

L' Enfant du miracle

Rita and her poet

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Posthumous child of his fervent last decade *Rita* was conceived on the Grand Boulevards of Paris somewhere between 1839 and 1841. We know nothing more than that. Nothing pinpoints the precise moment when pen was put to paper on her behalf. Practically all the historical sources repeat the same anecdotes how and when she began but they are all as improbable as the famous tall-story of his writing the final scene of *La Favorite* surrounded by dirty dishes on the dining table of a friend. Nice but nonsensical. *When* Gaetano Donizetti's *Rita* was composed is a mystery, all we can be sure is that the autograph score in Naples bears the date of "1841" on its frontispiece. And then quite factually that this "*farsetta*" (or as it was called initially) *RITA ou le MARI battu*, was first staged twelve years after the composer's death on 7 May 1860 at the Théâtre Impérial de l'Opéra-Comique in Paris.

One of the legends put about was that this was his very last composition: "*Il a improvisé ce petit ouvrage dans les derniers instans lucides qui ont précédés la chute de son beau génie.*" She could have been smuggled into the theatre in a warming-pan as far as some credulous critics are concerned...

Far more seriously, in view of the huge appetite for the music of Donizetti at that time, there were discussions about *Rita*'s authenticity, about her miraculous posthumous survival. How was it possible that a complete work by a popular composer had been lost for so long, only coming blinking into daylight when division of his property was made for his heirs? Both astonishment and scepticism accompanied her arrival, much of it absurd. And as a result she did not emerge unscathed - the conditions of her survival were no more transparent than those of her disappearance. Once a staging was decided-upon all sorts of re-adjustments were made, some of them radical. Even the title was subject to amendment: it was his poet, Gustave Vaëz, it would seem, who called the orphaned work *Rita*; Donizetti by all surviving evidence preferred *Deux hommes et une femme* ("*Due uomini e una donna*") as the libretto used by the composer makes clear (on the first page of which "*Rita*" is crossed out, there is no sign whatsoever of "*le mari battu*").

The most persuasive legend of all insists that composer and poet met by chance in the street; the plot was agreed on; and the opera written in eight days. *Rita* has eight numbers - one number-a-day was far from excessive for

the Bergamasc maestro so why should it not be true? The engaging M.Vaëz (Jean-Nicolas-Gustave van Nieuvenhuysen 1812-1862) was one of those adept foreign poets who found a niche in Paris writing farces and vaudevilles, a literary prodigy this young Belgian had an idiomatic turn of phrase others could envy and could write quickly enough to keep in step with the maestro. No uncommon feat. He had helped to translate *Lucia di Lammermoor* into French in 1839; collaborated on *La Favorite* in 1840 and later made the French version of *Don Pasquale* (not staged until 1864). Eager to assist, it has always been supposed that it was Vaëz who suggested the plot of *Rita*; again, why should it not be true? But its troubled-knot - two men desperate to lose a wife - was the stuff of Parisian slapstick as well as omnipresent in Naples where a *Commedia dell'arte* legacy of hilarious marital acrimony flourished in the backstreet theatres. For this reason alone a doubt remains as to the real origins of *Rita*. Her exact literary credentials the open-palmed shrew, untamed and akimbo between two unwilling spouses has never been properly established.

As a result of her streetwise conception, the *spoken dialogue* of this tiny *opéra comique* (not its sung text) went through three stages: **a)** in the first stage the dialogue was immediate, spontaneous and brutal, reflecting the scribbled eight-day genesis and a few shreds only survive: **b)** of the second stage there is a fair-copy in a scribal hand with autograph annotations discovered not long ago at Bergamo, its content rather more articulate: and **c)** there is a third stage which is included in the printed libretto used for the Parisian première of 1860 - tidy, respectful and retouched by other hands. As a result and inevitably, most of the question marks once associated with this *opéra comique* derive from its belated appearance, from this last version, not quite faithful to anything we can be sure that Donizetti had on his desk. It would seem that someone has imposed a measure of sweetness-and-light upon this sparkling score that was not and was never there in the first place: *Rita* - we can be sure - was originally a bitter little drama, sarcastic, sexually abrasive and thoroughly misogynist. We have to reflect that in the version with which we are familiar, when Peppe succeeds in losing Rita (in the game of morra followed by pulling straws) he calls out gaily “*plus de femme!!!*” In the un-expurgated first version of which vestiges survive in the printed full-score, he exclaims “*Plus de querelles! plus de soufflets!! plus de femmes!!!*”

Which is not the same thing at all.



