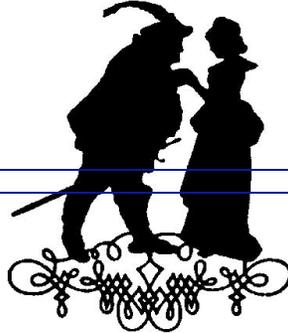


Opera con Brio

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Richard B. Beams



Donizetti Rarities: Wexford and Caramoor Lead the Way

Barbara Quintiliani thrills at Wexford Festival Opera

In an interview on the occasion of the Donizetti bicentennial in 1997, conductor and *bel canto* specialist Richard Bonyng commented on what vocal attributes a singer needs to master Donizetti's singing style:

Donizetti requires everything from a singer: a dramatic voice, the ability to deliver *coloratura* immaculately; a fine legato; and the facility to declaim, so just to be able to sing is not enough. His music was designed to exploit the great voices of his day. The writing demands meaty voices which can also sing the roulades.

Last fall Wexford Festival Opera found just such a singer, in Boston's own Barbara Quintiliani, to tackle the challenging title role in Donizetti's demanding and relatively neglected masterpiece, *Maria Padilla*. It is difficult not to be hyperbolic about the power and grandeur of her stunning performance; critics were universal in their superlatives. I quote one astute reviewer, Claire Seymour, in *Opera Today*:

Quintiliani needed all the resources of her formidable technique for this incredibly demanding role; and she positively relished the fiendish coloratura, while descending easily into a dark chest register. Her varied palette was equaled by a full emotional range. Indeed, she seemed totally at ease throughout, spinning a stream of golden sound, effortlessly negotiating leaps and extremes, and demonstrating superhuman stamina and breath control.

Throughout the opera, but especially in the virtuosic final cabaletta, "O padre, tu l'odi," ("Oh father, do you hear him?") as she claims a final victory as rightful wife and queen of King Pedro the Cruel of Castile, her compelling performance reminded the Wexford audience



Barbara Quintiliani and Adriano Graziani in Donizetti's *Maria Padilla*, Wexford Festival Opera 2009. Photo by Patrick Redmond

that Donizetti operas are not just vehicles for great singing but also are great dramas, and the music (and art of the singer) must serve the drama. As Bonyng further states, "if you don't sing his music dramatically then you're not performing Donizetti." This Ms. Quintiliani did. At the final curtain to the final performance, I was as moved as I have ever been in the opera house. From the eruption of audience response, so were others. Indeed Ms. Quintiliani took Wexford itself by storm, as I suspect she will Boston this coming May when she takes on this virtuoso role for Opera Boston's new production of this neglected *tour de force*. (Lucky Boston. While the

2010 Wexford Festival Opera is underway in October, Boston audiences can hear Ms. Quintiliani with Boston Baroque in powerful pieces for dramatic soprano from both Beethoven (*Ah! Perfido*) and Cherubini (arias from his tragic opera *Medée*.)

Maria Padilla: a role demanding *bel canto* artistry and Verdian heft

I had the good fortune to attend Renee Fleming's performance of the title role in *Maria Padilla* in the American professional premier of the opera some 20 years ago in 1990 at the Omaha Opera Fall Festival. The young and beautiful artist gave a compelling performance, indeed to my mind more compelling as a *bel canto* artist than she is now in such roles. But comparing her artistry with that of Ms. Quintiliani reminds me that physical size need not be a detriment to true *bel canto* artistry, which does not include either just singing prettily or looking pretty ("svelte and photo-shoot-friendly," to use the words of Claire Seymour.) Sing the music dramatically and you're singing Donizetti. Personality (and drama) comes through the voice and the music.

This is particularly important in Maria's role – really a combination of two musical "personalities." Briefly, Donizetti was commissioned in June to write the opera for the opening of the 1841 opera season at La Scala on December 26. But in early August, when Donizetti had by then finished with much of the score, the anticipated soprano Erminia Frezzolini, famous for her fioritura (florid vocal ornamentations) and pure tone, had to withdraw because of pregnancy. "What a state I'm in" he wrote to his brother-in-law. "Having composed half the opera, I am being offered a singer of whom much is hoped, but... God knows. But what can I do?"

