

VOX IMAGO

GAETANO DONIZETTI
MARY STUART

ANTONINO FOGLIANI
TEATRO ALLA SCALA

MARY STUART

MARY STUART: THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF AN IMPORTANT OPERA
Philip Gossett

Naples during the 1830s was a difficult place for a composer. Although in much of the rest of Italy censorship was felt most keenly between the failed revolutionary movements of 1848 and the formation of the new Italian state in 1860, in Naples theatrical censors were hard at work protecting public morality already during the 1830s. The very pious wife of King Ferdinando II of the Two Sicilies, Maria Cristina of Savoy, was a direct descendant of Maria Stuarda, and it was long believed that the subject of Donizetti's opera, the persecution and execution of Maria Stuarda at the hand of Elisabetta I, did not please her at all. Donizetti himself believed this, as he wrote to Rossini on 9 September 1834, "Scrisi *Maria Stuarda* per S. Carlo.... facemmo la prova generale e con molto successo..... è proibita! La Regina scende in retta linea da quella. Il Re dalle informazioni avute della fortunata musica ordinò ora che altra poesia vi sia posta e si eseguisca!.... Voi potrete ora immaginarvi l'anima mia come sta." Certainly it did not take great insight to realize that the first-act Finale, where Maria taunts the English Queen with the phrase "vil bastarda," was not going to gain easy approval anywhere on the Italian peninsula. There has been recent speculation that the Neapolitan prohibition (which came only after the dress rehearsal on either 5 or 6 September 1834) was probably the will of the King himself, and that it reflected more general concern for public morals and a general dislike of violent, tragic endings. Whichever is true, however, the basic conservatism of the Neapolitan administration remains clear.

After all, *Maria Stuarda* is hardly the only opera to have suffered from censorial intervention in Naples during the 1830s. When Bellini prepared his *I puritani* for a Neapolitan revival that never happened (owing not to censorship but to an outbreak of cholera, which prevented the score from being delivered in time to permit the opera to be rehearsed and performed), he did not even attempt to keep in his score the duet for the two basses at the end of the second act, the duet that concludes with the patriotic "Suoni la tromba" and its famous "Bella è affrontar la morte gridando libertà." As the composer told his friend Francesco Florimo, librarian at the Naples Conservatory, in a letter of 21-22 December 1834, he decided not to send this duet to Naples, "perché entrano ed amor di patria e libertà, ecc." As he described it in another letter of 5 January 1835, "è d'un liberale che fa paura..." But with that exception he did not anticipate any censorial difficulties, because "Non entra né religione, né amori nefandi, né politica alcuna." Donizetti was not nearly so fortunate with his *Poliuto* in 1838, an opera banned for religious reasons because it portrayed on stage the life of a saint. That the opera was derived from a play by Corneille, *Polyeucte*, made no difference whatsoever. Indeed the exclusion of *Poliuto* had a devastating effect on the tenor who was originally supposed to sing the title role, Adolphe Nourrit. A few months later, in a psychologically troubled state, he was to commit suicide by throwing himself off a third-floor balcony in the hotel in Naples where he was staying.

With both *Maria Stuarda* and *Poliuto*, then, Donizetti was left with completed operas that could not be performed in Naples in their current state. In the case of *Poliuto*, he threw up his hands, fled to Paris, and ultimately produced the work in French at the Opéra as *Les Martyrs*. In the case of *Maria Stuarda*, he was under orders to compromise at once, and he was not yet strong enough to be able to resist this pressure. So he did what Verdi would refuse to do for Naples in 1857 with his *La vendetta in dominò*, which ultimately became *Un ballo in maschera* for Rome: Donizetti transformed his opera by accepting a profoundly modified libretto (it became a story of feuding families in medieval Florence) and rewriting some of the music. As *Buondelmonte* the opera had a mediocre career, and Donizetti was not surprised. Adopting the style of doggerel verse he often employed in comic librettos, he wrote to the Roman librettist Jacopo Ferretti shortly before the premiere of 18 October 1834:

Ti basti saper solo
Che d'una gran preghiera

Ne feci in *Buondelmonte*
 Congiura bella e intera.
 A morte iva la donna?
 Invece muor Pedrazzi [the tenor],
 Delser [Del Sere, the original *Elisabetta*] dannava a morte?
 Or soffre dei strapazzi.
 Erano sei fra tutti?
 Or sono dieci e più;
 Come diventi l'opera,
 Immagina ora tu!
 Le stesse scene adopera,
 Ci stanno o non ci stanno,
 Né cerco mai di chiedere
 Se fanno o non fan danno.

