

Exploring Donizetti's Operas and Unveiling His Evolutionary Trajectory Through Those with Themes from the Moorish Kingdom and English History

Areti Tziboula¹ and Anna-Maria Rentzeperi-Tsonou²

Abstract

Donizetti engaged with all genres of opera and experimented with different themes. Thus, he composed character comedies, situational comedies, romantic comedies, comedies with a Neapolitan flavor, exotic operas, and operas with French librettos, while the operas for which he wrote the libretto himself were successful. From his serious operas, certain ones employed the ostensibly secure themes of the Moorish kingdom and the history of England. This study examines them on chronological order revealing an evolutionary course. Donizetti started by using stereotypes and applying happy endings but he gradually developed a mature romantic style expressing passion and suffering and employing mad scenes and tragic endings representing true romantic catharsis. Thus, although Donizetti was not a great renovator, he ultimately influenced the development of romantic opera.

Keywords: Donizetti's operas, Italian opera, Libretto, Romanticism, 19th century

1. Preface

Donizetti was a prolific opera composer. He left us a large legacy of works with examples from all genres of opera: farsae, comic operas, semi-seriae, and serious operas. He wrote a total of 70 operas, some of which are lost. Exactly half are serious operas, including two French grand operas, three are early works with classical themes, eleven are semiseriae, and twenty-one are comic and farsae. He began his career with mythological themes, but his engagement with them was limited to his early works. Specifically, he wrote *Il Pigmaliione* (1816), *Olimpiade* (1817), and *L'ira di Achille* (1817). Of these, only the first constitutes a complete work (Osborne 1996: 139-141).

2. Donizetti's farsae, comic and semiseriae operas

In this part will be examined some of Donizetti's farsae, comic and semiseriae operas which marked his career and demonstrate the composer's choice to engage with various opera genres.

Farsae

From Donizetti's farsae, *Le convenienze teatrali* (1827) in one act stands out, as well as its adaptation with the addition of a second act and a new title, *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali* (1831). Notably, the well-written libretto with its genuine humor is authored by Donizetti himself. The farsa satirizes the situations and characters of the world of opera (Ashbrook 1982: 302-304).

One of the best examples of romantic farsae is his farsa *Il Giovedigrasso* (1829), with libretto by Gilardoni.

At last, a distinct farsa is *Il campanello di notte* (1836) with libretto by Donizetti himself. The farsa has a local Neapolitan flavor and parodies singers as well as exaggerations regarding remedies against syphilis. The difference of this work from the composer's other comic works is the absence of passion and humanity (Law 1998: 161-162).

¹ 34, Venizelou st., 56224, Thessaloniki, Greece, PhD Candidate in Historical Musicology, Department of Music Science and Art, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece. Phone: 00306932608378, e-mail: atziboula@uom.edu.gr

² 13, Meg. Alexandrou, 54640, Thessaloniki, Greece, Associate Professor, Department of Music Science and Art, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece. Phone: 00306944839637, e-mail: arentzep@uom.edu.gr

Comic operas

Regarding Donizetti's comic operas, his first that established itself is the character comedy in two acts *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (1824). Its libretto is exceptionally well-written and addresses the delicate topic of the education of young men regarding their relationships with the opposite sex. In this opera, Donizetti succeeded in creating lively and multi-dimensional characters, beyond their comedic aspect (Ashbrook 1982: 293).

On the contrary, the next comic opera, the romantic *Olivo e Pasquale* (1827), is considered mediocre probably because the libretto did not inspire Donizetti (ibid: 299).

One of Donizetti's more serious comedies and his most carefully crafted comic work up to that point is *Alina, regina di Golconda* (1828) although its theme is rather outdated (Ashbrook 2002).

His next comic opera, *Gianni di Parigi* (1831), was written with the hope of being performed in Paris or London with Rubini as the protagonist. However, this did not happen as the main character of the opera was an outdated knightly hero and did not interest the tenor (Johnson, 1998: 158).

In 1832, he wrote an utterly romantic comic opera, *L'elisird'amore*. With this opera, both Romani with the libretto and Donizetti with his music, demonstrate absolute mastery in the comic genre. The characters are sketched with sharpness, each having their own peculiarities, while emotions emerge. Here, for the first time, the resolution of misconceptions occurs by recognizing emotions instead of relying on external elements. (Osborne 1996: 210-211).

The next comic opera, *Betty, o La capannasvizzer* (1836), with libretto by Donizetti, is romantic with a local Swiss flavor and particularly successful in portraying the charming heroine (Ashbrook 1982: 388).

La Fille du régiment (1840) is Donizetti's first opera based on a French libretto. It unfolds in Switzerland during the Napoleonic Wars (Ashbrook 1982: 436-437).

Regarding the libretto of *Rita* or *Deux hommes et une femme* (1841), it was written by Gustave Vaëz, librettist of previous works by the composer. The certain libretto was Donizetti's request when they coincidentally met in Paris while the composer was there waiting for the completion of the libretto for an order from La Scala in Milan. The Paris Opéra-Comique rejected *Rita*, and the libretto was translated into Italian, but it never premiered during the composer's lifetime. The opera is a character comedy with a simple plot. Characteristic is the scene where the heroine addresses the audience, an older Italian farsatradition (Weinstock 1963: 168-169).

The composer's last comic opera is *Don Pasquale* (1842) for the Italian theater in Paris, with a libretto by Ruffini and Donizetti, featuring characters reminiscent of the traditional characters of commedia dell'arte. However, the plot is simple, without the exaggerations typical of the opera buffa of the time. It perhaps represents the culmination of 19th century opera buffa and at the same time, it marks its end (Weinstock 1963:363, Golianek2007: 86).

