

Maria di Rohan

Does life imitate art, or vice versa?

Notes for a lecture

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Nineteenth century composers, it is sad to say, diminished everyone in their operas. “*Don’t put your daughter on the stage*” should have been the motto hung on every family tree: the murderous impulses of poor Lady Macbeth, the impassioned depravity of Lucrezia Borgia, and the incongruous amours of the “lovelorn” Elizabeth I in company with her covey of step-mothers - headless or otherwise - are simply proof of an unprincipled mindset by unscrupulous Italian maestri.

This, I very much fear, is the case with our heroine. It is but one short step from the Kärntnertheater in Vienna to appearing in “*Doctor Who*” (in 2002) but this, I can assure you, has been the case with the beautiful and fearless Marie-Aimée de Rohan-Montbazon, one of those people who fascinated everyone, even making an unwonted appearance in *The three Musketeers* (where she had an entirely fictional son by Athos of all people).

But why did our generous Bergamasco bring back to life such an iconic figure from an unimaginable past? Did he feel close to her in some way? The story of his opera gives only a hint of such an involvement. It is not a sophisticated tale: set in the precincts of the Louvre, Maria “*contessa di Rohan*” (soprano) is in attendance upon the Spanish Queen of France (known to history as Anne of Austria) while having an affair with the “*conte di Chalais*” (tenor) a minister of Louis XIII. Unknown to *Chalais*, Maria has secretly married “his best friend” (baritone) the “*duca di Chevreuse*”, a prince of Lorraine, to please her dying mother as well as to escape the long arm of the all-powerful Cardinal de Richelieu. Involved to a duel, before leaving *Chalais* scribbles a compromising letter to Maria to be delivered to her in the event of his being killed. While he is away from home the agents of Richelieu search his rooms, steal the letter, and send it to *Chevreuse*. The latter is incandescent with rage and jealousy and obliges *Chalais* to have a shoot-out with him instead. But *Chalais* turns the pistol on himself. *Chevreuse* promptly condemns his wife to perpetual ignominy and disgrace for her infidelity (!)

What a pack of nonsense!

Here you have the default plot of Italian Opera which someone summed-up as “*the soprano marries the baritone but loves the tenor*” (but please don’t smile so condescendingly this is the plot of *Tristan und Isolde*) based on a louche boulevard shocker *Un duel sous le cardinal de Richelieu* staged on 9 April 1832 in Paris and nothing more-or-less than a thoroughly bourgeois *ménage-à-trois* for popular consumption in the age of Louis-Philippe, intended both to put the grandees of the *ancien régime* in their place and to find an argument with which everyone in the audience could identify.

First, an attempt to describe the people featured in Donizetti's opera: in real life Marie de Rohan-Montbazon was something of a cross between Margaret Thatcher and Mata Hari (if any such prodigy can be imagined), born of one of the most powerful families in France in 1600 and one of the truly fascinating women of the day, she was married at seventeen to the *Connétable* de Luynes, a vindictive aficionado of Louis XIII who got himself killed soon after, leaving her with a son. Thus, of course, she was no spinster "*contessa di Rohan*" as in the Italian composer's melodrama but the widowed *duchesse* de Luynes when she married the *duc de Chevreuse*, and this was several years before she encountered Henri de Chalais who could never in any way be described as the "best friend" of her husband. Her second marriage was a *marriage de convenance*, no more, her second duke was a crony of her father and if she married to please anyone it was to please him. Indeed the most ludicrous supposition of all in Cammarano's libretto is her mother's "deathbed wish": Madeleine de Lenoncourt died when Marie was one year old and it is highly unlikely that either mother or daughter ever set eyes on each after the moment of delivery! The Chevreuse couple lived – when, rarely they found themselves under the same roof - in perfect harmony. Alcove activities they took in their stride, he had lots of lovers, so had she. It was the way of their world. Her main preoccupation was political intrigue, all her energy was spent in plotting against the centralising plans of Richelieu intended to increase the power of the Church and State at the expense of the territorial nobility. She was about as far from libretto's "*angelo di pace*" as possible, stirring-up trouble across Europe, exploiting her quasi-royal status and agitating in Madrid, London and Brussels, dodging the slings and arrows of the Cardinal-tyrant in that as the wife of a foreign prince she was out of his reach, eluding his attempts to contain her, galloping to the frontiers disguised as a man. Such Amazon exploits brought her fame and scandal - not just in respect of her courage and beauty but also for her cunning and heft. Ingenious, resourceful and dashing she was involved in every subversive coup and became one of the genuinely emblematic figures of the day and age. Painted by Velasquez (the Wallace Collection), if you can recognise this remarkable personality in Cammarano's libretto you must have an especially powerful imagination.



