

Donizetti's "Birthday" offering to Bertel Thorvaldsen

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*'Il XXXIX Compleanno dell'arrivo in Roma
Del Comendatore Thorvaldsen*

*Parole improvvisate dal. Cr.Barberi, musica dal M.o Donizetti
C.r dalla legion d'onore, ed eseguita dal dilettante Carlo Santi
in Roma il 8 Marzo 1836'*

It would be nice to be assured that great composers and great sculptors met on the same level ground. True, Rossini wrote an *Omaggio Pastorale* for the inauguration of a bust of Canova at Treviso in 1823 but this was music and art at a very considerable distance, and his carrying of one the ribbons attached to the funeral carriage in Florence of the sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini in 1850 even more so no doubt. A recent sales catalogue lists an opera - *La sposa di Corinto* by Pietro Canonica¹ - who is also described as "a celebrated sculptor". A rare bird surely? Can any other sculptor-musician be called to mind? Spontini, with morbid foresight, had commissioned a tomb from Canova several decades before his own death and at Maiolati Spontini it still supplies a suitable reminder of a certain chilly neo-classical symbiosis. Can Donizetti's brief contact, if that is what it was, with the celebrated Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen, have been any more specific?

All the evidence seems to point otherwise. His intimate contacts in Rome can be taken for granted: the Vasselli family of course,² his friend Jacopo Ferretti - and a few other sociable beings representing very nearly the sum total of his circle in that city. A warm and creative assembly indeed and of no small sophistication but not large in number. He corresponded with ducal impresarios and a few others but we are never told who he 'frequented' (as the French say) or what could have been the nature of his social life in the Eternal City. The vast international colony of artists in Rome seems not to have played any part in his frequent visits despite the existence of a truly sumptuous marble portrait bust of the composer, dated 1840, and now the justifiable pride of the Ateneo in Bergamo and carved in Rome.³ We know he wrote a 'Luge qui legis' for his Bergamasc sculptor friend Pompeo Marchesi in 1842⁴ - an artist who was one of a group of his *milanese* supporters. But this is almost all there is.

How and when did he encounter the famed neo-classical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen? (His name naturalised as *Berto*). Was Donizetti actually acquainted with him? Who knows? Did he ever go to Thorvaldsen's studio? There is no evidence that he did or that he did not. The Pope visited Thorvaldsen in his Roman studio in 1830 (there is a painting to prove it) so why not? The Pope was followed by a legion of lesser lights on the same circuit as the composer - there is even an account of Adolphe Nourrit's visit to Thorvaldsen in February 1838 when he was en route for Naples to work with the great Bergamasc and possibly the latter had recommended this *détour* as a suitable cultural highlight?

Naturally the maestro was well acquainted with Gaetano Barbieri, the poet of the brief cantata that is the subject of this paper. Barbieri (1775-1873) was almost a key figure in the Italian musical world, he was *Direttore ed Editore* (together with his printer friend Giulio Ferrario and a certain Giacinto Battaglia) of the important Journal 'I Teatri' of Milan as well as the author of two well-known libretti for Giovanni Pacini.⁶ This last 'cohabitation' could well supply an explanation for some of the awkward language of the Thorvaldsen cantata - a covey of *milanese* critics took a poor view of Barbieri's literary gifts and insisted that: '*Barbieri non poteva più ferocemente vendicarsi di Pacini che scrivendo libretti per lui*'.⁷ While Pacini - in turn - made many jokes about Barbieri, insisting that he was a: "*chiaro professore di matematiche*"... "*di una onestà scrupolosa, ma le formole algebriche e le figure geometriche mal si confanno colla poesia*"⁸

Apart from mathematics (and Pacini's jokes) Barbieri's scholarship also had extended to teaching Italian to visiting foreigners during his cash-strapped bohemian youth in Rome, in which blithe interim he may well have become acquainted the gregarious Danish sculptor.

These issues taken into account, it is not forbidden to speculate - in default of any other evidence - that it was the poet who requested the music from Donizetti for Thorvaldsen's "Birthday" cantata and not the distinguished artist himself.

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Convivial music-making had something of a vogue in the Eternal City. In 1833 for example the Bergamasc had agreed to compose a little cantata *Il Fate* with words scribbled by Ferretti for the birthday⁹ of *conte* Antonio Lozano, and a month or two later another for the name-day of Anna Carnevali¹ to be sung by one of her daughters. Both these he certainly attended. Thus his readiness to lend an *improptu* hand to extempore celebrations of this kind must have left a certain echo.