Semiseriae operas

Regarding Donizetti's semiseriae operas, the composer's very first opera falls into this category. It is the heroic opera *Enrico di Borgogna* (1818).

Additionally, the composer's first significant commission is a semiseria opera. This is *Chiara e Serafina* (1822) for La Scala in Milan, with a libretto by the notable Romani.

Among his other semiseriae operas, *Emilia di Liverpool* (1824) stands out. Set in distant England, it did not achieve success, perhaps due to its mixed genre, which imposed the transformation of comic characters into serious, to serve romantic aesthetic criteria (Osborne 1996: 157).

In *Otto mesi in due ore* (1827), the title itself signifies the abolishment of the Aristotelian concept of unity of time. The opera successfully blends opera buffa with melodrama. Donizetti in this opera employs for the first time the technique of pantomime. It's one of Donizetti's favorite operas, which is why he adapted it with various titles, participating himself in the revision of the libretto (Ashbrook 2003: 301).

Gianni di Calais (1828) is the first adaptation in opera of the homonymous French melodrama by Caigniez. The use of French elements in the libretto gives the opera an exotic character (Johnson 1998: 167).

The next semiseria opera, *Francesca di Foix* (1831), is also based on a French source, set in the French court of the Renaissance. The French origin of the libretto is evident both in its urban character and in its concise dialogue.

Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo (1833) is a semiseria opera set on a tropical island, featuring romantic elements and a male protagonist in the mad-scene.

Noteworthy is *Torquato Tasso* (1833), which refers to the historical figure of the great Italian poet. It does not fit the classical semiseria opera mold and it represents Donizetti's attempt to expand the scope of romantic opera by combining two dissimilar elements: heroic tragedy with broader comedy.

Donizetti's best semiseria opera, *Linda di Chamounix* (1840), is the last in the genre. The plot unfolds in the French Alps and depicts the contrast between the aristocracy and ordinary people.

3. Donizetti's serious operas

The librettos of the serious operas of the composer are based on literary works of French, Italian, German, and English authors of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus, his sources include Florian, Caigniez, Delavigne, Chenier, Bis, Anselot, Bourgeois, Maillan, Duveyrier, Vaëz, Foucher, Dumas, Ringhini, Sperduti, Sgricci, Marchionni, Bianco, Marengo, Scribe, Scott, Schiller, Hugo, Lord Byron, Moore, and von Schenk.

The serious operas of Donizetti share a common denominator: love and historical events from various periods of European history: the biblical times, the era of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the period of Spanish domination over the Flemish during the 16th century, Spain of the Moorish kingdom. Other operas refer to the French history of the 10th century during the time of Louis V and of the 15th century during the reign of the House of Vergey, to English history and to its myths such as that of Rosaund Clifford from the 12th century and of Lucia di Lammermoor from the 17th century. In many operas, reference is made to historical figures of Italian history, such as Parisina Malatesta of the 15th century, the opponent families of 16th century Bologna Lampertazzi and Geremei, Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara of the 16th century, Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice of the 14th century, the noble Pia de' Tolomei from Siena of the 13th century. Historical figures from other regions are also encountered, such as the noble Maria Padilla from Castile of the 14th century, Queen of Cyprus Catherine Cornaro of the 15th century, the French courtier Marie de Rohan of the 17th century, and Dom Sebastian, King of Portugal, of the 16th century.

In the themes of the librettos of his serious operas, an evolutionary trajectory is identified, with an increasing attraction to dynamic plots with tragic or dark and horrific elements, indicative of the composer's turn from conservatism towards innovation. It is indisputable that the circumstances of the period, especially the censorship of the time forced him to make changes in his librettos, so as to receive an order for an opera from the more liberal Paris which was his constant thought and desire.

In this part will be examined Donizetti's serious operas with themes taken from the Moorish Kingdom and from the history of England. The specific themes have been repeatedly used in the course of his career thus enabling the researcher to see the progressive approach to Donizetti and the concessions that the composer had to make to overcome stereotypes and create his mature romantic style.

3.1 Donizetti's serious operas with thematology taken from the Moorish Kingdom

During the initial decades of the 19th century, Italian censorship displayed heightened sensitivity towards themes involving Christian monarchs. Consequently, subjects found greater acceptance if they pertained to non-Christian rulers, such as those from the dynasties of the Moorish Kingdom. Moreover, given Naples' Spanish dominion during this period, operas featuring Spanish-Moorish motifs were highly favored in Neapolitan circles (Ashbrook 2000: 499-500, Jellinek 2005: 743).

Donizetti wrote 7 serious operas with the abovementioned subject, that William Ashbrook calls Donizetti's "Castilian Ring-let": *Zoraida di Granata* (1822), *Alabor in Granata* (1825), *Ehvinda* (1826), *Sancia di Castiglia* (1832), *La favorite* (1840) *Maria Padilla* (1841) and *Dom Sebastien, roi de Portugal* (1843) (Ashbrook 1982: 457).

3.2 The operas

Zoraida di Granata (1822)

Donizetti's debut serious opera, presented in two acts, premiered at the Argentina Theatre in Rome, achieving resounding success. The libretto, penned by Merelli, drew inspiration from the French novel *Gonsalve de Cordove* or *Grenade reconquise* by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian (1793) and Romanelli's libretto for Giuseppe Nicolini's *Abenamet e Zoraide* (1805). Merelli remained largely faithful to Florian's narrative throughout the composition process.