A daughter that is not entirely posthumous then? Is this the right term? But why not? One of her progenitors (M. Vaëz) was still alive. The two scores published in Paris by Henry Lemoine, offer more than one clue to the evolution of *Rita*. The beautifully engraved orchestral full-score which was the first to appear in the wake of the première contains vestiges of a text that was probably under the eyes of the composer while the vocal score - that for *piano et chant* - of a slightly later date – already contains a modified version. This last is described as “*arrangée par A. Bazille*” on its title page and here it would seem we might have one of the culprits, particularly in respect of the general

domesticising of the mise-en-scène. Auguste-Ernest Bazille (1828-1891) co-existed on the fringes of comedy in the Second Empire, he himself appears fleetingly as the co-author with like-minded colleagues: François-August Gevaert, Antoine Clapisson, Eugène Gautier, Emile Jonas. Sylvain Mangeant and Ferdinand Poise as joint authors of a modish *opérette en un acte* called *La Poularde de Caux* given at the Palais-Royal on 17 May 1861 with a text by Adolphe de Leuven and Prilleux. Someone, arguably, appointed Bazille - a musically adept person, otherwise unengaged - not simply to make a piano reduction but to help to mould Rita to the mœurs of the day - her auberge now transferred from Piedmont to near Naples, far more discreet politically at the time of Napoleon III.

The myths do not help. The printed libretto for the première leads off :

“Cet ouvrage fut écrit par le célèbre maestro dans la dernière année de sa vie. Il se promenait un soir sur le boulevard des Italiens, il était triste; depuis huit jours il n’avait rien à mettre en musique, et composer était un véritable besoin pour Donizetti. Rencontrant M.Gustave Vaëz, son ami, son collaborateur pour La Favorite: “Sauvez-moi la vie, lui dit-il, en me donnant tout de suite le moindre petit acte, pour que je puisse travailler”. Un sujet bouffe fut convenu, et Donizetti se hâta de rentrer avec les paroles du premier air, dont la musique se trouvait faite le lendemain quand M.Gustave Vaëz apporta les paroles du second morceau. La besogne continua ainsi, et, au bout d’une semaine, tout fut terminé, livret, chant et orchestration”.

A sweet story, worthy of the sentimentally-adjusted tale that would be mounted that evening, but alas, poor Donizetti had been paralysed and almost mute for two terrible years before his death. In fact the date of *Rita*, sometime around 1839-40 pre-supposes some interesting reflections: if the *Lucie de Lammermoor* of Donizetti and Vaëz represents “a woman bereft of any power in the face of a gang of brutes” as we have recently read, then their *Rita* of the same date is her revenge, the calculating embattled aubergiste is the other side of the coin, as uncomfortable and challenging a proposition as any in the disconcerting annals of the composer.

The performed version has real merits, has an improved flow, makes its points swiftly and surely. The Lemoine full score is superb, musically impeccable, that reference to Donizetti’s holograph has been made is confirmed for the transparent reason that - perfectly unusually - it contains the role of Peppe in alternative versions - Peppe as a ténor and Peppe as a baryton -

each in the appropriate clef, one printed above the other as in the composers autograph and thus endorsing Donizetti's "two men" in the simplest way possible - neither Peppe nor Gasparo need be differentiated by timbre, both could be brothers-in-arms equally to outface the same woman.

The comedy indeed is wholly in the collusion/confrontation of these two men with at its heart the game of morra by means of which each hopes *to lose* Rita. Proposed by Peppe, and highly popular in Italy, the game asks that a number is shouted out in turn - a number not more than ten - at the same time both men putting out a right hand with as many fingers extended as chance dictates; if the total number of fingers equals the number called-out, then he who calls the number is the winner. A provocative game, fast and furious and wonderfully exposed to cheating. The comedy resides also in their manly confidences: Peppe explains his reddened cheek; Gasparo is outraged: "*Une femme bat son...*" (appalled, he can't go on) "*Mais, c'est impardonnable ça! Dans un bon ménage, bien tendre, bien uni, c'est le mari qui bat sa femme*". Peppe: "*Le mari?*"

