

Cornaro x 2

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"I didn't think it so much worse than all the others"
("non la supposeva tanto al disotto delle altre mie")

Donizetti to Dolci 6 February 1844

She had been a blow to his self-esteem. Intended for Vienna but then shelved half-complete, her creative fervour dispersed, the belated staging of *Caterina Cornaro* in the Parthenopean capital in circumstances beyond his control proved his undoing, he was ill, he blamed himself, it was *his* fault he said but the bass pedal in the dismissal of this opera was no fault of the composer, it was that of fate. Donizetti gave birth to his operas himself, under his own baton, but weakening health forbade any journey to Naples to ensure a happy delivery.

Conceived in the shadows, in a state of exhaustion, his letters full of "if I don't die" and "nothing fills the gap" (ironically confirming *Caterina's* insemination between *Linda di Chamounix* and *Don Pasquale* as the jeering critics noted) this ill-received opera owed nothing either to their limited understanding or to these two landmarks.

How much did it owe to Halévy? The French composer's *La Reine de Chypre*, a five-act *grand-opéra* with a Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint Georges text had enthralled Paris a few months before. It featured just those starring voices he believed to be his own property - La Stoltz, Duprez and Barroilhet as well as the same plot and historical heft, but initiated in its echo, while Halévy's imposing score still reverberated, real similarities between the two operas are surprisingly few. Gallic accents from the French tour-de-force make a mark only to the extent that this saga of thwarted love and murky Venetian intrigue divides into two parts: begun in Paris, Donizetti's inaugural gambit flirts briefly with Halévy's expansive *sceneggiatura* - while the dramatic core of his fervent response to the plot, fruit of his return to polyglot Austria, has an orchestral width, travelogue curiosity and a range of exotic images that belong to another culture. *Linda* and *Pasquale* have no role here, eastern spice from the Maghrebin *Dom Sébastien roi de Portugal* has been stirred into the mixture.

Comparisons are delusional, dreams of a fraternal clone are illusory, the same encounters prompt a similar response in both scores, but hopes of a print-through are unavailing. With one foot in two European capitals and with *grand-opéras* of his own Donizetti derived at least half of his opera from a default recipe in his own portfolio.

Parallel moments are scarcely more than a handful:

1. The *Acte I duo* between Caterina and Gérard of *La Reine de Chypre: Le ciel est radieux/Gérard mon Gérard* can be paired with the *duettino* of the same amorous couple in an identical position in the Prologue of *Caterina Cornaro: Tu l'amor mio, tu l'iride*
2. The ensuing intervention of Mocenigo can also be equated: ie *Sommes nous seuls ici* - a *duo-scène* in *La Reine de Chypre* between Andréa Cornaro and Mocenigo is dramatically paralleled with the *scena e cavatina: Dell'empio Cipro il popolo* of Mocenigo in *Caterina Cornaro*
3. The *duo final* of *Acte 2* by Halévy is echoed precisely by the *scena e duetto finale* of the identical pair that ends the Donizetti Prologue: that is: *Arbitre de ma vie* by Halévy has its equivalent in *Spera in me, della tua vita* of its Italian sport
4. Similarly, the *récitatif et duo final* of Halévy's *Acte 3* between Gérard and Lusignan *Vous qui de la chevalerie* has its parallel in the *scena e duetto* of the same two male voices that forms the crux of Atto primo of *Caterina Cornaro: Guarda o re, dagli occhi miei*
5. Lusignan's *cavatine* in *Acte 5* of *La Reine de Chypre* is echoed by the *scena e romanza* of Lusignano in Atto primo of Donizetti's opera: that is Lusignan's *A ton noble courage*, of the first finds a pair in *Non turbarti a questi accenti* of the second
6. ... and then very surprisingly where dramatic sequence is concerned the emotional crux, the *duo* between Gérard and Caterina - the actual *point-de-repère* of *Acte 5* of the *grand opéra* of Halévy *Quand le devoir sacré qui près du roi m'appelle*, has a precise corollary with the Atto primo *scena e duetto* between Gerardo and Caterina - that is in Donizetti's *Da quel di che lacerato*

Factually, as can be seen, the last duet of the generously expansive opera by Halévy - the proactive emotional climax of *La Reine de Chypre* finds the Italian composer still in his sprawling and rather discontinuous first act, and it marks a term, with these gallic moments Halévy more-or-less vanishes, his *Acte 4* is ignored and his *Acte 5* is dismembered, though many aspects of the plot remain *in situ* his prolific contemporary offers an Atto Secondo to his own taste, its substance *meridional* in tooth and claw. Once in fact, Donizetti returned to his imperial sinecure and the opera's destiny was assured he brought the plot to an energetic resolution: initiated by a big moment for the tenor, followed by a front-of-stage *gran'scena* for the heroine - a bipartite aria launched by the coro, centred upon a *preghiera* interrupted

by a lachrymose off-stage death-scene for the baritone in the form of *tempo-di-mezzo*, the whole capped by a syncopated cabaletta-con-coro with a cry of farewell (from Gerardo) and full reprise. In all an eloquent, if far-from novel sequence with the intention of bringing down the curtain to the eager endorsement of his fellow citizens.