The narrative revolves around Princess Zoraida, who loves Abenamet, yet faces the threat of forced marriage to the throne's usurper, Almuzir. The unfolding events follow a predictable trajectory, culminating in a gratifying resolution where Abenamet and Zoraida unite in marriage, ensuring a blissful conclusion to the opera (Ashbrook 1982: 535, 2000: 500, Osborne 1996: 147).

Two years following the debut of the opera, impresario Paterni extended an invitation to Donizetti to revise the production for the very same theater. The task involved expanding the character of Abenamet to

showcase the talents of the eminent musico of the era, Rosmunda Pisaroni. The libretto was adapted by Ferretti. Nevertheless, the opera failed to replicate its earlier success. This shift in reception suggests that in 1822, upon its premiere, the Romans were captivated by the novelty of the composer's arrival, whereas by 1824, familiarity had diminished the impact (Ashbrook: 1982: 287-288).

However, Zoraida presented Donizetti with an invitation from the preeminent impresario of the era, Domenico Barbaja, to join the esteemed San Carlo theatre in Naples. There, Donizetti established himself for the subsequent 16 years, though he remained open to accepting invitations from other theaters (ibid: 287, Smart 2001).

Alahor in Granata (1825)

Due to the closure of Neapolitan theaters during the winter of 1825-26, Donizetti opted to accept the position of musical director at the renowned Carolino Theatre in the distant Sicilian town of Palermo. This commitment came with the stipulation that he compose a new opera. Despite facing a string of frustrating setbacks, *Alahor in Granata* premiered in two acts on January 7, 1826 (Freeman 1972: 243).

Set in medieval Granada amidst one of the Moorish wars, the narrative of *Alahor in Granata* unfolds against the backdrop of the waning Moorish Kingdom. The connection between *Alahor* and *Zoraida* is widely recognized, drawing inspiration from Florian's *Gonzalve de Cordove*, albeit with a more liberal adaptation (Ashbrook 2000: 500). The authorship of the libretto is credited to someone identified only by the initials M.A. Freeman suggests, following Ashbrook, that these initials could signify "Maestro Anonimo" or a comparable designation. However, Pirrotta proposes an alternative interpretation, suggesting "Molti autori" (many authors). Interestingly, these same initials are found in another opera, *Don Pasquale*, staged in Paris in 1842. It's plausible that a local amateur from Palermo collaborated with Donizetti in crafting the libretto (Freeman 1972: 245).

Alahor's libretto is based on Etienne de Jouy's libretto for Cherubini's *Les Abencerages* (1813) and Romani's libretto for Meyerbeer's *L'Esule di Granata* (1821), which in turn are based on Florian's *Gonzalve de Cordove*. The librettist retained the essence of the plot but opted to alter the names and familial relationships of the central characters (ibid: 246, Ashbrook 1982: 539-540, Osborne 1996: 161).

Romani's libretto for Meyerbeer lacked significant dramatic depth. Unfortunately, the alterations made for Donizetti's version did little to enhance its poetic or dramatic qualities (Freeman 1972: 245-246).

Following its debut, the opera was staged three times at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples during 1826. Subsequently, it received another performance at the Carolino Theatre in Palermo in 1830 (ibid: 240, Ashbrook 2000: 501).

The opera achieved a moderate level of success, imputed in part to its conservatively crafted libretto. According to the correspondent of the German Journal *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, Vol. XXVIII (1826), col. 637, the characters were perceived as somewhat rigid, and the situations tended to be static, despite possessing a dramatic potential. The entire opera was permeated by the stereotypes prevalent during its time. The sole innovative aspect lay in its exotic setting. However, beyond the names of the characters, there was little that resonated with Moorish culture in the narrative. There was a notable absence of efforts to integrate the exotic elements into broader, more intricate, and compelling dramatic segments. The story could have unfolded in classical Greece or any other locale, rather than Granada, without significant alteration. The passions evoked in *Alahor* were subdued and the happy ending was characteristic of an outdated tradition (Freeman 1972: 246, Ashbrook 2000: 502).

The storyline revolves around the siblings Alahor and Zoraida, who are descendants of the deceased Moorish leader Abencerrage. Zoraida harbors affection for Hashem, the newly appointed leader of the Zegri tribe and the brother of the individual responsible for her father's death. Ultimately, Hashem encounters Alahor and persuades him of his integrity and genuine love for Zoraida (Freeman 1972: 246, Osborne 1996: 161).

Elvida (1826)

Following the debut of *Alahor* in San Carlo during the summer of 1826, Donizetti penned his sole one-act opera, *Elvida*, for the celebration of Queen Maria Isabella of Spain's birthday at the same venue. The libretto, crafted by the experienced Giovanni Schmidt, precisely met Donizetti's request: a straightforward plot devoid of historical intricacies, lightly touching upon the Spanish-Moorish conflict, accentuating Spanish elements, and culminating in a joyful resolution. The origins of the libretto remain undisclosed. Donizetti received a modest compensation for his efforts, resulting in minimal exertion in its composition (Ashbrook 1982: 296-297, 540, Jellinek 2005: 743).

***Sancia di Castiglia* (1832)**

The opera is written in two acts with a libretto penned by Pietro Salatino, drawing from an undisclosed source. Its premiere took place at San Carlo. For the first time in an opera with a Moorish theme, Donizetti highlighted passion and suffering. The composer wholeheartedly dedicated the work to his mentor Mayr, showcasing his profound reverence. Despite its potential, *Sancia di Castiglia* remains one of Donizetti's less prominent operas. The reason is that the libretto, although laden and providing some promising situations, is conservatively given and ultimately it does not take advantage of them offering scant depth in character portrayal. Notably, Sancia emerges as the sole compelling character, torn by inner conflicts. Set in 10th century Castile, the plot revolves around the Moorish prince Irkano's bid to seize the throne by marrying the widowed Queen Sancia, all while coaxing her into poisoning her son, Garzia. In a tragic turn, as the poisoned cup is presented to Garzia, his mother seizes it, consumes its content, and succumbs to death (ibid: 554, Osborne 1996: 214).