The singer he was now offered was a popular German soprano, Sophie Lowe, a much more powerful singer, with more dramatic timbre than Frezzolini. (Verdi was soon to compose two of his more dramatic soprano roles for her, Elvira in *Ernani* and the fiery Odabella in *Attila*.) Donizetti adjusted accordingly, cutting down on the fioritura composed for Frezzolini's more agile voice. Donizetti scholar Roger Parker suggested in the Wexford notes that perhaps it was "apt and even beneficial that the eponymous heroine was the product of two distinct and contrasting musical personalities."

Barbara Quintiliani indeed turned this dichotomy to advantage. She has proved herself, at Sarasota Opera (in Verdi's rarely heard *Il Corsaro*) and elsewhere, as a consummate Verdi singer – both in the roles written especially for Lowe, and others. Critic Richard Dyer in Boston has called her "the Verdi soprano the world has been waiting for." Rene Fleming is, of course, not such a singer; her Omaha interpretation of the role, for all its *bel canto* artistry, lacked this compelling "Verdian" element. But Ms. Quintiliani has it all.



The rebuilt Wexford Opera House
Photo: Ros Kavanagh



Marco Caria and Barbara Quintiliani in *Maria Padilla*,
Wexford Festival Opera, 2009. Photo: Patrick Redmond

Other strengths of *Maria Padilla* at Wexford

The focus on Ms. Quintiliani should not detract from the other strengths of the Wexford production, including that of Welsh tenor Adriano Graziani as Don Ruiz, especially in the effective mad scene for him, Maria's humiliated elderly father. A mad scene for tenor! Sometimes, this can be the peak of the opera, as it was in a concert performance of *Maria Padilla* I heard at Washington Concert Opera recently (in 2008), in which tenor Justin Lavender excelled in this critical role. Unfortunately, the rather cluttered set in Wexford – piles of masonry and debris, rows of chairs, and (in Act 3) strange floating corpses – sometimes made me wish for a "semi-staged" opera, a la Caramoor.

And director Marco Gandini countered Donizetti's intentions having Pedro's new queen, Bianca, die of shock at the sight of Maria, rather than Maria herself. Yet in the end, the music (aided by the idiomatic conducting of Wexford Artistic Director, David Agler) and the formidable performance of Barbara Quintiliani saved the day. In the early 50s Maria Callas demonstrated to modern audiences on both sides of the Atlantic the dramatic power of *bel canto* opera. A good opera, she once said, must get better and better as it goes on. *Maria Padilla* certainly did.

Wexford's admirable focus on Donizetti

Over the years, with some twelve major Donizetti productions, Wexford has made Donizetti (along with other *bel canto* composers, from Rossini to Mercadante,) a principal focus. The Wexford approach, usually with stunning success in its intimate theater, is to stress that Donizetti's operas are great dramas served skillfully by appropriate music. (Note for example the review of his penultimate opera seria, *Maria di Rohan*, in the 2006 *Opera con Brio* publication "Wexford Opera – A Festival in Transition.") Early years (the 1950s and 60s) included a healthy sampling from the Donizetti repertory soon to become familiar: *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Lucia*, *Anna Bolena*, *La fille du regiment*, and *Don Pasquale*. However, as program annotator David Wright has pointed out, "to think of Donizetti as the composer of half a dozen staple works of the opera repertoire would be like thinking of Beethoven as the author of five piano sonatas instead of 32."



Gaetano Donizetti

Our thanks to Wexford then for continuing with a representative sampling of comic works whose variety of tone and subject highlight Donizetti's genuine buffo flair: the one-act *farsa*, *Il Giovedì Grasso* (in 1970); Donizetti's first major success, the *buffa* opera, *L'ajo nell'imburazzo* (in 1973); and the delightful *semi-seria* opera, *Linda di Chamounix* (in 1983, recently heard in concert at Caramoor as well). Then, as though to remind us that the long arc of Donizetti's theatrical career is made up of almost 70 operas, long and short, comic and tragic, Wexford programmed more infrequently performed *serioso* works: *Parisina* (in 1996) and *L'assedio di Calis* (in 1991), and finally the more recent productions of *Maria di Rohan* and *Maria Padilla*.