Jacques-Fromental Halévy

These operas of Halévy and Donizetti, as is clear, were born of opposing philosophies as well as venues. Audiences at the grandiose Opéra were blasé, could be charmed and diverted but prided themselves on a jealously preserved *désinvolture*, occasions when they were actually conquered were few. *Grand opéra* was devised for their sanguine disposition, it offered elevated themes with a leisurely unfolding in meticulously re-created historical settings with picture-book veracity and costumes, hyper-real *voire* gruesome or disturbing spectacle as a major forte, a ballet *divertissement* as light relief and a thin spread of judiciously distributed vocal items. Intemperate enthusiasm was reserved for lesser venues.

In utter contrast, audiences at the superb Real Teatro di S. Carlo of Naples took their seats with feigned indifference, showing little attention to the stage, but when engaged musically proceeded to respond to the anticipated supernatural vocal athletics with a violence that was proverbial.

This last heady brew ultimately shaped the Donizettian approach to his doomed *tragedia lirica*, converting it from the measured psycho-historical colonial drama of its gestation to a travel-poster melodrama replete with that which Italian eyes and ears wanted to see and hear.

Grand opéra never quite equated with the Latin notion of *entertainment*.

Staged on 18 January 1844 *Caterina Cornaro* suffered from faulty genesis. Its evolution can be traced from Donizetti's letters: conceived as an offering to the complex Austro-Hungarian political psyche her libretto was commissioned in the summer of 1842 but then was rudely upstaged by an opera on much the same argument by Franz Lachner - an unwelcome setback that defused most of her initial motivation. We hear of the project again in that same capital many months later, when, on 21 March 1843, he unexpectedly announced that the shelved "*Catterina*" would find refuge in Naples.¹ At the end of May he informs his publisher that her "*second and third acts*"² (he means her first and second acts) have already been sent to Naples and that "*the first act*" (he means the Prologue) will follow when some adjustments to its music have been made.³ On 7 June he writes to his friend Tommaso Persico in Naples to say that he has now sent the revised Prologue and libretto to Naples and asks that he gives a hand with the preparation ("*Vedi di aggiustarmi codesto affari*") as the whole business is giving him "*stomach ache and he wants to live in peace*". It is clear that painful birth pangs led to something not so very different from real dyspepsia.

Letters from the middle to the end of June are alive with complaints about the projected cast and enforced alterations to the music; these being most especially to the *Scena e Romanza* of Lusignano in Act 1 (Lusignano being the character nearest to his heart - it is not impossible that the fatally-ill Donizetti compared himself with this lovelorn hero!) accompanied by fears for the opera's reception with a number of disturbing key issues: he insists that Gerardo *must* wear a *Maltese Cross* when his vocation as a Knight of Rhodes is revealed (he makes a little drawing) and *not* a crucifix which would be vetoed fatally (to the plot) by the censorship in Naples, he hopes too that the King can be persuaded to desist from applying his personal ukase to the *poisoning* of his confrère, the ill-used King of Cyprus. He should be reminded that it was the work of a vile *republican!*

¹ Donizetti had proposed to write an opera for Naples based on 'Ruy Blas'; Cammarano prepared a synopsis purportedly derived from a play called 'Folco Melian' which he believed could evade the virtual ban on Victor Hugo's works in that city, but the composer - though he began sketching its score - had second-thoughts and in view of the ill-effect of his covert departure from Naples decided to replace his subversive project with the less-contentious *Caterina Cornaro*

² The composer's autograph score in Naples is inconclusively divided. The "*Prologue and Two Acts*" of its stage appearance being a later clarification, but one which coincidentally underlines its divided genesis between Paris and Vienna

³ The autograph score of the "*Prologue*" indeed shows signs of revision

Even as late as November of that year he continued to agonise over the "*operazioni chirurgiche*" (cuts and amputations) that he dreads will be imposed upon his "*Catterina*". He had every reason to do so. At the prima the opera was thoroughly betrayed. The Venetian coro behaved throughout in a way that would have been praised by Gilbert and Sullivan; Gerardo's unmanly oath of affiliation as a Knight of Rhodes was ignored - together with his Maltese Cross - thus deftly removing any reason for his behavior at the height of the drama as well as any rationale for the key duet *Da quel di che lacerato*; as for the royal hero Lusignano, he was portrayed as near-moribund from his first entry to the bewilderment of an audience that was not allowed to know that his enfeebled behaviour was due to the actions of a sinister incubus faithful to the Republic of Venice. The King of Naples had failed Donizetti.