It is Donizetti's first opera with a Spanish theme that has a tragic ending, but there is a complete lack of mutual love between the characters. Irkano's character is painted with shades of selfishness and vindictiveness, as he manipulates Sancia into poisoning Garzia, only to reveal deeper ulterior motives following his intended bride's demise. Moreover, Donizetti's handling of the libretto reveals his inclination toward exploring Sancia's internal conflicts rather than depicting her as a deceived lover (Ashbrook 1982: 333-334, Osborne 1996: 215).

***La favorite* (1840)**

By 1840, Donizetti had established himself as a permanent resident of Paris. *La favorite*, a grand opera in four acts for the Opéra, unfolds against the backdrop of the Moorish wars and the tumultuous clashes between church and state. The libretto boasts a diverse origin, which proves to be advantageous. In particular, *La favorite*, originated, from the one hand, from *L'ange de Nisida* (1839) in libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaez, based on various sources, including the play *Le Comte de Comminges* by Francois-Thomas Baculardd'Arnaud (1790). *L'ange*, however, was never performed because the production of the theatre went bankrupt. On the other hand, *La favorite* is heavily influenced by an earlier unfinished opera titled *Adelaide* (1834). In *Adelaide*, the Italian libretto had already been supplanted by the French text of *L'ange*, which now undergoes further transformation with the French adaptation for *La Favorite*. This latest iteration diverges significantly in plot and character from *L'ange*. Donizetti, aided by Alphonse Royer, Gustave Vaez, and possibly Scribe, undertook the task of revising the libretto. Through their collaborative efforts, they succeeded in imbuing the plot with a stringent and cohesive logic (Glasow 1998: 33-35).

While *L'ange* was tailored for the modest resources of the Renaissance Theatre, *La Favorite* was destined for the grandiose demands of the Opéra, where spectacle played a pivotal role in productions. The incorporation of the historical figure of Leonora de Guzman into the plot not only ensured a more seamless fit within the Opéra repertoire but also opened up the possibility of staging the work in Italy. In contrast, *L'ange*, which delved into the extramarital affairs of the king of Naples, would have faced insurmountable obstacles for presentation in Italy (Ashbrook 1982: 441-442).

The storyline revolves around the romantic entanglement between Fernando, the son of Balthazar, the abbot of the Monastery of Santiago de Compostela and a member of the Cistercian Order of Calatrava in Castile, and Leonora, who is the mistress of King Alfonso. Unaware of Leonora's true identity, Fernando seeks the king's permission to marry her. In a twist of irony, Alfonso grants his consent, only for Fernando to discover Leonora's true status, prompting his retreat to the convent. The opera concludes with the remorseful Leonora passing away in the embrace of her beloved (Osborne 1996: 277).

Fernando embodies the epitome of courtly love, idealism, courage, and an unwavering sense of honor. This trait is particularly highlighted in one of the opera's notable scenes, where he symbolically shatters his sword and casts its fragments at the feet of the king (Ashbrook 1982: 253, 443).

Simultaneously, Alfonso emerges as one of Donizetti's most captivating characters. As a king, he commands authority, yet his dual nature reveals facets of sardonic wit, lustful desires, and inherent corruption, which consistently underscore his complexity.

An essential aspect of the opera lies in the stark contrast between the disciplined atmosphere of the monastic scenes and the indulgent court of Alfonso. This sharp dichotomy serves to underscore the clash between asceticism and hedonism, adding depth to the thematic exploration of the narrative.

Equally significant is the portrayal of the conflict between church and state, which reaches its pinnacle when Balthazar, driven by principles, threatens to renounce his allegiance to the king if he proceeds with the divorce of his daughter. This confrontation underscores the tension between religious authority and political power, enriching the opera's thematic complexity (Ibid: 444, 447).

***Maria Padilla* (1841)**

The opera unfolds across three acts and debuted at La Scala in Milan, marking Donizetti's return after an extended absence in Paris. However, the performance of the opera was overshadowed by the premiere of Verdi's *Nabucco*, which garnered greater attention and acclaim during the same period (Willier 1998: 182).

Donizetti himself chose the subject matter and collaborated with Rossi to craft the libretto. The inspiration for the theme stemmed from Ancelot's play of the same title, which premiered in Paris in 1838. Set in 14th century Castile, the narrative draws loose inspiration from the historical figure of Maria Padilla, known for her pride and ambition, and her tumultuous relationship with Don Pedro, who kept her as one of his many mistresses. Within the court, a faction advocates for Pedro to wed Bianca, a Bourbon princess, to avert potential civil unrest. However, in a dramatic turn of events, Pedro ultimately declares Maria as queen and rejects Bianca (Osborne 1996: 284).

The orchestration of the plot significantly enhances its dramatic impact, showcasing an innovation far ahead of its time (Ashbrook 1982: 458).

Despite its numerous merits, *Maria Padilla* unfortunately suffers from a significant flaw in its resolution, particularly in the most crucial segment of the drama. In Ancelot's original play, when Maria discovers that Pedro is going to marry Bianca for political reasons, she grabs the crown from her opponent's head and commits suicide. However, due to the strict censorship policies in Milan in 1841, which forbade on-stage deaths, Donizetti reluctantly altered the ending to a happier one, where Maria emerges as the queen while Bianca is publicly humiliated and ostracized. This forced alteration creates a dissonance between the audience's expectation of a tragic conclusion and the ultimately joyful resolution, detracting from the coherence of the narrative (Ibid: 466).