But the real question was what was to happen to *Maria Stuarda*? Would Donizetti simply allow it to disappear in the wake of *Buondelmonte*? Or was there some hope of resurrecting it in something that was at least closer to its original form?

The great mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran was in Naples during the Autumn of 1834, preparing to create the title role in Lauro Rossi's *Amelia* at the Teatro San Carlo on 31 December. Malibran, the daughter of the tenor Emanuele García (the first Conte d'Almaviva in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in February 1816), began her career as a singer already in Paris at the age of fifteen, in 1823, when she sang in a Rossini cantata. Rossini was very taken with her abilities. When asked during the 1850s about the great singers of his time, he responded: "Il piú grande era la [Isabella] Colbran, che è diventata la sua prima moglie, ma l'unica era la [Maria] Malibran." She was part of the company of singers that performed with her father in New York between 1825 and 1827, then returned to France, where she was one of the principal performers at the Théâtre Italien until her death in 1836. She played a similar role in London, but was also well known in Italy, where she participated in several important operatic seasons. Most famously, Bellini revised his *I puritani* for her, hoping to have her sing the modified score in Naples in 1836, but the performance would not take place because of delays related to a cholera outbreak. Bellini boasted that he had done a great deal to adjust his score to Malibran's abilities and taste. As he told his friend Francesco Florimo in Naples: "Senti ora i cambiamenti che ho fatti per la Malibran. Situazione per cavatina non v'è nel libro; quindi ella sortirà con un duetto con Porto, e poi nella piazza di un quartettino insignificante gli ho fatto un pezzo si curioso, e si brillante che ne sarà contentona, essendo nel suo prediletto genere: questo pezzo vale piú di dieci cavatine, poichè è venuto ben siutato, tanto che lo darò ancora a Parigi, essendo di grande effetto. Avrà il finale, a lei appoggiato il Largo, vi è molta azione e nella stretta specialmente, ove ella non avendo il motivo principale che è appoggiato ai bassi, e tutti i cori, essendo un'Anatema puritano riempirà la scena e dei suoi ridi, esprimendo la commozione che le prende il cervello, colpito dall'immenso dolore della fuga del suo amante ecc. ella può essere ammirabile in tal genere di espressione, nuova per la scena. Poi al 2° atto ha una grande scena ove avrà di come impiegare la sua celeste anima, da far piangere tutti e poi la fine è brillantissima come tenera." The Neapolitan version of *I puritani* is extant, even though the performance never took place, and Bellini did indeed try to arrange it to favor the talents of Maria Malibran.

On the occasion of the fiasco surrounding *Maria Stuarda* in Naples in 1834, the music publisher, Guglielmo Cottrau, wrote on 9 December that Malibran had seen the score of *Maria Stuarda*, which at that point remained his property, and wanted to sing the role of Maria. By 3 May 1835, Donizetti was telling Ricordi in Milan that Malibran would indeed sing the part at La Scala later that year, while offering to compose an overture for the opera. (In the music he had prepared for Naples there was only a brief Preludio.) Malibran herself was enthusiastic about the project and wrote in a letter of 7 August: "Sono stata a Westminster Abbey per copiare il costume della Maria e di Elisabetta." Donizetti certainly made several changes in the opera in preparation for the Scala performances, although these cannot always be documented in every detail. Later he came personally to Milan to work with the cast, arriving on 3 December; he seems to have introduced additional modifications during the rehearsal period, (The relationship between the original Neapolitan score and the Milanese revisions will be discussed below.)

The year between the Neapolitan *Buondelmonte* and the Milanese *Maria Stuarda* was a particularly intense one for Donizetti. On 13 November 1834, soon after *Buondelmonte*, he left Naples for Milan,

where his latest opera, *Gemma di Vergy*, was to open the season at the Teatro alla Scala on 26 December. But it was not on *Gemma* that he had been working most assiduously in Naples. Instead, he was preparing the opera he was to offer Paris the following Spring (1835), *Marino Faliero*, thanks to the invitation Rossini had arranged for him to be given (similar invitations went to Bellini and Mercadante) to prepare a new work for the Théâtre Italien. The subject of Donizetti's Parisian opera had already been determined by the end of September 1834, and the composer sent detailed information about it to the head of the theater, Carlo Severini, in early October, the month during which he also finished a first version of that opera. Donizetti himself left Milan for Paris on 31 December, after the premiere of *Gemma di Vergy*. In Paris, after being exposed to opera in a non-Italian city for the first time, he began making significant modifications to his *Marino Faliero*, some of them perhaps suggested by Rossini himself.