Marie de Rohan, Duchesse de Chevreuse (Wallace collection)

Next, Henri de Talleyrand, *comte de Chalais* (yes he was a forebear of Napoléon's foreign minister). Born in 1599, he did not commit suicide as in the opera he was beheaded by Richelieu in 1626. He was no kind of candidate for the ministry of any King, indeed he was rather an absurd young man, impetuous and idealistic, naïf, more like an epitome zany delinquent than a hero. If they did actually have an affair it was brief and functional and took place shortly before his death. Though she was part of his plotting it was scarcely a conjunction of equals; she was fearless and a winner; he was hot-headed and a loser. When he was arrested by the Cardinal she left him to his fate. By 1843 scarcely anyone bothered to remember him. Her biographies said little about this unhappy figure:

"She married in 1617, Charles d'Albert, Duc de Luynes, Connétable de France, then, her husband being dead, she married in 1622, Claude de Lorraine, Duc de Chevreuse. She intrigued at first against Richelieu and had to fly into exile. Richelieu being dead, she intrigued then against Mazarin and put herself at the head of a "Cabale des Importants" made up of old friends of Anne of Austria disappointed with the confidence the queen had in the latter. During the Fronde, she also played an important role and supported with all her power Gondi and Condé. She died in 1679"

Brief and to the point, she would have liked this account of her life. No sentimental digressions, no *rêves d'amour*, no fantasy offspring, no galloping about the country in drag. In his book on Donizetti William Ashbrook asserts magisterially that the *"basic demand of the romantic melodrama is that the composer give musical coherence and credibility to an intense plot whose denouement is tragic and inevitable"* but Marie died in her bed, the only person in the opera actually to have had a *"tragic and inevitable denouement"* was poor Chalais which is precisely why he has been dug up by the authors of libretti and trashy plays.

Then Claude de Lorraine, *prince de Joinville, duc de Chevreuse*. Born in 1578 he was the last son of the scarface Henri *duc de Guise*, head of the Catholic League against the Protestants, who was assassinated together with his brother the Cardinal in a bloody coup at Blois in 1588 with the complicity of Henri III who detested them both. The seventh child of the operatically important Catherine de Clèvesⁱ, Chevreuse was a lightweight, a remarkably brave soldier who undertook some diplomatic duties but was permanently insolvent and incompetent, except in bed. Married to Marie de Rohan in 1622 he was twice her age. He was delighted with his rich and celebrated wife and devoted to the Crown (unlike Marie who loathed a succession of rulers), their marriage was a huge success, they lived cheerfully enough in a kind of alliance founded upon mutual solidarity. He took no interest in her lovers, she was polite to his. They had three daughters. He tried his best to get her out of political hot water and his royal standing enabled her to get away with – if not exactly murder – at least with every kind of treason.

However did Gaetano Donizetti get involved with these overlifesized characters from an incredible past?

One can hazard all sorts of guesses. The most persuasive of all is that Maria was on his doorstep. He was living in Paris in the Hôtel Manchester, formerly the town-house of a close friend of the beautiful duchess but now fallen on hard times and turned into a nondescript hotel. Even though largely rebuilt and clouded by commerce if our composer had listened very carefully in the small hours of the night he might have heard her footfall on the stairs. Situated near the Académie royale de Musique of his day he was within a stone's-throw of the site where the seventeenth century Hôtel de Chevreuse used to stand, side by side with the Hôtel de Chalais (with a secret door linking them?) both buildings in the vast quadrangle of the Louvre on the site where now the *Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel* tries to look important. If you dug down you might find a vestige of their foundations under its marble vault.

The *mise-en-scène* of his opera was very real to the Italian composer. He could actually see the double staircase within the Louvre (it now leads to the fabulous Napoléon III apartment) where the opera opens; in earshot was the Gallerie d'Apollon whose distant murmur of voices, of dancing and striking clocks which he could occasionally witness; in the dead of night [no influx of tourists in his day] the shadows and empty grandeur of the still-extant Palais des Tuileries were quite magical and thanks the fatal memory of Marie Antoinette and her children in flight to Varennes it was indeed a place of impending doom - where he could actually hear the "*voce fatal di morte*" that colours the whole of his score. As far as his heroine was concerned, he was not just writing an account of her hyper-dramatic presence but evoking a real and tangible being.