This opera notably features a mad scene, a popular trope of the time, revolving around Maria's descent into madness prompted by her father's actions. Specifically, in a pivotal moment, her father seizes a letter from Don Pedro, which attests to his genuine intentions of marrying Maria as his lawful wife. Instead of defending his daughter, he callously destroys the letter, exacerbating Maria's anguish and precipitating her mental unraveling (Willier 1998: 184).

***Dom Sébastien, roi de Portugal* (1843)**

This opera marked the culmination of Donizetti's career before his descent into mental instability due to neurosyphilis. Composed for the Paris Opéra, it stands as his third and arguably finest grand opera, representing a pinnacle achievement amidst his prolific output. Expansive and profoundly somber in tone, it delves into weighty themes. The libretto, penned by Eugène Scribe, draws from the play of the same title by Paul Foucher (1838), itself inspired by John Dryden's drama *Don Sebastian* (1691). Rooted in historical events, the opera revolves around the ill-fated King Sebastian of Portugal (1554-1578) and his unsuccessful military campaign in Morocco in 1578 (Ashbrook 1982: 510, Porter 1989: 120, Osborne 1996: 298).

Set against the backdrop of Lisbon and the vast expanse of the Moroccan desert, the plot of the opera centers on the personal turmoil of Portuguese King Sebastian, which unfolds in tandem with the clash of two divergent cultures. As Sebastian prepares to embark on a religious crusade in Africa, he finds himself entangled in a profound personal drama when he rescues the life of the Moorish Princess Zaida. Following his invasion of Morocco, Sebastian suffers defeat at the hands of Zaida's father and is presumed dead on the battlefield. However, the princess discovers him and aids in his recovery. Meanwhile, back in Lisbon, the influential cleric Dom Juan de Silva schemes against the absent king, plotting to deliver the country into the hands of the Spaniards. Sebastian manages to return to Lisbon just in time to attend his own funeral, orchestrated by the conniving inquisitor. Ultimately, Sebastian and Zaida find themselves imprisoned, and despite a failed attempt to escape with the assistance of Sebastian's friend, the poet Camoens, they meet their demise by gunfire (Baxter 1998: 201).

At the time, Donizetti aspired to create an opera comparable to historical masterpieces such as Auber's, Halévy's, and Meyerbeer's works. He viewed *Dom Sébastien* as a monumental endeavor, akin to Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*. Inspired by these illustrious predecessors, Donizetti aimed to vividly portray his five central characters and to accentuate the dramatic intensity of their situations. He wrote to a friend in Naples, before the premiere: "Imagine what it would be like: a shocking spectacle — Portuguese, Arabs, an Inquisition auto-da-fe, a royal procession with a catafalque - the underground dungeons of the Inquisition" (Donizetti to Teodoro Ghezzi, 5 October 1843, quoted in Baxter 1998: 200).

The result of his effort, however, is a leaden libretto, full of exaggerations, something that makes the opera not completely plausible. Clement and Larousse, in their *Dictionnaire des opéras*, called Donizetti the new victim of Scribe who received a libretto that contained some rather ridiculous situations (Clement and Larousse 1843: 232).

3.3 Conclusions regarding Donizetti's serious operas with thematology taken from the Moorish Kingdom

The first three operas of the "Castilian Ring-let" are conservatively written with happy endings. However, this conservative approach resonated with the traditional tastes of the 19th-century Italian audience, leading to increased demand for the composer's work.

Sancia di Castiglia, composed a decade after *Zoraida*, differs from the earlier operas as it delves deeply into themes of passion and suffering, culminating in a tragic conclusion.

La Favorite, penned for the Paris Opéra eight years after *Sancia*, masterfully delineates its characters while also exploring the intricate dynamics between church and state.

Maria Padilla, composed just a year after *La Favorite*, exhibits a deliberate Italian character tailored for its premiere at La Scala in Milan. While the plot initially hints at a tragic conclusion, the opera ultimately concludes with a happy ending, a concession to the conservative tastes of Milan's audience. However, amidst this traditional framework, the opera features an innovative mad scene, serving either as a reflection of the prevailing Kantian concept of subjectivity or as a departure from conventional plot structures.

Finally, *Dom Sébastien*, crafted for the Paris Opéra, stands as the composer's final completed opera. Here, Donizetti's aspiration to create a monumental work on par with Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, is evident. It is a historical grand opera with a tragic ending offering compelling evidence of the composer's tragic vision.

4. Donizetti's serious operas with thematology taken from the history of England

During this era, Italy perceived England as an exotic land with distinct characteristics, and English history frequently served as the subject matter for operas. Italian composers were particularly fascinated by the thematic richness of the Tudor dynasty. Among the Tudor monarchs, Mary Stuart emerged as the most popular heroine, revered for her Catholic faith and martyrdom, while Queen Elizabeth I was often depicted as "jealous, willful, and easily overwrought," according to Frei (2007: 13).

Donizetti indeed composed seven operas centered around themes from English history: *Alfredo il grande* (1823), *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth* (1829), *Anna Bolena* (1830), *Rosmondad'Inghilterra* (1834), *Maria Stuarda* (1834), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Roberto Devereux* (1837).