The première of 1860 had its ups-and-downs as regards distribution with Constance-Caroline Faure-Lefebvre (1828-1905) as Rita - high-priestess of opéra bouffe and wife of the Opéra star Jean-Baptiste Faure, with the tenor Victor Warot as Peppe, and a certain Barielle as Gasparo (presumably the husband of the dancer Pauline Barielle) a cast fully demonstrative of two helpless men face-to-face with an indomitable example of the monstrous regiment of *prime donne*. The structure of *Rita*, however, in contrast to the aggression of the plot, is perfectly neat and tidy, almost eighteenth-century in its precision. Each protagonist has a solo; each sings two duos and the score is capped by two trios. These solos present a deliberately misleading picture of the protagonists: Rita's aria shows her as happy and content; Gasparo's as urbane and assured (smug in his self-possession); and Peppe's as liberated, optimistic and as free as the air. Only their exchanges reveal the true state of affairs - in an elaborate series of ironies - if not quite Metastasian - but one whose imprint he might have recognised as his own. He might also have recognised the wonderful expansiveness of the orchestral variety, the small scale of *Rita* does not extend to its component parts: the three duos are major constructions in miniature, the word-setting - fleet and accomplished, the allusive fragments of melody, the elaborate compositional resource and its ample deployment indicating a maestro of great experience and range. One can sense that this tiny opéra comique was hemmed-in by very large scores - by *Les Martyrs*, by *Le Duc d'Albe*, by *La Favorite* and *Adelia* - as if a companionable team of whales had been offering a helpful nudge to a minnow swimming at their side.

But then, we come to the changes to the nature of the opera. Who was the most likely author? Who but Vaëz himself. Maybe the text was written in eight days as legend proposes, but in this case he took advantage of the delayed début to rewrite it. Authenticity is always relative, the music of *Rita* has never been in doubt but the *text* of this opera has always remained subject to manipulation. Spoken dialogue was never sacrosanct, if an opéra comique was successful enough to be sent travelling abroad, or was restaged at the Opéra, the spoken text would be transformed into recitative, and in any case all dialogue was invariably tailored to specific performance. Donizetti took a relaxed view of versification, comic or tragic, most of his comedies opt for a punch-line rather than for the kind of rhetoric that causes a joke to fall flat. The texts for the solos, duos, trios of *Rita* remain more-or-less as they were originally conceived in the “eight-day” genesis - that is certain - but someone, *someone* - and Vaëz only can have been responsible - took a bold pen to the spoken dialogue of “*Due uomini e una donna*” in 1860: monologues were dramatically pruned, they became sharper and taunter, while the conversational to-and-fro became almost laconic, dead-pan, its humour more pointed. The crude dialogue of Donizetti’s manuscript libretto was discarded. The text shows signs of a literary makeover. No one can be sure that the composer did not initiate this process himself - nothing is detrimental or unworthy, very much the reverse - but as a result *Rita* took a big step into the Second Empire on her *débuts impériaux*, she is now more circumspect; her eyes are a little less focused upon parsimony and husband-beating, a covert *douceur* is the order of the day. She is still a bitch, but if she begins to value poor Peppe it is because she realises she possesses something of worth.

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Was it Vaëz who added “*le mari battu*” to the title? It must have been at his instigation. After all, *Rita*, the anti-heroine, had grown-up now as far as he was concerned. Such a monster was rare in the Donizetti canon, the composer cherished a more ductile model: a flighty Adina melts before the endearing frailty of Nemorino; “*Sofronia*” (ie *Norina*), though husband-slapping is also on her agenda, only *pretends* to terrorise Don Pasquale and is a “*nice girl*” really. Even such an arcane trio as Donna Lucrezia Borgia, Antonina (*Belisario*), and Maria de Rudenz have their tender moments when tested to the limits. Donizetti warmed to their plight, but not to *Rita*. Her opening aria is capped with a kind of jingle, a refrain worthy of the Duchess in “*Alice in Wonderland*” :

Mon mari, qu'on dit bête,
L'est un peu, j'en fais cas;
Il n'agit qu'à ma tête,
S'il dit non, je le bats,
Je le bats, je le bats.

(a malignant chant that should have brought the aria to a halt in the first hasty libretto but has been given a scribbled codicil in the **b** libretto, written in a different hand, endowing it with a more pacific envoi :

*Pour maris, les niais,
Croyez-moi, sont parfaits.
Suivez bien mes recettes,
Épouser un niais.*

clearly an afterthought which Donizetti has set as a reprise so that even though still combative it reveals that some muzzling of Rita had begun well before 1860)

But the following *duetto con pertichini* with Peppe is scarcely more benign :

*Va! grand inutile.
Bélitre, vaurien,
Vaurien, vaurien, vaurien, vaurien...
Tu n'est bon à rien,
A rien. à rien, à rien, à rien...
Combien je regrette
Mon autre mari
(at which point she slaps Peppe)*

Peppe (holding his cheek)
oh! oh! la la

which she mimics
*oh! oh! la la
Va grand inutile*

No retouching can ever make Rita aimiable. Peppe's misogynistic response in the wake of the slapping may well reflect some of Donizetti's own bitterness in these years - pessimistic, alone following the death of his wife in 1837 and never reconciled to despair and solitude. Peppe's monologue (severely edited

in 1860) is a real cri-du-cœur :