The opera had its premiere on 12 March, and was not an overwhelming success. But Donizetti learned a great deal from the experience. He was especially taken with having seen for the first time a French Grand Opera. As he wrote to Antonio Dolci in Bergamo from Paris on 16 March: "Alla Grand Opera fanno ora un'opera *La Juive*. Se tu vedi che ricchezza... insomma non è più illusione è verità. Cardinali in scena, Re, Compagnia di *Desupli* (in lingua orobica) collo stendardo colla Madonna, e le anime sante avanti. Tutti scalzi. Bruciano viva la *Juive*. Par vero sai, fa male—fa male come la musica che ci cantano sopra... questo te lo spiegherà compar Simone [surely Simone Mayr]."

Donizetti returned to the subject in a letter to Innocenzo Giampieri of 10 April during his trip back to Naples from Paris: "Viddi la *Juive* alla grand'Opera.... e dico viddi che per musica popolare non ce n'è. L'illusione è portata al colmo... Giureresti esser cosa vera. Argento vero e cardinali quasi veri. Armeria del Re vera, costumi d'armati, cotte, lance etc. vere; e quelle che false erano copiate dalle vere e costavano 1500 franchi l'una, le cotte dei figuranti. Troppa verità... ultima scena troppo orrenda e più orrenda per tanta illusione. A Costanza! Un'Ebreo per commercio avuto con un cristiano è gettata col padre nella caldaia dell'olio bollente. Pria di venirci si passa per mille coglionerie, ma tutto è ricco e tutto è magnifico, quindi si chiude un occhio." However ambivalent his feeling about *La Juive* may have been, however, there can be no doubt that the Parisian experience had a profound impact on the remainder of Donizetti's career. This is most self-evidently seen in his *L'assedio di Calais*, which had its premiere at the Teatro San Carlo of Naples on 19 November 1836, but his very next opera after *Marino Faliero* was none other than *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which had its premiere at the San Carlo on 26 September 1835.

After *Lucia*, Donizetti traveled to Milan again, where *Maria Stuarda* received its first performances ever at La Scala, beginning on 30 December 1835, but there too it suffered reversals. Permission for the premiere had been granted, to be sure, but with changes imposed by the censors, who did not want Maria to hurl the accusation of "vil bastarda" at the Queen and who had other objections to the religious and political rituals presented on stage. Although in theory Malibran agreed to sing the opera with the modifications requested by the censors, apparently she continued to present her role as Donizetti had conceived it, and the result was another prohibition: as of 12 January 1836, further performances of *Maria Stuarda* were banned. Now Donizetti had had enough: he never seems to have taken any further interest in the opera, whose autograph languished in the hands of Cottrau in Naples.

Maria Stuarda did have a brief theatrical life (without Donizetti's participation) while the composer was still alive, but it never circulated widely. A major effort to revive it took place in Naples in 1865, almost twenty years after Donizetti's death. A manuscript corresponding to that effort still exists in the library of the Naples Conservatory, in which the orchestration was seriously modified and in which two highly substantive changes were introduced, one in the opening chorus of the Introduzione, another in the final stretta of the first-act Finale. In both cases the changes were made not by Donizetti (long dead), but by local musicians who sought to hide the fact that the composer had reused the music of each of these passages in a French opera, *La Favorite* (1840), which by that time was well known in Italy.

1) Instead of the opening chorus in 2/4 and *E-flat major* written for Naples and performed without change—as far as we can tell—in Milan, a different chorus was substituted, in 6/8 and *B-flat major*, not an original piece but an importation from a chorus that opens the first-act Finale in Donizetti's 1828 *Alina, regina di Golconda*. The principal tune of the original chorus for *Maria Stuarda* later became the very popular "Doux zéphyr, sois-lui fidèle" of *La Favorite*. This replacement was introduced by the composer himself into *Buondelmonte* (making some changes in the *Alina* version), presumably because he did not

think the character of his original chorus appropriate for the revised libretto, but he never contemplated it for *Maria Stuarda* and subsequent efforts to introduce it into this opera are certainly misguided.