4.1 The operas

Alfredo il Grande (1823)

This marks Donizetti's inaugural opera performed at San Carlo, Naples, and his first foray into British history. The libretto, likely penned by Tottola, possibly derived from Merelli's libretto for Mayr's opera of the same title (1818). Chronicling the life and deeds of the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great (9th century), the opera's plot unfolds with a tedious narrative, featuring inexplicable encounters and clashes involving English and Danish soldiers, armed shepherds, and various rural elements. Despite its shortcomings, the opera concludes happily (Ashbrook 1982: 292, Osborne 1996: 152).

The drama unfolds on the picturesque island of Athelney in Somerset, where Queen Amalia arrives incognito with General Edward, seeking her husband, King Alfred. Taking refuge in a shepherd's dwelling, they unknowingly share the same hiding place as the king. However, their presence does not go unnoticed by their Danish adversaries, who keep a watchful eye on them. A clash erupts between the English and the Danes, resulting in victory for the English forces, who acclaim Alfred as the savior of England (Ashbrook 1982: 536).

Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth (1829)

The opera is structured into three acts, with the libretto penned by Tottola, drawing inspiration from Gaetano Barbieri's *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth*, which premiered in 1824. Barbieri's work, in turn, was based on Scribe's libretto for the opera *Leicester* or *Le Château de Kenilworth*, staged in Paris in 1823. Scribe's source material was Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*, which had been translated into Italian in 1821, shortly after its original publication (Osborne 1996: 185).

The opera was crafted for a royal gala commemorating the birthday of Isabella Maria, Queen of Naples, and premiered at the prestigious San Carlo theater. A year later, it underwent adaptation and was once again presented at the same venue, this time under the title *Il castello di Kenilworth*.

The plot revolves around Lester's endeavors to conceal his marriage to Amelia from the Queen. It offers a simplified rendition of Scott's novel, with a significant departure: whereas in the novel, the wife is neglected, insulted, and ultimately meets a tragic demise at the hands of her husband, the opera opts for a happy ending, fitting for the celebratory atmosphere of the royal gala. Lester successfully rescues Amelia and Queen Elizabeth, who, despite harboring feelings for him, displays remarkable magnanimity towards the couple. The courtiers' chorus praises the queen's virtues, declaring, "How fortunate is England to have such a Queen, the splendor of the century" (Ibid: 186). However, the opera does not fully elucidate the queen's transformation from magnificence to leniency, leaving this aspect open to interpretation.

This opera is Donizetti's first serious opera where two conflicting female roles are presented (Ashbrook 1982: 312-313, Holden 2001: 229).

Anna Bolena, (1830)

Anna Bolena is a poignant drama in two acts, albeit historically inaccurate, portraying the life of King Henry VIII's second wife, Anna Bolena. The narrative unfolds in England in 1536, where King Henry VIII has grown disenchanted with Anne and has shifted his affections to the first lady of the court, Giovanna. Circumstances conspire to imprison the innocent Anna, her former lover Percy, her brother Rochefort, and the servant Smeaton, who harbors unrequited love for Anna. Giovanna suggests to Anna that she plead guilty to secure her release, but Anna adamantly refuses. In the Tower of London, Anna hears the cannon fire announcing Henry's marriage to Giovanna as she walks towards the gallows, immersed in prayer. Prior to her execution, Anna appeals to heaven for mercy upon her husband and his new wife (Ashbrook 1982: 549-550).

Romani discovered the story and proposed it to Donizetti. Rather than drawing directly from Shakespeare, Donizetti and Romani sourced their material from two contemporary works: *Enrico VIII* or *Anna Bolena* by Marie-Joseph de Chenier translated into Italian by Hippolyto Piedmonte, and staged in Turin in 1816, and *Anna Bolena* by Alessandro Pepoli, which premiered in Venice in 1788.

It is the most dramatic libretto of Romani's career so far.

The libretto distinctly portrays the conflict between the two intersecting triangles: Anna-Seymour-Henry and Anna-Percy-Henry. It intensifies the tension to a genuine romantic catharsis, depicting the lovers' poignant preparation for death, their longing for salvation, and their eventual release from their torments. It focuses on the tragic heroine who moves the audience with the phases of her transformation from an intolerable estate, through desire for salvage, to victory, when her right is re-established, as she finds the psychic force not to imprecate but to forgive those who led her to death. The libretto offers strong feelings of romance, betrayal and suffering. It offers ample opportunities for the portrayal of intense emotions, igniting Donizetti's creative spark as he breathed life into the characters through his musical compositions, sustaining the tension and vitality of the drama (Ashbrook 1982: 66, 317-318; Fralick 1985: 12).

At its debut, the production showcased two remarkable singers who would significantly shape Donizetti's future endeavors: soprano Giuditta Pasta, cast as Anna, and tenor Giovanni Rubini. Pasta, renowned for her meticulous preparation of roles, provided Donizetti with valuable insights during the composition process, as the composer resided at her residence on Lake Como for an extended period, where much of the work was completed (Ashbrook 1982: 317-321, Smart 2001).

The opera debuted with resounding success, kicking off the carnival season at Milan's Carcano Theater with great acclaim. Subsequently, it swiftly captivated audiences in Paris and London. Its triumph endured for nearly fifty years, profoundly reshaping several facets of the composer's career. It firmly positioned him among Italy's foremost composers, alongside Rossini and Bellini, inspiring him to delve further into romantic tragedies and securing him commissions from numerous theaters (Osborne 1996: 195, Bourne 2008).

It is said that his teacher Mayr, called Donizetti "maestro" only after Anna Bolena (Fralick 1985: 10).

Anna Bolena, *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux* are often referred to as the "Tudor Queen Trilogy", although Donizetti himself did not intend to link them together (Ibid: 2).

