

# MADAME STOLTZ RECONSIDERED

“*Riveduta*” possibly?

Alexander Weatherson

That their relations began badly, and ended worse, we all know, but there was hope even for Rosine Stoltz. Or so it would seem. After Donizetti had pronounced in 1840 that the key role of Héléne in *Le Duc d'Albe* was in no way suitable for her voice, there was a seismic shift worthy of any operatic Richter scale. His views momentarily turned upside down in nothing less than a monstrous *U turn*. Moreover, from the evidence of his letters we find that this was not the only opera he was ready to tailor to her perfectly unbearable gifts. She was a mezzo-soprano of great vocal ability, beautiful and talented and had a remarkable scenic allure. All these things, Donizetti was ready to concede. In every other respect she was detestable.

The change of tack is truly extraordinary. At the end of December 1841<sup>i</sup> he could be writing to Michele Accursi “*Non far per dio che io entri in un imbroglio con dar la parte alla Stoltz – Nò, per dio, la musica fatta non ci sta, ed io non voglio sacrificar un’opera pel gusto di essere agreable a Mad.me.*”

But the wind was to change: only four weeks later, at the end of January 1842, he would be dashing off anew to Accursi in his breathless mixture of Italian and French<sup>ii</sup> “*Anch’io son d’avviso che nel Duca d’Alba vi è qualche modificazione a fare, un po’ meno potente la cospirazione, un poco più caldo l’amore; del resto io avrei immaginato dover riuscire di grand’effetto: avevo sopra tutto carezzato il rôle della donna; rôle nuovo forse in teatro, rôle di azione, mentre quasi sempre la donna è passiva. Qui, giovane entusiasta, amante, una Giovanna d’Arco. E io imaginava che Mad.Stoltz vi sarebbe stata ammirabile, perchè vi sono molte e molte situazioni che mi sembrano avermi ispirato, e son certo che più bel rôle di donna e più nuovo non l’ho mai avuto. Infine che un uomo odiato da tutti, da tutti fuggito, a cui non rimane che una sola speranza, un solo affetto, l’amor del figlio che deve consolarlo etc etc., discenda fino alla bassezza per sentirsi chiamar Padre, mi pare teatrale e drammatico. Le nom de Père dans la bouche de son fils, pour lui c’est une consolation nouvelle, c’est la preuve que le cœur lui reviendra aussi; del resto ne parleremo con Pillet e Scribe e decideremo.*”

Without a pause adding the following lines to this unprecedented *volte face*: “*La Stoltz nel rôle di Antonina era Madre ma madre giovane che ispira amore; se non lo vuole prenda il simpatico rôle di Irene, a cui si adatta la nuova aria, che ho fatto per lei – bien.*”

“*Ispira amore*”? Two big blows in succession. The second of these statements was not entirely out of the blue, we are well aware from earlier letters that *Belisario* had been mooted for Paris. But in 1842 and with Rosine Stoltz in the role of Antonina? Or, even more improbably, with her singing the role of her daughter Irene and being supplied with a new aria! We know that Mechetti in Vienna published a *Scena e cavatina* ‘*Spari dagli occhi il pianto*’ by Mercadante for insertion into *Belisario* but this is going even further into the realms of fantasy. Has this “*nuova aria*” for Irene/Stoltz survived? Did Donizetti intend that his 1836 masterpiece should appear at the Opéra? In *French*?



**Rosine Stoltz (née Victorine Noël 1815-1903)**

*Belisario* in fact surfaced in Paris at the Théâtre Italien on 24 October 1843 with Giulia Grisi as Antonina. And we do know that in the libretto for the first staging of *Belisario* at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London later in 1843 when the role of Irene was sung by Fanny Tachinardi-Persiani (far-more celebrated a Donizettian diva than Rosine Stoltz<sup>iii</sup> and a casting which *might* have included new music of this importance) that nothing of the sort is included in the printed text. But in many of the published libretti there is in Parte III Sc.VI a narration<sup>iv</sup> for Irene responding to Giustiniano and Antonina’s questioning and recounting in detail Belisario’s triumph - beginning ‘*La china d’erto colle, che sovrasta al campo*’- a discursive piece which *could* have been set or reset - and then too there is her cavatina in the *Introduzione* which *could* have been given new music while retaining its original text. Both of which

items might have been describable as a “*nuova aria*”. But this is pure conjecture.

As for *Le Duc d’Albe*. So he had changed his mind about this fabled sacred monster of the Académie royale de Musique? This *maitresse-femme* (“Rosy” she called herself) with its inert director and lover - the complaisant Léon Pillet she so triumphantly led on a leash. An opera with “*qualche modificazione*” and with La Stoltz in the guise of a Joan of Arc? Incredible. That *Le Duc d’Albe* still remained in orbit is in itself somewhat baffling in view of the timetable. True, Charles de Boigne gives the following list of works on his desk for 1842-43<sup>v</sup>:

*Dom Sébastien*  
*Caterina Cornaro*  
*Maria di Rohan*  
*Don Pasquale*  
*Gabrielle de Vergi*  
*La Duc d’Albe*  
*Una Farza inedita*

and as these were in the recollection of a “*compagnon de riz au lait*” we must take them seriously, but that Rosy was capable of “*più caldo l’amore*” and “*entusiasta*” is even less credible than that of the “*rôle de azione*” she was here allotted. As for her being a source of inspiration for the “*più bel rôle di donna e più nuovo non l’ho mai avuto*” this is truly amazing! Can it be possible, do you think, that he had - if very briefly - fallen for this well-turned ankle? He favoured mezzo-sopranos as we have learned to know. Did he actually ask Scribe for changes to the libretto? Or ask Pillet for “*modificazione*” of any kind whatsoever.<sup>vi</sup> This we may never be able to decide.

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<sup>i</sup> *Studi Donizettiani* 1 (Bergamo 1962), Letter 85, 74

<sup>ii</sup> op cit Letter 88, 80

<sup>iii</sup> Antonina in this London edition was sung by Adelaide Moltini

<sup>iv</sup> In “*virgolati*” in the prima edition of the opera and often cut in revivals but it was sung - according to printed sources - at Firenze in 1840-41 (as the “*nuova aria*”?)

<sup>v</sup> Charles de Boigne *Petits Mémoires de l’Opéra* (Paris 1857), 207

<sup>vi</sup> There are no detectable alterations of this kind to the autograph score