

Avant la lettre
L'Ange de Nisida

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Don't you think we need a new term? What about *Before Donizetti*?

The degrees of authenticity used by the great auction houses are really most helpful: if the author's name is printed *in full* in their catalogues, in capitals and in large script one can bid with confidence knowing that this painting or sculpture is truly authentic as viewed by their experts. If the name is printed in lower case, in italics, inverted commas or with a prefix like: "*school of...*" or "*attributed to...*" and so on, then the work is more dubious, speculative or suspect in some way, and not transparently attributable to the stated author.

"*After Rembrandt*" is easy enough, it is an imitation work by a follower. But what about music? If the *manuscript* of *L'Ange de Nisida* could come under the hammer we should not be in any doubt of its authenticity, it is in the hand of the composer. In performance however, the issue is not so transparent: we in our seats need to be wise *before* as well as *after* the event: Donizetti supplied an outline only, not in any way a finished work of art.

It is not a matter of *topos*. The Bergamasc maestro wrote his manuscript scores wherever he felt so inclined, *en route* between cities, in bed, maybe after a meal surrounded by dirty dishes on the dining table of a friend (according to one famously unreliable legend à propos *La Favorite*) but he *composed* his operas on stage - they became a theatrical reality only during rehearsal. A few years ago, the lamented Philip Gossett came up with a fundamental critique of all such tardy resurrections from autograph sources:

"... *if there's going to be a problem about this work joining the Donizetti canon it will be because it was never rehearsed under the composer's guiding eye...*"

noting that when he edited *Don Pasquale* he saw at first-hand how many changes Donizetti wrote into the score during rehearsal. In the case of one example of unperformed music:

"*We have no idea what he might have come up with had he taken it through a rehearsal period...*"

All performance reliant upon holograph manuscript, however meticulous and enlightened is like going to a flower-show and being offered a packet of seeds with a glossy picture on the cover. Authenticity? A post-dated blossoming of this kind must be taken with a pinch of fertilizer. *Donizetti* is something you may well hear with pleasure in the coming days - maybe even GAETANO DONIZETTI

but **DOMENICO GAETANO MARIA DONIZETTI**
is not, alas, anything you can ever get!