

IL VEDOVO SOLITARIO

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It is not very often that we can trace the steps of Donizetti as a teacher. We know of the affection and championship of Nicola De Giosa, of his impact upon Antonio Buzzola, on Giuseppe Puzone, on Salvatore Sarmiento, Nicola Gabrielli, Salvatore Agnelli and Matteo Salvi, even something about the elusive relationship with that Uranio Fontana who was to make such an odd transcription of the maestro's incomplete *Elisabeth*, but nothing very substantial in the way of actual evidence as to his methods and practices in the classroom, especially in Naples where he taught for a few precious years at the Conservatorio di S. Pietro a Majella.ⁱ

A touching witness survives however on the shelves of the Nosedà Collection in the Milan Conservatorio Library (T.51), the by-no-means unknown score and parts of *Il vedovo solitario*, a melodramma (or farsa) in one act, exhibited in Bergamo in 1897 as an opera by "Donizetti" but rightly dismissed by scholars as nothing of the sort. Indeed the score is not by Donizetti at all, but, I suggest, by his pupils, and has been corrected – quite briefly in some cases and quite entertainingly too – by the maestro in his didactic guise. The first "red herring" is how it came to be written. Did the great composer propose to the Teatro Nuovo in Naples that a *pasticcio* opera by his most talented pupils would be good enough to have a staging? And who supplied the amusing text? It was not by Donizetti, it would seem, capable as he was of writing such a text, as the manuscript libretto also survives in the same archive and is in a very different hand. Was it purely and simply an exercise? But the *parts* supply evidence to the contrary. It looks very much as though the score could have been allotted to six students, each one writing a complete section; there is a *Sinfonia*; an *Introduzione*; two *Terzetti*; a *Duetto Buffo*, and a *Finaletto* – on the opening page of which is inscribed faintly the name of De Giosa. Nicola De Giosa entered the Naples Conservatorio in the same year that Donizetti became Professor of Composition and was then fifteen years of age.ⁱⁱ

A precocious student himself, and always attentive to the incomparable education he had received from Mayr, Donizetti would have been the very first to expound a fully professional exposure for his students at the very tenderest age. The Teatro Nuovo? One of the mid-score pages of *Il vedovo solitario* is inscribed "*Da Rappresentarsi nel nel Teatro Nuovo*". That the Nuovo in Naples was intended and not any other of the innumerable "new"

theatres elsewhere in the peninsula is amply demonstrated by the set of manuscript parts ready prepared for singers whose names are appended in manuscript at the head of each one. Thus we learn that *Sgra. Checcherini* (either Francesca or Marianna) was to sing *Ancilla: Casaccia* (either Carlo or Raffaele) was to sing that of the *Padre*, and another *Casaccia* – which of the vast clan was intended is anyone’s guess – was allotted that of *Lubino*; *Anselmo* was to be sung by *Barbiere* (or Barbieri), and *Gaetano De Nicola* was to sing *Sor Filippo*. As these were all permanent stars in the Nuovo firmament of Naples the intended venue is clear enough.

How appropriate it would have been if, for example, Raffaele Casaccia was the intended widower – as later he would take the title role in De Giosa’s *Don Checco*, his most successful opera which would enchant that same Nuovo audience in 1850. But they were all experts, the crème-de-la-crème of comedy in Naples, if this *Vedovo solitario* was to be the work of his pupils, they would have had the very best.

So far so good but was it ever performed? Now comes the second “red herring” of this mysterious score. On the same page is also inscribed (in the same hand?) “*Xbre del 32*”. Too early both for Donizetti as a teacher in Naples and too early for De Giosa as a pupil in his charge. With the aid of John Black’s as yet (scandalously) unpublished complete chronology of the Naples theatres in these years it is possible to establish that no *Vedovo solitario* came before the public in that month. Dr Black gives the following listing for the Nuovo in October 1832:

La famiglia indiana (1,10,23)
Il ciabattino medico (2,8,11,14, 21,22,25,28)
La cenerentola (4,5,6,7,12)
Aladino (13)
Il ventaglio (15,26,29)
Torvaldo e Dorliska (16,17,18,19, 27)
Quattro prigionieri (20)
La vendemmia (20,23,26)
Il barbiere di Siviglia (30,31)

which scarcely leaves room for any educational extras. Even if “*Xbre del 32*” is taken to mean December 1832 (which is sometimes the case) the listing of operas at the Teatro Nuovo is no more helpful, the theatre was closed between 16 and 24 December as usual, otherwise the listing is as follows:

Il ventaglio (1,12)
Il barbiere di Siviglia (2,5,27)