Rosmonda d'Inghilterra (1834)

This two-act opera debuted during the Carnival season at the Teatro de la Pergola in Florence. Romani penned the libretto, originally intended for Coccia's opera *Rosmunda* (1829), and later adapted it for Donizetti, making certain textual modifications. While the exact source of Romani's inspiration remains undisclosed, it is speculated to be akin to the material utilized for the ballet *Rosmondo*, featuring music by Schira and choreography by Galzerani. This ballet enjoyed a successful staging at La Scala in Milan in 1828 and would have likely been familiar to the librettist. The narrative unfolds in the vicinity of Woodstock Castle during 12th-century England, drawing

upon the legend of the "fair-haired" Rosmonda Clifford and her tragic love for King Henry II, which incites the jealousy and wrath of Eleanor of Aquitaine. In the opera's climax, Eleanor fatally wounds Rosmonda, who succumbs to her injuries in the arms of Henry and her father.

While the dramatic confrontations are expertly crafted, the storyline appears somewhat convoluted. Donizetti's musical composition for the libretto feels sporadic, failing to deeply resonate with the audience. Additionally, he reworked the opera under the title *Rosamund Clifford* in 1837 (Ashbrook 1982: 357, Osborne 1996: 228).

Maria Stuarda (1834)

Following a stint in the northern regions, where audiences embraced melodrama and operatic violence, Donizetti returned to Naples in 1834 to embark on his next composition for the Teatro San Carlo. Inspired by Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, he selected the subject of Mary Queen of Scots for his opera.

The storyline delves into Queen Elizabeth's envious resentment toward the captive Mary Queen of Scots, ultimately leading to Mary's execution by Elizabeth's command. The opera concludes with Maria's poignant plea for forgiveness from those who wronged her, moments before her demise (Ashbrook 1982: 558).

Schiller's *Mary Stuart* lacks tenderness. On the contrary, it expresses feelings of vengeful jealousy and passion on the part of Queen Elizabeth. Donizetti encountered the work through Mafei's 1830 translation, which placed greater emphasis on the political and nationalistic themes rather than Mary's demise, diverging from Alfieri's more conventional 1778 translation. The composer altered the plot to heighten its intrigue and dramatic tension. Although the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, never encountered Mary Stuart and was Elizabeth's asserted lover, in Donizetti's opera he loves the Queen of Scots and urges Elizabeth to meet her. When the ladies meet on a hunt near Fotheringay Castle where Mary is confined, she begs forgiveness, but Elizabeth calls her a liar, declaring that her imprisonment "in dust and shame" suits her. Elizabeth further accuses Maria of betraying her marriage to Darnley, intensifying the confrontation. The climax of the scene arrives as Maria confronts Elizabeth, labeling her "a vile bastard." In response, Elizabeth condemns Maria to death, and the act concludes with the chilling chorus proclaiming "The queen has decided for you. Yes, be silent, come, tremble all hope is lost" (Frei 2007: 13-14).

In *Maria Stuarda*, Donizetti masterfully captures Elizabeth's magnificence and capricious nature, yet Maria's presence tends to overshadow her (Ashbrook 1982-401).

Donizetti, accustomed to the Northern audiences' embrace of themes featuring bloodshed and violence, did not anticipate encountering opposition from the censors. However, the Neapolitan censors grew progressively stringent regarding depictions of bloody and violent subjects, fearing they might disturb public tranquility and morality. During this period, Donizetti's enthusiasm for vibrant themes was burgeoning. With Romani's retirement, Donizetti faced the task of seeking out his own librettist. Eventually, he discovered Giuseppe Bardari (1817-1861), a youthful seventeen-year-old, who, despite his relative inexperience, possessed a vivacious dramatic sensibility. Donizetti, having already authored three librettos himself, played an active role in shaping the libretto for this opera, collaborating closely with earlier librettists (Fralick 1985: 28). However, the original libretto exhibited certain weaknesses, notably the delayed appearance of the protagonist, Maria Stuart, who only emerges in the second act. As a result, Elizabeth's character dominated the entirety of the first act, potentially confusing the audience regarding the central focus of the opera. Additionally, Elizabeth's characterization lacked depth and complexity, rendering her portrayal somewhat predictable. Recognizing these shortcomings, Donizetti intervened and made alterations to the libretto, aiming to achieve a more balanced treatment of the leading roles (Ashbrook 1982: 349, 358, Fralick 1985: 31).

The censors' demands for alterations to the libretto were met, leading to its eventual approval. However, rumors regarding the opera's controversial theme began to circulate. Furthermore, a dispute between the leading actresses provided the King, who was married to Maria Christina, a direct descendant of Maria Stuarda, with justification to prohibit its premiere. After facing rejection for two additional librettos due to censorship cuts, Donizetti eventually found success with one titled *Buodelmonte*, set in a different location and era compared to *Maria Stuarda*. This libretto was accepted and staged in Naples in October 1834 (Fralick 1985: 29, Osborne 1996: 230).

Nine months later, when the uproar over *Maria Stuarda* settled, the popular mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran insisted on performing Maria on the Scala in Milan. As the censors in Milan were more open-minded than in Naples, her request was granted, subject to text modifications (Fralick 1985: 29). The opera was finally staged at La Scala in Milan, but Malibran sang the words that had been banned by the censors, among them the phrase "vil bastarda" (the bastard), which are said to have caused Queen Maria Christina to faint upon hearing them. It is also said that the audience turned pale and trembled at the terrible "bastard" in the confrontation scene.

