

Long may they reign: Donizetti's glorious "Three Queens"

By Roger Pines



The physically and emotionally spent Queen Elizabeth I (Sondra Radvanovsky) in the final moments of *Roberto Devereux*, Metropolitan Opera, 2015|16 season.

The Tudor era has attracted opera composers for nearly two centuries. While the great man himself does get the title role in Saint-Saëns's *Henry VIII*, it's the women who have the lion's share of operatic glory, especially in the works of Gaetano Donizetti. At least four of his more than 60 operas focus on women who left an indelible mark on English and Scottish history: *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth*, *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereux* (yes, that last opera has the male lead as its title, but Queen Elizabeth I is certainly the true protagonist). *Elisabetta* is second-drawer Donizetti and exceedingly rarely encountered onstage, but the others find the composer in top form and have been widely heard internationally. Commonly known as "The Tudor Queens," they present Anne Boleyn, Mary Stuart, and Elizabeth I as truly memorable personalities. Each presents a massive challenge to even the most accomplished interpreter of bel canto repertoire, in which beauty of voice and superb technique must combine

to produce passionate, achingly sincere expressiveness.

You may be devoted to these three from what you've read (the amount of authoritative scholarly material on them is overwhelming) or how you've seen them portrayed onscreen by such brilliant actresses as Bette Davis, Glenda Jackson, Vanessa Redgrave, Helen Mirren, and more recently Saoirse Ronan and Margot Robbie. If you pride yourself on everything you know about the period, it's perhaps best to forget most of it, given the enormous liberties each libretto takes with historical accuracy. Certainly, though, we can declare that the operas remain absolutely true to the spirit of these women and do them full justice.

Lyric's presentation of "The Three Queens" places the operas not just in the order in which they were written, but in the order that the specific events of the operas took place: the executions of Anne in 1536, Mary in 1587, and 14 years later Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex.



Gaetano Donizetti at the height of his career, painted by Giuseppe Rillosi.

any text with exquisite simplicity. In *Anna Bolena* he had a great tragic actress in Giuditta Pasta, who'd go on to create *Norma* for Vincenzo Bellini.

This work uses all the conventional elements of bel canto opera – the cavatina (a slow, reflective aria) and the cabaletta (a livelier, showier aria immediately following the cavatina) – as well as large-scale duets, trios, and huge ensemble finales. At the same time, and especially in the superb final scene, Donizetti takes some very bold steps that help to make *Anna Bolena*, for its time, something of a musical trailblazer.

The scene begins, predictably enough, with a quiet, legato chorus sung by Anne's devoted ladies. What follows, however, is a huge surprise: an almost-mad scene in which the condemned Anne, awaiting execution, relives her wedding to Henry, but then imagines herself being forgiven by her first love, Richard Percy. Anne's music here, much of it *a cappella*, wonderfully reveals her wandering thoughts and painful vulnerability. The emotions are extreme, with the soprano needing to respond line by line as would any great stage actress.

Following this extended recitative is the loveliest, most touching moment of the entire opera: Anne's cavatina beginning "Al dolce guidami al castel natio" ("Take me back to the pleasant

Anna Bolena wasn't the first success of Donizetti's career, but it made his name throughout Europe as no other work had done prior to the premiere at Milan's Teatro Carcano in 1830. Donizetti wasn't always fortunate in his librettists, but he certainly was in this case with the vastly experienced, enormously respected Felice Romani. Nine years older than his composer colleague, Romani shaped

castle where I was born"), in which she's overcome by nostalgia for her youth and her first days of love. Donizetti's spellbinding legato communicates truly luminous sweetness, with the soprano tracing the lines as if sculpting the most delicate figurine. One of Donizetti's supreme tests for the singer comes close to the end, when Donizetti asks her to ascend softly on a coruscatingly decorated phrase all the up to a floated high A.

But there are more challenges for Anne ahead. First, when the men who love her appear – Percy, the court singer Smeton, and Anne's brother Lord Rochford – she's able to join her voice with theirs in a prayer for an end to her suffering. To insert a simple, heartfelt quartet at this point in the drama was a brilliant stroke by Donizetti, since it offers a welcome breather after such emotional stress and a calm before the final vocal fireworks.

And when those fireworks come, it's a real barrage, in the form of Anne's mighty cabaletta, "Coppia iniqua" ("Wicked pair"). Here she proclaims that, rather than call down vengeance on Henry and his new bride, she'll go to her grave "with pardon on my lips." Donizetti's music asks his heroine to slash through sequences of electrifying trills and wild bursts of coloratura, while digging deeply and vehemently into the text.

Even more than *Anna Bolena*, many liberties with history are taken in *Maria Stuarda*. For example, there was no romance between Mary and the Earl of Leicester at all, whereas this is an essential element of the opera. And Lord Cecil certainly wasn't viciously intent on seeing Mary executed. The opera's turning point is the in-person confrontation between Mary and Elizabeth (also a vital part of the Schiller play on which *Maria Stuarda* was based), but, in fact, it never took place, since the two never met!

