and valuable instruction that Italy can boast today'.²³

On the same day that Mayr wrote this appeal, which must have made official some prior understanding, Donizetti, a month before his eighteenth birthday, set out by diligence for Bologna. Besides giving him money for the journey out of his own pocket, Mayr sent him on his way with two letters. The first recommended him to the publisher Giovanni Ricordi of Milan;²⁴ the second, to Marchese Francesco Sampieri of Bologna, asked assistance in finding the lad a cheap, comfortable lodging.

When Donizetti arrived in Bologna he found a room on the third floor of the house that is now Via Pepoli, no. 1. Occupying an apart-