Thus the opera was banned, and Donizetti would not open the Milan's carnival season for the next six years. The opera became popular only at the end of the decade (Ashbrook 1982: 349, 358, Fralick 1985: 30, Osborne 1996: 229-234, Frei 2007: 14).

Lucia di Lammermoor (1835)

The libretto for this opera in three acts is written by Camarano and is derived from: Ballozzi's libretto for Caraffa's opera *Le nozze di Lammermoor* (1829), Bassi's libretto for Rieschi's opera *La fidanzata di Lammermoor* and Beltrame's libretto for Mazzucato's opera *La fidanzata di Lammermoor* (1834), which in turn derived from Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) (Ashbrook 1982: 560).

Scott's novel was inspired by a story that took place in 1668 involving Janet Dalrymple, of noble birth, who on her wedding night stabbed and wounded seriously her husband because her parents forced her to marry someone she didn't love, while she was secretly engaged to someone else.

Scott shifted the plot to the late 17th century, changed the names of the characters, moved the setting to another part of Scotland, and created a complex plot by adding new characters: the benevolent reverend Mr. Bide-the-Bent and Caleb Balderstone, the honest follower who along with the timid Craigengelt provide comic counterbalance to the tragic story. Donizetti and Camarano in turn set the plot in the same place and time as Scott and focused on the tragic elements with some essential changes: Lucia faints when Edgardo arrives at her wedding and when she wakes up, in her insanity she fantasizes that she is going to marry him, she stabs her husband to death on the first night of the wedding, and Edgardo kills himself when he learns of his beloved's death. The reverend's place is taken by Lucia's teacher, Raimondo (Osborne 1996: 241-242).

Unlike many operas with complex plots, the story of *Lucia di Lammermoor* is simple: the lives of the young lovers are relentlessly destroyed by the impositions of the family. The main characters are accurately sketched and their fate is apparent from the beginning, while the narrative is strong and clear. All this allows the audience to follow this epic legend without distraction. Madness, hallucinations, murder and the ghost, place the opera in the intense romantic, gothic style. Moreover, it is the first opera that does not bring its protagonist back from the brink of madness. In previous operas, the mad woman returned to sanity through love or through the guidance of a man, yet Lucia is the first to break that tradition (Ashbrook 1982: 375, Sorba, 2006:600, Esse 2009: 85, Armstrong 2016: 10, Menzies 2016: 5). The opera was established and contributed to the vogue for romantic tragedy in Italian opera. In 1839, Donizetti adapted the opera for the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris. In this adaptation, the opera contributed to the formation of the 19th century French culture. Now, at the beginning of the opera, a more detailed description of the background of the plot is given. Otherwise, however, it is not superior to the original Italian work (Ashbrook 1982: 381-382).

Roberto Devereux (1837)

This opera in three acts was commissioned by the impresario Barbagia for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. The librettist was one of the most prominent librettists of his time, Salvatore Camarano with a rich theatrical background. Donizetti considered him only Romani's subordinate but enjoyed working with him more than Romani (Fralick 1985: 45).

Camarano managed to provide a well formed libretto based on two sources: Romani's libretto for Mercantade's *Il Conte d'Essex* (1833) and Ancelot's play *Elisabeth d'Angleterre* (1829) (Ibid: 47).

The fact that his sources were already dramatized, perhaps explains Camarano's well-structured libretto. Although Elizabeth is the primary character of the opera, the other main characters are equally important to the plot. Of the operas he wrote about Elizabeth, this one portrays her most fully as it portrays the contrast between her royal power and feminine vulnerability. Donizetti was in a bad psychological condition when he wrote this particular opera as he had just lost his wife and their baby to the cholera epidemic that was plaguing his country (Ibid: 46).

Roberto Devereux was one of the last operas that Donizetti wrote for the Italian stage and one of the first he prepared for production in Paris after he settled there in 1838. It represents the composer's fully mature style near the height of his career. His sensitivity to the performance of the text and dramatization is clearly visible (Ashbrook 1982: 407, Fralick 1985: 45).

4.2 Conclusions regarding Donizetti's serious operas with thematology taken from the history of England

The first two operas with thematology taken from the history of England are conservatively written with a happy ending. But *Anna Bolena*, the first opera in the Tudor's Queen trilogy follows, showing Donizetti's

increasing preoccupation with sombre themes. And the rest of the operas in the trilogy are in a strong romantic style, as is *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Of the operas he wrote about Elizabeth, the one that portrays her most completely is *Roberto Devereux*. In this last opera, Elizabeth changes from a reserved but lovable woman to an enraged queen. She is wounded by a sense of betrayal both of her position in leadership and as a woman. She almost disintegrates as she is racked with remorse and consumed by revenge visions.

On the other hand, in *Il Castello di Kenilworth*, Elizabeth's change from grandeur to leniency is not fully explained. It is justified only by the fact that the opera was being performed for the Queen's birthday and that she was present at its premiere. Finally, in *Maria Stuarda*, her majesty and caprice are wonderfully portrayed but the title character, *Stuarda*, prevents her from being knocked off that pedestal (Ashbrook 1982: 401).

5. General conclusions

Examining Donizetti's trajectory regarding the serious operas with themes from the Moorish Kingdom and the history of England, reveals that the composer often conformed to the conventions of his time and to the restrictions of censorship. He matured relatively slowly in his work and he proved not to be a great renovator. But he tried, and ultimately succeeded, in unfolding his inclination for dynamic plots and in creating a highly personal dramatic style. Thus, he eventually influenced the development of romantic opera both in Italy and in Paris, justifying Mario Pieri's characterization that Donizetti is the first purely romantic composer. (Pieri 2003: 263).

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