That confrontation is the source of the most famous anecdote associated with this opera. The story goes that, in a rehearsal for the Naples premiere, sopranos Giuseppina Ronzi di Begnis (Mary) and Anna Del Serre (Elizabeth) got into a knock-down, drag-out fight onstage, right after Mary vilified Elizabeth as a "vil bastarda" ("vile bastard"). Apparently the fracas started with Del Serre smacking Ronzi di Begnis in the face and the situation then worsened, with each lady



Three extraordinary divas: (far left) Giuditta Pasta, pictured as Anne Boleyn, a role she created; (middle) Maria Malibran, who created the title role of *Maria Stuarda*; (left) Giuseppina Ronzi di Begnis, the first Elizabeth I in *Roberto Devereux*.



Sondra Radvanovsky in the final scene of *Maria Stuarda*, Metropolitan Opera, 2015|16 season.

screaming with jealousy and calling her rival utterly unworthy of Donizetti's favor.

At the dress rehearsal for the premiere, the Queen of Naples fainted at the point in the opera where Mary hears that she is to be executed. Then and there, the King cancelled all the performances. Donizetti, resourceful composer that he was, employed another libretto entitled *Buondelmonte* and adapted the *Maria Stuarda* score to it. The cobbled-together work opened with the same cast a few months later, but it was a failure. Once the Milan censors approved the libretto, the opera could premiere in 1835 at La Scala with that era's most wildly acclaimed diva, the ravishing Maria Malibran, in the title role.

The prima donna takes wing in *Maria Stuarda*'s third act: first, in a duet in which the courtier Talbot – who's also a priest! – hears her confession, and then in the opera's magnificent final scene. As in *Anna Bolena*, this scene is somewhat unconventionally structured. It, too, opens with a somber chorus, this one rather larger-scale than that of *Anna Bolena*, but here again, a group of the condemned woman's supporters are expressing their deep concern. When the dignified Mary appears, she asks everyone to join her in a prayer. Donizetti refers to it in the score as the "Inno della Morte," "Hymn of Death," but it's wonderfully majestic and uplifting. This is Mary's greatest test in the opera: she must sustain a top G over the chorus at a stately tempo for 21 beats and then, in the same breath, ascend note by note to a high B-flat. It's a moment in which shining, rock-steady tone must be colored by an air of total serenity.

Mary has two more major challenges: a brief but exquisite aria, in which she magnanimously asks heaven to bless Elizabeth and her people; and then a second aria, this one a farewell to her companion, Hannah Kennedy, and the Earl of Leicester. This isn't about vocal display at all: it's vivid, nobly conceived music, very much anticipating early Verdi in the dramatic, thrusting power of each phrase. It sets the seal on a scene that a great American scholar of bel canto, William Ashbrook,

praised for the composer's ability "to communicate the drama with a soaring directness balanced by moments of lyrical expansiveness that strike the listener with the force of truth." The leading lady of the aborted *Stuarda* premiere, grand-voiced Giuseppina Ronzi di Begnis, led the cast of the first *Roberto Devereux* – again, at Naples, in 1838. This is Donizetti at his mature best, creating in Elizabeth a characterization to rank with Bellini's *Norma* in its sheer vocal grandeur and complexity of emotion. The title character, the Earl of Essex, is one of the most misguided figures in English history, given his rashness in overestimating his power over the Queen. In contrast to real life, the opera centers on the Queen's desperate jealousy regarding Essex's infatuation with Sarah, Duchess of Nottingham. That liaison didn't exist in history – the real Duchess was a woman roughly the same age as the Queen herself! The Duke, until Essex betrays him, is the Earl's great friend in the opera, whereas the real men had no relationship at all, amicable or otherwise.

The harrowing final scene opens with a deeply moving cavatina for Elizabeth. Here the singer has the challenge of pouring feeling out of himself, shaping the lines with the utmost expressive power. In this aria, "Vivi, ingrato" ("Live, you ungrateful man"), the monarch is able to reveal all the anguish of unrequited love. The great moment comes when she declares, "Let no one say he has seen the Queen of England weeping." Here the line plunges in a startling arpeggio from top A to bottom D, which only serves to emphasize the emotional strain for her at this moment.

There's no "bridge" number between that aria to the concluding one – just the dramatic intervention of the Nottinghams, through which Elizabeth confirms, to her horror, that her friend Sarah was her rival *and* that Essex is dead. At this point, any element of elaborate technical dexterity would have been singularly inappropriate; the Queen is beyond devastated, and it takes all the emotional strength acquired over her turbulent lifetime to survive this moment. As she bitterly castigates the Duke and Sarah, then envisions Essex's head and her own tomb, the huge phrases should emerge from her with positively monumental power. It seems a rather surprising afterthought that, in her final seconds of singing, she suddenly adds, "Let James be King of England," although he didn't assume the throne until the death of Elizabeth in March 1603, two years after Essex's execution.

For anyone who appreciates dramatic power and resplendent vocalism in Italian opera, "The Three Queens" is a unique gift. A company can undertake such a project only when the right singer comes along. After well over a century of neglect, these operas gradually were restored to favor, beginning with Maria Callas singing *Anna Bolena* in 1957, and then all three operas subsequently in the performances of such exceptional sopranos as Beverly Sills, Leyla Gencer, Montserrat Caballé, and more recently Mariella Devia. All who attend the Lyric performances can rejoice that in Sondra Radvanovsky we have a similarly extraordinary artist who has taken her rightful place in the glorious tradition of these operas. **L**

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