Ospitalità e vendetta (3)
La vendemmia (3)
L'inganno felice (4)
Le metamorfosi per amore (4)
Il ciabattino medico (6,26,31)
Il nuovo Figaro (8.9.10.11.13,14,15,25,29,30)

which leaves only 7 and 28 without recorded performances. Nor has Dr Black been able to trace any Neapolitan operas in the entire period 1822-1848 with *Vedovo* in the title. There have been plenty of *widows* as might have been expected:

- - **delirante** (at the Nuovo 1823,1824)
- - **di un vivo** (at the Partenope 1832 inc. October)
- (at the Fenice 1833)
- (at the Nuovo 1835)
- - **eremita** (at the Fenice 1827)
- - **scaltra** (at the Nuovo 1831)
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- but no widowers at all.
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- This particular widower could no doubt, as he suggests, have been staged under an alternative title, but the list of roles gives no hint of any such thing. The opera could too have been a purely private affair but with such a roster of singers this seems unlikely. More probably "*Xbre del 32*" is simply wrong, or simply a deduction, and there is also the possibility that the *Duetto Buffo* which bears this inscription was in fact begun earlier and that the project was one which Donizetti inherited as a teacher, rather than initiated himself (teachers are prone to this sort of thing).
- The score itself gives no real clue as to the date of composition. It is a bound oblong manuscript of 171 pages with the order of scoring of the primo Ottocento. Each of its sections is in a different script, the *Sinfonia* thick and clumsy (but without corrections so no doubt a Fair Copy despite its uningratiating appearance). Other sections are more tentative, the second *Terzetto* gives the impression that the master has taken a bold initiative; did he actually write in the vocal line beforehand and ask the student to orchestrate it? It would be no more than logical as he wrote his own scores in this way especially at that stage of his career (*viz* the unfinished *Adelaide* in the Bibliothèque Nationale). In another case he has, conversely, supplied additional orchestration. In the *Introduzione* Donizetti – if Donizetti it is – seems to have initiated a dialogue with his

pupil, quite the most entertaining sections are those where the master and pupil have turned to the text to point the situation between them: the pupil writing in – as the libretto dictates *Si! Si! Si! Si!* and Donizetti countering – equally as indicated in the libretto *Nò! Nò! Nò! Nò!* In another place Donizetti has contributed a greeting: *Buongiorno padre!* to which the pupil has responded, and with a decided relish: *Addio figlia!* Clearly lessons with their genial teacher were both instructive and fun. No wonder they loved him.

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If the hypothetical genesis of *Il vedovo solitario* can be sustained - if in fact it was the celebrated Donizetti in the act of masterminding a *pasticcio* opera on behalf of his students - it can only have been undertaken between 1834 and the day of 30 July 1837ⁱⁱⁱ after which it would have been simply too painful for the bereft composer even to contemplate. Was this last fateful occurrence the reason for its disappearance – its absolute obliteration from the hearts and minds of everyone concerned?

And which of Donizetti's pupils or their offspring was able to identify the score as one worked upon by the master when it came to the Memorial Exhibition at Bergamo in 1897? Where did it come from? Here, once again, the vital clue may lie with Nicola De Giosa. To the very end of his days this loyal and gifted pupil sustained the memory of the splendid Bergamasc, dying even with his name on his lips according to Alfredo Giovine's affectionate biography. Could the score have been among those sold from De Giosa's house when he was ill in 1882 by a "*donna di fiducia*" who disposed of his papers "... *a involgere salumi e formaggi*"?

When De Giosa discovered his loss he lamented "*Non tanto per i manoscritti...ma per i consigli e gli appunti che i miei maestri Ruggi, Zingarelli, e Donizetti avevano posto sui fogli di musica*"^{iv}

All his life De Giosa recalled his famous teacher and his school now in decline: "*Povero collegio*" he could write "*Oh Tempi famosi di Donizetti*"

- A score like *Il vedovo solitario* supplies more questions than answers. Only one factor is incontestable: at the end of his stay in Naples Donizetti, alas, was the most unhappy vedovo solitario of them all.

ⁱ Donizetti became Professor of Composition at the Conservatorio di S. Pietro a Majella in 1834. Though he abandoned the post in 1838 it was not filled by a replacement until February 1845 when Carlo Conti was appointed in his place

ⁱⁱ Nicola (or Niccola) De Giosa (1819-1885), later a prominent composer and conductor, born in Bari, he spent much of his career in the Parthenopean city

ⁱⁱⁱ Virginia Donizetti died on 30 July 1837

^{iv} Alfredo Giovine *Niccola de Giosa* (Bari 1968), 24 In the Biblioteca Sagarriga Visconti Volpi di Bari is a complete manuscript score of *Le due regine* which turns out to be nothing less than a manuscript of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* with additional music written on top by De Giosa

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