

Donizetti intimo

Trema Bisanzio!

Who and what did the composer have in mind with this cry? Enigmatic as a plot, born as a puzzle, *Belisario* is the most oddly timed opera in the Donizettian canon. “*Strong love*” he said he wanted but this is precisely what he did not get. *Belisario* is his one truly Byzantine argument.

Very few operas can have been born under such a brilliant star. The maestro himself wrote that he intended to set Cammarano’s shelved *Belisario* on the actual day that *Lucia di Lammermoor* made her début in Naples and brought him instant fame (even if the date of his letter has been disputed¹), thus, the long-held belief that Donizetti only decided to tackle the forgotten text by his overjoyed collaborator in the euphoric wake of *Lucia* is completely untrue. The libretto of *Belisario* had been offered to Barbaja in 1833 - two years before - as an example of his poetic skills, Cammarano was hoping to get the official post left vacant by Domenico Gilardoni, but Barbaja had turned it down.

Nor had Donizetti ever shown any particular enthusiasm for this bitter tale of revenge and betrayal - or so at least it has always been presumed. We were wrong. The initial puzzle, however, is due to something else entirely:

AI LETTORI

Fu base di questo lavoro, che oso offrirvi, una Tragedia di Holbein, che il valenta Artista Drammatica Luigi Marchionni ridusse per le Scene Italiane.

Il Belisario di Holbein, pari a quello della Storia, colse ovunque allori copiosi e meritati; reputerò il mio non meno avventuroso, se Voi, delle cose Teatrali integri e scienti giudici, gli accorderete una sola fronda di quegli allori.

Vivete Felici.

L'AUTORE

So reads the preface to the printed libretto of *Belisario* for its Venetian prima on 4 February 1836, and very charmingly put it is, but it is anything but true, the opera is not based on Holbein.² The romantic stage owed almost everything to a very small number of people, one of the most adept of whom was the journeyman/playwright/actor Luigi Marchionni (1791-1851) who was a lynch-pin for libretti. The leader of a family troupe whose interminable provincial tours disgorged an incredible amount of undistinguished dramatic fare to gullible audiences, with plots and texts he himself prepared, he kept his ear close to the ground for new ideas. That these were shallow plays lowered to the tastes of largely unsophisticated clients full of posturing and arcane situations did not deter him in the least. That most of them were purloined from foreign authors or rival companies or from fleeting ballets was no impediment - a

¹ His letter (Z.176^a) is dated “28 sett. 1835” but the prima of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Teatro S. Carlo was two days earlier.

² Franz Ignaz Holbein (1779-1859). No Belisarius is listed among his plays.

regular transfusion from unacknowledged sources was necessary for his survival. He was a clever plagiariser and his web was widespread, lachrymose sentimentality and gothic gobbledygook lifted from the dregs of the Paris backstreet theatres kept him going for the most part. The fact is, Marchionni was only *just* respectable.

No doubt this was the root cause of Cammarano's problem with his *Belisario*. In this instance Luigi Marchionni had dared look further than usual: filching a comparatively new play from under the nose of its author - a tetchy government official from Munich - risked reprisals in all the important parts of the peninsula. Cammarano took pains to conceal the source of his plot, hence its attribution to "Holbein" which is nothing more than an unadulterated red herring: Marchionni's play 'Belisario' (published in one of the compilations of 'L'Ape teatrale') and the libretto by Salvatore Cammarano for Donizetti, were based on the *Trauerspiel* 'Belisar' by the Bavarian Staatsmann und Dichter Eduard von Schenk (1778-1841) a stiff-necked official who was not at all amused by this theft of his intellectual property. The play had first been performed at Munich in 1820.

But this false note is only an aside. Though he had every reason to be on top of the world with *Lucia* Donizetti chose to cap his success with a score that is amongst the darkest of all his output - a bitter saga with an angry agenda even if clothed in the most compelling music at his disposal.