Recent Comic Rarities in Europe

Happily, one doesn't need to be in a time warp these days to catch performances of unfamiliar comic operas from Donizetti's prolific output. Among the most interesting I was able to attend this past year were a clever pairing of two works in May at Liege's Opera Royal de Wallonie: the opera comique *Rita ou le mari battu* (performed in the original French) and the one-act *farsa*, *Il campanello*, rooted in archetypal *commedia dell'arte* antics. *Rita*, coming relatively late in Donizetti's career and not performed until some years after his death, has been rightly called "the little sister of *La fille du regiment*" by Donizetti scholar John Jernigan (a good friend and traveling companion) while he aptly describes *Il Campanello* as both "the child of *Elisir d'amore* and the progenitor of *Don Pasquale*." The productions of these two rarities were a delight and a revelation. As Dr. Jernigan states:

The Opera Royal de Wallonie gave us two sparkling comedies by a master, two jewels which show us not just how Donizetti was adjusting his Neopolitan style to the realities of Paris, but how his unflinching sense of melody and good fun can be just as delightful in the twenty-first century as it was in the nineteenth.

If you would like to read further comments by Dr. Jernigan, please contact me at info@operaconbrio.com.

Another rare production followed the next night at Oper Nürnberg, Donizetti's early opera *semi-seria*, *Emilia di Liverpool*, which mixes so successfully the comic, the serious, and the sentimental (as does, for example, Donizetti's much later masterpiece *Linda di Chamounix*). The numerous comic scenes stood out, many of them with hilarious spoken dialogue. No surprise here. Donizetti's comic timing was often impeccable.

Maria di Rohan at the Caramoor Music Festival

One doesn't necessarily have to go abroad to experience rare and dramatically true Donizetti. Yet the echo of those Wexford performances seems to linger, not only with the revived performance of *Maria Padilla* soon coming to Boston with Barbara Quintiliani, but also last summer, with a renewed assessment of *Maria di Rohan* at Caramoor. An ambitious addition to its "Bel Canto at Caramoor" series, *Maria di Rohan* joined the impressive lineup of Bellini's *Norma* earlier in the summer, Rossini's *Semiramide* in 2009, Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* in 2007 and many others. (See my 2002 *Opera con Brio* article "Bel canto at Caramoor," which traces Will Crutchfield's vision and accomplishment as Director of Opera at Caramoor, a position he has held since 1997.)

Events surrounding the performances of *Maria di Rohan* continued Caramoor's admirable musicological excursions into the history of the works it performs. As is always the case at Caramoor, the performance of *Maria di Rohan* was in concert – but the added bonus was this offering of pre-opera events. These included discussions by Mr. Crutchfield and Philip Gossett, one of the world's foremost experts in 19th century Italian opera, on the complexities involved with Donizetti's numerous revisions and alternate music. As they emphasized, *Maria di Rohan*, Donizetti's penultimate opera, began life in 1843 in Vienna, but soon was adapted for both Paris and Naples, generating many alternate versions of numbers. We were then treated to a performance of this alternative music, with Dr. Gossett occasionally as accompanist, followed by more performances from the Caramoor Bel Canto Young Artists and Apprentices. (Most stunning, hardly recognizable indeed as Donizetti, was an austere *Miserere* from late in the composer's career.)

As in the 2005 Wexford production, Caramoor used basically the taut Vienna version of this stormy melodrama, in which the soprano, Maria, is ripped apart, torn between loyalty to the baritone, a husband she does not love (the Duke of Chevreuse), and the tenor, the man she does love (Count of Chalais). As in *Maria Padilla*, we have a love triangle that doesn't end well. (Schoenberg summarized such archetypal Romantic melodramas accurately: "There is a tenor and a soprano who are in love with each other, and there is also a baritone who is not at all delighted by these proceedings.")