2) Instead of the theme of the stretta at the triplet passages on “Grazie oh Cielo!,” which Donizetti had reused in *La Favorite* (within the third-act Finale), an entirely different theme was introduced. No one has yet identified this revised theme as coming from another Donizetti work; for the moment it must be considered an 1865 invention. There does not seem to be any justification whatsoever for using it today. This 1865 revision is the one published in vocal scores by the editors Cottrau in Naples and Gérard in France, and it is the form in which the opera was revived in Bergamo in 1958 and then circulated widely among modern theaters.

For many years Donizetti’s own autograph manuscript of *Maria Stuarda*—formerly the property of the editor Cottrau in Naples—seemed to have disappeared. Then, in 1924, the manuscript resurfaced at a Sotheby’s auction, where it was purchased by a great Swedish collector, Rudolf Nydahl, whose collection was preserved after his death (since the 1970s) in the Stiftelsen Musikkulturens främjande in Stockholm. This major rediscovery finally made possible the preparation of a critical edition of the opera by the Swedish musicologist Anders Wiklund, which was published by Ricordi in 1991. That should have resolved all the outstanding problems, but—unfortunately—it could not do so.

Maria Stuarda is a classic case in which the discovery of an autograph manuscript does not resolve the many uncertainties that still circulate around an opera. And the issues are not trivial: they reflect fundamental questions as to what music should be performed and how the vocal lines should be sung. Nor should we throw up our hands and pretend that because Donizetti *might* have made other changes for other occasions (had such occasions presented themselves) our responsibilities as scholars and performers are any less clear. What we really need and want is two published versions of this opera: the version prepared for Naples and never performed, and the version revised for Milan and performed there under Donizetti’s direction. What we get instead in the critical edition is a transcription based on the autograph, neither fish nor fowl. It may be that the surviving sources will never allow us to reconstruct these two versions precisely, so that the best choice is to follow the autograph. But it needs to be stated clearly that such a choice remains an unhappy compromise.

Let us begin with two issues concerning the basic shape of the opera. Afterwards we can look at the vexing question of the changes Donizetti seems to have introduced to favor the particular vocal needs of his Milanese singers, especially of Maria Malibran in the role of Maria Stuarda.

1) A Sinfonia, a Preludio, or both? For Naples Donizetti began *Maria Stuarda* with a very brief Preludio that leads directly into the Introduzione. For Milan he supplied a full-length Sinfonia in *G minor/major*. The Sinfonia was not incorporated into the autograph manuscript, nor is an autograph manuscript of the piece known to survive, but a good copyist’s manuscript of the orchestral score is extant, from which the composition has been edited, and the piece is included in a piano reduction among the extracts published by Ricordi soon after the Milanese premiere. Whether the Sinfonia is a distinguished piece is not at issue: if performers *wish* to introduce it (and that is a decision that rightly is up to the performers), the question is how should they accomplish this. The editors of the critical edition take the position that “one performer has to exclude from the main text either one piece or the other,” but they offer no evidence that Donizetti felt that way. As far as anyone seems to know, in Milan the Sinfonia may well have led directly into the very brief Preludio, and then into the Introduzione. That, indeed, is the solution adopted in this performance of the opera.

2) The Duetto for Maria and Leicester (“Da tutti abbandonata”). In Naples Donizetti did not provide for a duet for Maria and Leicester before the first-act Finale. There was a duet for Elisabetta and Leicester earlier in the act, “Quali sensi! Ell’è commossa”), after which the opera continued with the Scena e Cavatina for Maria (“Oh nube, che lieve”) and then moved directly to the first-act Finale. When he revised his score in Naples for *Buondelmonte*, Donizetti replaced the Elisabetta and Leicester duet with a new duet for Irene and Buondelmonte. Well, not exactly new: it was derived from a piece he had introduced into his *Fausta* (originally performed in Naples at the beginning of 1832) for a revival in Venice at the end of 1833. (As must be apparent, Donizetti rarely wasted any music: when he felt that he needed to add a piece to an opera, he was not averse to looking back at music he had previously composed and finding what he thought might be an appropriate piece to insert into the new context.)