“Au diable! celui qui a imaginé de faire durer le mariage éternellement... pour que ça ressemblât complètement à l'enfer... non il n'y a que l'homme pour avoir ces idées là... il est le seul dans toute la création - je dois avoir une joue plus rouge que l'autre!” (slapping his face on the other side)

The nastiness of the argument (and both Rita and Gasparo are inescapably deplorable) may well explain Donizetti's failure to stage *Rita*. The humour, the brilliant music, the accomplishment, gaiety and flair with which he packages his irreconcilable trio never completely pastes-over a yawning absence of sympathy. Never conceals a dearth of that humanity upon which he pinned his faith. Especially the creaking conclusion of the opera with nothing resolved. Vaëz must certainly have been conscious of this fact, hence the brave re-editing - only the heavy syrup of sentimentality could divert attention from a lacuna of such unbridgeable dimensions.

The critics of the day, incapable of reading a libretto, appear to have surrendered completely: Henri Boisseau writing in “Revue et Gazette des Théâtres” (10 May 1860) even observing:

“Nous n'avons remarqué qu'une grosse invraisemblance dans cette pièce; c'est que deux hommes, assez heureux pour avoir épousé Mme Faure-Lefebvre, veulent tous deux la quitter. Ce n'est pas admissible... Voilà la situation, et l'habile librettiste l'a compliquée de scènes et d'incidents très comiques; mais il faut bien en venir au dénouement prévu: ce n'est pas sans quelques regrets que Peppe (sic) quitterait Rita; elle avait des heures charmantes après ses petits momens de vivacité, et la main qui battait caressait mieux encore. Rita propose une nouvelle charte conjugale où le droit des taloches est aboli; et tout le monde est content”.

(Rita's final words, had he paid more attention, were however as follows :

*Grâce à lui, mon ménage
Est gâté; je maudis
De bon cœur, son passage,
Et surtout ses avis.*

[Interestingly enough however, and this absurdity aside, the famous reviewer does pinpoint a precise name for the “premier mari” she was so content to curse: “Gasparo Sbrigani” - which – and indeed others mention it - appears to supply a rare clue to the real source of the plot?]

“La partition posthume de Donizetti est facile, vivante, rapide et sans aucune originalité d’idées et de facture. C’est une improvisation intarissable, qui caresse l’oreille, ne l’étonne jamais, ne trahit aucun effort de la part de celui qui l’a créée et ne donne aucune fatigue à celui qui l’écoute” (Bendit Jouvin “Le Figaro” 10 May 1860)

“Abondance mélodique inépuisable, style facile, élégant, sans recherche, piquant sans effort, grâce, finesse, gaieté naturelle et jamais chargée, tout ce qui fait de la musique le plus délicat des plaisirs se trouve réuni dans ce petit ouvrage” (Gustave Héquet “L’Illustration” 12 May 1860)

“Et pourtant peut-être était-il dans la nature que Rita préférât ce scélérat de Gasparo. Que voulez-vous, aurait-elle dit pour expliquer ce raccommodement, comment renoncer à un monstre qui me battait si bien?” (Clément Caraguel “Le Charivari” 12 May 1860)

“Le poème est gai; la partition posthume de Donizetti est claire et facile; il pleut des soufflets; il pleut des couplets... Citons l’air de Rita, un joli duo bouffe et un trio rondement agencé”. (Paul de Saint Victor “La Presse” 13 May 1860)

“Impossible de rencontrer à vingt kilomètres à la ronde - dans n’importe quel village - une aubergiste plus séduisante.” (“Le Ménestrel” 13 May 1860)

The superficiality of the world, in fact, into which *Rita* was born semi-posthumously supplies a gloss to her resurrection which poor Donizetti may even have relished. The composer who gloried in dramatic irony, in paradox, in the tragic destiny - the fallibility - of innumerable heroes and heroines, ancient and modern, real and imaginary - would certainly have appreciated the incomprehension with which his “*Due uomini e una donna*” had been received. Yet another turn-in-the-screw of his own tragic fate. But they were right about the music, the score is as delicious as the tale is distressing. The miraculous child, *Rita*, has had a posthumous success never to be predicted, especially in Italy. This Montpellier revival is the first in truly authentic guise since the doubtfully authentic début in the Paris of 1860. But, as regards the choice of title to this honour, it is the poet alone who should have the last word, it is his: “*le MARI battu*”.

This dispute notwithstanding, as will be proved on every subsequent hearing, the lesson of *Rita*, the semi-posthumous-miracle of *Rita*, is that music triumphs - music always triumphs - on its own account and invariably over both

time and text.