Then there were the *foreign-sounding* orchestral demands learned in Vienna which Neapolitan audiences heard with impatience. *Caterina Cornaro* demanded a very large orchestra with a huge wind section whose soloistic flights impinged upon even the very best voices - an "*alien*" lyricism at many important moments according to the critics which interrupted the enjoyment of the local vocal connoisseurs.

The opera fell apart even before the end of Act One: three pieces only were applauded, Caterina's *cabaletta* in the Prologue; the *stretta* of her duet with Gerardo in Atto Primo; and the first part of the quartet that closed this same act (with its slight concurrence with the quartet that ends Act 5 of Halevy's opera). The entire Act Two, the climax of the romantic tragedy, all the music that had been written specifically for their delectation fell prey to the whistling, heckling and relentless hostility which was the fate of operas that failed to please in that city.

It was the ultimate envoi that capped the whole disaster. Caterina's final *cabaletta* left Donizetti's erstwhile supporters defeated in their seats. They had waited in vain, the city was accustomed to long long *arie finali* when the belcantist *aficionado* could sit back transfixed in a haze of lyrical fervour at the final apotheosis of a celebrity voice. Within the memory of such indulgent closures as those of *Sancia di Castiglia*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Roberto Devereux* on that stage, confronted by the elegantly modest syncopated understatement of the widowed "*Catterina*" the audience took noisy revenge. Not only was the dowager sovereign short-winded but they too had been cut off in their prime. A hostile press turned the screw, suggesting that *Caterina Cornaro* had been written by someone else, leaving the composer in Vienna incandescent with rage.

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It was not the end of *Caterina Cornaro*. More was to come. There was a survival potential to this plot whose prospects and fate were so oddly spliced. It remained a challenge even though a fractured structure militated against success, or simply because it militated against success.

Upon the news of the failure of his opera Donizetti began convalescent measures to add and subtract new pieces, to add a *cabaletta da forza all'entrata del Rè* and a *duetto fra Catterina e Lusignano* at the start of the second act that would permit the king to die "with her name of his lips". A project too to eliminate Gerardo in the *finale ultimo* in a major rethink of the unhappy *cabaletta*. These things did not actually reach the stage. At the one revival of *Caterina Cornaro* in his lifetime at the Teatro Ducale of Parma in February 1845 there were some changes as indicated in the printed libretto but not those listed above. *Caterina* had a new *cabaletta* in the place of that in the Prologue (though it was one of the few pieces to have been applauded earlier) Mocenigo too has a new aria and Lusignano an amendment to his *Romanza*. But there is no evidence that a radical *finale nuovo* of any kind was *performed* as is sometimes claimed.

No doubt it was due to the quality of the cast he was offered at Parma whose reputation he was obliged to endorse, it is unthinkable (at this date) that a renowned diva like Marianna Barbieri-Nini in the role of a sovereign *Caterina Cornaro* would have been ready to accept the climax to an opera in which she must quit the scene without the last word.

Whatever its *convenienze*, at least the revival won the day and Donizetti could abandon his heroine, if not with satisfaction at least with relief.

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Few critical judgments have done justice to *Caterina Cornaro*. In any historical context this was an opera open to the future. Though the unkind global economy of our day will remark on her flawed *business model* and even though caught between two cultures like her incautious fellow traveler the King of Portugal, she set sail on a voyage of discovery the composer himself was not to complete. For him, as for both these celebrities, time ran out.

In no way can this opera be described as "*worse than all the others*". It is true that piecemeal genesis left unrewarding gaps but thanks to

Parisian culture, to *grand-opéra* in general (and by inference to Halévy) a species of mid-century descriptive writing had rubbed-off on Donizetti and it was his scene-painting, expansive cori, wide-screen vistas and evocative instrumentation, exotic spin-off from the even more extended *Dom Sébastien* that pointed *Caterina Cornaro* in an opposite direction to the Neapolitan bathos that had been her undoing. This opera, with its string of arias, tableaux and ensembles in no-way unworthy of any of his major scores marks another small step in the long march towards the Victorian world-view, that global intellectual explosion soon to make a momentous impact at the hands of artists and writers, industrialists and innovators of the mid-century. Donizetti was joining the throng. Not on any large canvas of course with this scribbled postcard from Cyprus, but the scale is not really relevant, the picture is an important one.