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The run-up to that abortive summer season in Naples had been unusually fraught, not only had *Lucia* suffered infuriating delays before emerging in glory but the letters preceding her debut are full of frustration and foreboding. The most revealing of these, and the one that most presupposes his choice of *Belisario* is dated 14 July 1835, well before *Lucia*, and is addressed to Simon Mayr:

"M^o Pregiat.mo

*Ma come? Il Sig. Andrea non ha di me nuove? Eh, non è vero! Egli avrà forse già traccannato ciò che pagar gli feci, ed inebbiato, non avrà capito la bestialità che andava a dire, cioè che di me novelle non avea. Di Giuseppe ne sono io pure digiuno, e non è il viaggio dell'orto come si suol dire, che se i venti son contrari, troppo tempo vola prima di averne la felice nuova dell'arrivo. Basta, spero presto però sapere l'annunzio per mezzo di Mr. Jourin qui dimorante, e possidente in Bizanzio."*³

The opera due to emerge was a tale of family discord. Exactly how much of the angst outlined above got into his *Belisario*? What would the opera represent? Opera as catharsis? When he should have been resting on his laurels at the height of his powers the composer found himself writing the most accusatory and conflictual opera of his career, focussed upon betrayal, bitter calumny, blindness and disaster.

The historical Belisario abandoned his son on a distant beach, Gaetano - a son who had outgrown his humble roots and discarded his impoverished home - agonised over filial deficiency from the moment he left Bergamo till the end of his life. Now, faced with parental illness and high on guilt he would bring these deficiencies to a boil. In

³ Z.169^a "*Costantinopoli*" was the habitual name.

this instance the single word in his letter “*Bizanzio*” is a telling signpost in the indictment - most especially of his brother Giuseppe, whose absence in an alien Empire, and, in Gaetano's view - whose devious inconsequence and neglect of his filial duties left much to be desired. “*Trema Bisanzio!*” as it emerges has more than one interpretation. But not in isolation, in combination with his own permanent self-reproach. There is, in fact, something very specifically biographical in the underlying mood and choice of plot of *Belisario* which encompasses his father's death in December 1835; Virginia's childbirth (and the death of her baby son); his mother's collapse followed by her death too (shortly after the *prima*), and the festering dismay at his increasingly precarious situation in Naples. A continual awareness of disaster and reproach that came to a climax within the family orbit. Heralded by this trail of catastrophe and embarrassments, *Belisario* proved to be not just a painful example of “*il vero*” in the Verdian sense of being concerned with real people, real events and real emotions on the stage, but revealed a core of all-too-tangible resentments underlying its musical substance. In this sense, his determination to choose *Belisario* to succeed *Lucia di Lammermoor*, is of real import to his cause and motivation, however undeclared.

And then the opera's morbid traumatic genesis could not have been more pessimistic. Its comrade-in-arms was the *Requiem per Bellini* whose affecting score and that of *Belisario* had lain side-by-side on his desk while he was writing them - with the liturgical twin never quite coming to fruition. Maria Malibran was an active ingredient too, this is doubly clear. Not only is she the dedicatee of his *Lamento per la morte di Bellini*, his song ‘*Venne sull'ali ai zeffiri*’ with its text by Andrea Maffei which he published at the end of 1835, but was pointed by her wilful antics at the *prima* of *Maria Stuarda* in the carnival of 1836 - leading to its virtual dismissal and putting a term to a score he knew to be exemplary. Her behaviour was an attack upon his integrity (like that of Antonina upon *Belisario*) which, en route for Venice, certainly played a part in the vehemence and scorching contempt with which he characteristically embellishes the long long cantilena for his glorious anti-heroine.

How far, and how factually, can a hidden agenda of this speculative nature be pursued? Not very far. But he was to continue with his sniping:

“*Non voglio fare il minchione come il Bey mio fratello che dopo avere guadagnato più di me forse, so ne stà nell'antica Bisanzio a grattarsi la pancia fra la peste, ed il palo*” he was to write to Dolci a little later (letter Z.316 of 13 November 1838).

The above derision of his brother in Istanbul is based on what? Disappointment? Disenchantment? Frustration? In no way could their real musical paths actually collide. Perhaps it was simply an elder brother syndrome - an indulgence in family humour with no direct relationship to his current problems except for its venerable site? Did Giuseppe Donizetti Pasha earn more than his famous sibling? Surely not, and the former would be obliged to lean upon his cadet for all posterity.

But then their dysfunctional family conflict may, however inadvertently, have led to a masterpiece so we should be content with that.

Alexander Weatherson