With *Maria Stuarda* and Milan beckoning, Donizetti returned to the duet he had originally written for Elisabetta and Leicester, but he decided *also* to use the *Buondelmonte* duet. And so, he wrote a new recitative to introduce this duet—now intended for Maria and Leicester—and actually had the *Buondelmonte* duet bound into his autograph of *Maria Stuarda* after Maria’s Cavatina. Another hand modified the words of the *Buondelmonte* duet so that it could be performed by the characters of Maria and Leicester. Because Donizetti had to prepare the introductory recitative for the Maria and Leicester duet (he actually prepared two different versions of this recitative), there is no question that he was responsible for the insertion, which nonetheless makes the first act very long. But he soon developed doubts about the advisability of what he had done and in a letter of 13 May 1837 he suggested: “toglietelo che è intruso e non sta bene. È meglio che dopo la cavatina di Maria (che dirà con tutta forza) attacchi il finale.” So there can be no doubt that the piece and its introductory recitative, absent in the Naples form of the opera, was added for Milan and performed there, but that Donizetti thought it advisable to return to the original shape of the scene.

While there does not seem to be any single score preserving the more detailed changes Donizetti seems to have made during the rehearsal period in Milan, Donizetti’s Milanese publisher, Ricordi, did print a significant number of extracts from the opera—most of the solo music—and these have important variants from the versions we know from the autograph manuscript. Many, but not all of them, pertain to the title role, sung by Malibran. The modifications for Maria’s cavatina and the last scene are particularly fascinating, because they correspond so precisely to the kind of vocalism that Malibran favored: rapid fioritura, large leaps from one registral extreme to another, and particular attention to the lower register. The cantabile of the last scene, “D’un cor che muore,” was profoundly modified, with a melodic line that had been based on a descending idea from above to a central register transformed into a line based on an ascending idea from below to the same central register. In both the Duet for Talbot and Leicester and the Duet for Elisabetta and Leicester, however, there were also important modifications in the vocal lines. In the latter, furthermore, the cantabile is transposed down a tone (from *B major* to *A major*), whereas the cabaletta is transposed up a semitone (from *E major* to *F major*). This peculiarity is accounted for, in part, by changes in the vocal lines.) Unfortunately, we have only a vocal score of these Milanese modifications: no orchestral manuscript has yet been found for them and the changes do not figure in Donizetti’s autograph manuscript.

What, then, should a theater do? Many of us would love to hear *Maria Stuarda* in the form in which it was originally sung at La Scala. Yet there remain many uncertainties about that version, and some sections would have to be orchestrated anew: it is true that the sections involved are not complicated and are often fairly closely tied to the original music, but the passages would nevertheless be “reconstructions.” More to the point, does one really want to insist that a modern singer embrace *precisely* the vocal alterations introduced by Donizetti for Maria Malibran? There were quite contrasting views of Malibran’s art by her contemporaries. Her friend the Contessa di Merlin wrote: “Maria Malibran fu sublime come cantante drammatica, ma quello che fu trionfante soprattutto sono stati questi *fiorituri* improvvisati con cui sapeva elettrificare gli ascoltatori, soprattutto in gruppi privati. Lei dava nuova vita ad una composizione, aggiungendo i colori più brillanti e intensi del arcobaleno.” Stendhal, on the other hand, complained about the Bolognese that they had too much “indulgence pour le déluge d’ornaments quelquefois un peu exagérés du chant de madame Malibran.” But even if we all could agree that the “Malibran” version were in some sense ideal, favoring that particular version would involve an homage to the past that Donizetti would scarcely have thought reasonable: each singer should do what is appropriate for his or her own voice, not struggle to imitate the specific variants prepared for another singer. In that sense, the original score offers a somewhat more generic text, but one that individual singers should be invited to personalize.

That is, of course, the wonderful reality of performance. Scholars need to make available the most accurate scores possible, but it is ultimately up to the performers to make music and create theater. While I would personally exclude from consideration the changes introduced into *Maria Stuarda* in 1865, changes that have no relationship whatsoever to Donizetti, there remains ample material for performers to consider as they mount the opera in a way that satisfies their artistic needs and the expectations of a modern audience.

For additional information about *Maria Stuarda*, see the important article by Jeremy Commons, “*Maria Stuarda* and the Neapolitan Censorship,” in *The Donizetti Society Journal*, III (1977), 151-67, as well as the extensive treatment of *Buondelmonte* and of the Neapolitan and Milan versions of *Maria*

Stuarda in Annalisa Bini and Jeremy Commons, *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva* (Milano, 1997), pp. 407-27 and 532-51. The critical edition, a cura di Anders Wiklund, was published in the *Edizione critica delle opere di Gaetano Donizetti* (Milano, 1991).

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