As for the performance itself of *Maria di Rohan*, alas cancellations are not only the nemesis of the *otto cento* opera scene. The much-anticipated soprano Takesha Meshe Kizart had to withdraw because of illness; young apprentice artist Jennifer Rowley miraculously took over the lead with just one rehearsal. Ms. Rowley handled the difficult role with assurance and vigor, her velveteen outpourings especially effective in the poignant Act I aria "Cupa fatal mestizia" in which she laments her gloomy predicament.

The stark close of the opera, however, gives no chance for lyrical effusion from the soprano, à la *Maria Padilla*, since Donizetti withdrew her angry cabaletta before the premiere. As in Wexford, the final line flung at her by her husband stuns her to silence: "Death for him [Chalais]; for you, unfaithful woman, life with infamy." For Donizetti, dramatic criteria now took precedence over elaboration of musical form. Verdian melodrama is just around the corner.



Jennifer Rowley performs in *Maria di Rohan* at Caramoor, August 2010
Photo: Gabe Palacio



Angela Meade with conductor Will Crutchfield in Bellini's *Norma* at Caramoor, July 2010. Photo by Landon Nordeman

Angela Meade thrills at Caramoor

It is worth noting that Wexford will not be lacking a *bel canto* performance this fall; their upcoming production of *Virginia*, a rarely performed opera from Donizetti's equally prolific contemporary, Saverio Mercadante, will feature another rising star in the world of *bel canto*, Angela Meade, whose sensational performance in Bellini's *Norma* in July at the 2010 Caramoor International Music Festival swept the audience away as well. Seasoned critic Andrew Porter gave a pre-opera talk surveying the great interpreters of *Norma* he has reviewed, pointing to the staggering difficulties inherent in a role that invites varying and always interesting interpretations. At the top of his list were the fascinatingly varied interpretations of Callas in the 50s (in London, at her thrilling vocal peak) and then in Paris (early 60s, more nuanced). A "perfect" *Norma* simply may not be possible, he stated.

I never heard Callas live, but Angela Meade in Bellini's *Norma* at Caramoor gave perhaps the most complete and satisfying interpretation of *Norma* I have ever heard, with all the ingredients for expressive, dramatic articulation that Mr. Bonyngue called for: legato phrasing, which could soar high to finely woven pianissimos, low to vibrant fortes, all with formidable technique and breathtaking control. (Coincidentally Ms. Quintiliani took on the role of *Norma*, evidently with great success, during the same month at Chautauqua Opera.)

A note on Angela Meade. Two years ago (in November of 2008) her performance in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* with the Philadelphia Academy of Music was just as compelling. A recent winner in the Metropolitan Opera auditions, during the MET's 2009/10 season, she was the cover for Renee Fleming's *Armida*, as she will be in the next season. Not wishing Ms. Fleming ill, one can only hope, however, that Ms. Meade gets to show the audience what she can do with perhaps Rossini's most demanding and virtuosic role for the female voice. At any rate, in the fall of 2011, she will open the Met season in *Anna Bolena*. For now, one especially looks forward to her performance in Mercadante's *Virginia* at Wexford this fall.

Donizetti Lives on

The Wexford Festival Opera and the Caramoor International Music Festival have extensive and varied offerings each year. Yet, the art of *bel canto* is also alive and well at each. Happily, too, the less familiar Donizetti continues to receive performances not just in these two unique festivals, but also in the most unexpected corners of the operatic world.

A Donizetti score, like a Bellini score, is an artistic skeleton requiring both musical elaboration and sensitive singers to bring out its beauty as well as its inherent drama. We are indeed fortunate to have committed and talented advocates of Donizetti's work in young artists like Barbara Quintiliani, Angela Meade and the courageous Jennifer Rowley who are able to realize the potential of this exciting repertoire. Moreover, we are truly fortunate for the commitment of such innovative festivals as Wexford and Caramoor to capture the depth and richness of Donizetti's genius.



Self Caricature by Gaetano Donizetti

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