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It is possible of course that his plot had come to him in Vienna where the exiled Rohan family were now omni-present at Court. As Court composer in the 1840's Donizetti was popular in imperial circles in the monumental city, he gave lessons to archduchesses and was graciously received by Metternich who was a music-lover (though no one ever bothers to say so). Victor-Louis-Mériadec de Rohan *prince* de Guémené, *duc* de Montbazou, now an Austrian Vice-Marshal and somewhat infirm, was still around; his heir Camille-Joseph-Philippe, *prince* de Rohan-Rochefort who largely is responsible for the present-day Rohan descendents of the senior branch of the family was very much present as a Knight of the Golden Fleece. Either or both of these survivors could have re-awakened the Cammarano/Lillo textⁱⁱ in the mind of the composer. Could he have discussed his projected opera with them? Maybe in conversation or maybe by their mega presence could this heroine of the pre-Fronde *Résistance* have been brought to mind. Did either of them attend the first performance on 5 June 1843 at the Kärntnertortheater? No one knows. Maybe archival research will one day throw a light on this, but if these survivors of a fabulous era of the past *were* present, they would initially have been astonished, then indignant, and then roared with laughter.

In defence of a princely input into Donizetti's masterpiece there is the strange dramatic codicil to the Viennese score which no one seems to know whether

was, or was not, actually performed. Eight lines of climactic text for Maria in which – far from accepting the absurd terminal dismissal by her husband - she flings back at the angry Chevreuse: “*Eternal shame? I don’t love you, you are a murderer...*”

Onta eterna?...Io non t’amai!...
Io ti resi un omicida...
Per me infamia e morte avrai,
E fu pura la mia fé.
Cielo! Or usa del tuo dritto,
Questa vittima ti sfida...
Se obbedirti fu delitto,
È il tuo fulmine mercè.

Who supplied this brief text? It is nowhere to be found in the Lillo performance material, nor does it exist in the manuscript Cammarano furnished for a projected Pacini setting at Venice in 1841. It is unique to Vienna, and I suggest that it could have been an attempt to set the record straight at the behest of these exiled descendants disconcerted by this grotesque parody of the life of the famous duchess, their forbear, which Donizetti added to his drama as a conciliatory gesture.

Presumably it fell at the first hurdle? There is no record of its reception. Was it too much a rebuttal of all the preceding events? Too conventional perhaps, or simply too late for the worm to turn? It was sung at Wexford a few years ago with remarkable success.

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But the crux of this melodrama indeed lay with its final quadro, an ultimate *coup de théâtre* never quite to be resolved. The three principal editions of *Maria di Rohan* offer a different *Scena ultima*. For its first revival at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris on 14 November 1843 Donizetti relinquished the austerity of the original Viennese setting, giving an unexpected boost to the tiny role of Armando di Gondi for the celebrated contralto Marietta Brambilla with two shiny new arias; moving music up and down; revising some of the more important moments – sometimes for the better (the Act II *duetto* for Maria and Chalais for example) - sometimes for the worse most notably by relinquishing a key moment of the original opera, that is, transforming the Act II slow *cabaletta* Chalais had sung while burning midnight oil, writing his crucial letter (the moving ‘E tu, se cado esanime’), and turning it into a brilliant, flighty and illogically optimistic cap to Giulia Grisi’s *preghiera* in Act III, ‘Benigno il cielo arridere’ - a marvellous but irrelevant extravagance that got the Paris audience going at the expense of the plot.

Though this version ended in parallel with that of Vienna (but without the princely coda) and was a wonderful success, for a Naples re-edition of nearly a year later in the resplendent S. Carlo on 11 November 1844, the composer turned it around anew. Reverting to Cammarano’s original title of *Il conte di Chalais*, with Gondi’s pretensions reduced by half and heavily re-orchestrated, it was subject to a far more serious revision throughout. The drama was intensified and even though Eugenia Tadolini in the role of Maria was heard in silence (she was pregnant), and the tenor Gaetano Fraschini was out of voice (giving a poor impact to his new *cavatina* ‘La speme di quest’anima’), hope revived with Filippo Coletti’s unassailable

Chevreuse at an utterly optimum level. Indeed the total effect of the opera was at last utterly convincing with a final enhanced dramatic climax that belongs to a later era of the stage. There was no longer any "Mills and Boon" invective like "*vita coll' infamia*" or "*donna infedel*" or anything like that: a brutal Chevreuse pushes aside Maria who tries to get between the two men, he drags Chalais through the secret door, two shots are heard and Chevreuse reappears with eyes blazing. Maria falls to the ground in a dead faint. It was at last a version of this fantasy on her life and times that, for the first time, *might* have left her feeling that a daughter could well be put on the stage without (too much of) a qualm.

ⁱ Carlo Coccia *Caterina di Guisa* La Scala, Milan 14 February 1833

ⁱⁱ The text of Maria di Rohan had first been supplied to Giuseppe Lillo as *Il conte di Chalais* at the S. Carlo, Naples on 6 November 1839