Bertel Thorvaldsen - the Italians preferred '*Thorwaldsen*' (19

November 1770-24 March 1844 was one of the pillars of Rome. The son of an Icelandic wood-carver, he had studied at the Copenhagen Academy where he won a travelling scholarship to the one place even the northern protestant élite regarded as giving a final gloss to an aesthetic education - the papal capital. The date of his arrival there we know for the simple reason that it is recorded on the title page of the Donizetti 'cantata'. His XXXIX ' *Compleanno* ' is not that of his date of birth as one might surmise but that of the day when he first set foot on the seven hills of the city of the Caesars: the 8th March 1797, upon each recurrent anniversary of which he called all his friends together to celebrate what he liked to describe as his "Roman Birthday" a gathering replete with the gaiety and irreverence that belied the long succession of marble divinities for which he was famed - as cold and inflexible a series of monoliths as the iceberg that sank the Titanic. His 'Jason' had attracted the attention and possibly envy of Canova in 1803, his neo-classical triumphs included the 'Alexander' frieze on the façade of the Quirinale ⁱⁱ and he had made a corner in outsize religious iconography in the antique mode whose solemnity and air of indomitable permanence had elevated him to an unique Pontifical favour. His prestige was such that he became a ' *Consigliere della Commissione delle Belle Arti* ' in which capacity he was entrusted with uncovering the tomb of *Raffaello* where it had long been supposed to remain - at the foot of a statue of the Madonna del Sasso in the Pantheon in 1833. A discovery announced with the maximum of publicity and astonishment.

In this semi-official capacity he certainly 'frequented' artist colleagues of every nation visiting the city. Did he, in turn, 'frequent' celebrated musicians passing through Rome? He made many busts of distinguished contemporaries but Donizetti - as far as anyone seems to be aware - was not among them. The only quasi-musical sculpture by Thorvaldsen positively identifiable is an enormous equestrian statue of Prince Poniatowski at Cracow (and this is a 'political' Poniatowski and not one that noble tribe of Tuscan musicians descended from the famous dynasty of Polish rulers). But this imposing monolith could well have been a self-portrait of the Danish master himself as his friends knew him: flowing hair, heroic, bearded, gesturing widely, the perfect embodiment in weight and worth both of his own generous personality and of the hefty trail of immovable potentates due to his hand still seriously impeding traffic-roundabouts throughout Europe.

The precise evidence, however, of a Donizettian contribution to his fame is less solid. Irrespective of their shared Roman interests they could not have been together on the occasion of his 39th ' *Compleanno* '. The "Birthday" was celebrated it would seem under Thorvaldsen's own roof in the Via Sistina (now numbered 48-51) but the Bergamasc had left

Rome two days before the celebration took place. On 6 March we know that Donizetti had scribbled a few lines to his friend Ferretti from his Roman lodgings: *'Non posso più vederti, che parto stanotte. Addio.'* As Zavadini notes the composer was eager to leave for Naples where an ill Virginia awaited him. And once returned there he wrote a celebrated note to Bardari on his point of arrival: *'eccomi, da jeri di ritorno!'* It was the famous message dated *'oggi 8 o 9 marzo'* in which he disclosed to his teenage colleague the sad fate of their joint *Maria Stuarda* in Milan:

'La Stuarda dopo 6 sere a Milano fu proibita, e nel momento il più felice, non volean Bastarda, non voleano il toson d'oro al collo, non voleano si inginocchiasse per la confessione a Talbot. La Malibran disse: non mi fido pensare a tante cose...'

but concluding warmly: *'Il libro per voi è qui, il vino per me è da voi. Venite, portate il vino, o almeno la botte, vuota.'* so convivial celebrations of some sort may still have kept a place in his mind. There is no doubt about the course of events: he had left Venice (after *Belisario*) on 8 February, arriving at Civitavecchia on 15 February travelling via Milan and Genoa, and then purged a two-week quarantine in Rome (according to Cametti), staying with the Vassellis.

This brief visit was far from tranquil. On 4 March he was handed a letter telling him that his mother had died in the Bergamo he had passed so near, on 10 February. He wrote a terrible letter to Antonio Dolci in response - again from the Vasselli address - on 5 March:

'Dunque tutto è finito? Se non avessi una costituzione talmente forte ch'io stesso ne stupisco ... Tre mesi solo in giro, ed in tre mesi perdetti padre, madre e bambino ...'

adding, as the one consoling factor, his Légion d'Honneur, information available to us via the Thorvaldsen concert-organisers as we can see from the title page of the manuscript of the miniscule cantata which effectively "pins" the date of this music to these devastating Roman days - when, in spite of tragedy - he could put his hand to a lighthearted gesture. A letter too, mentioning his plans to leave Rome almost immediately.

How he passed his Roman days musically in this tragic interim is a more speculative affair. What melodies were in his mind in the wake of the triumphant *Belisario* and the shipwrecked *Stuarda*? We know that around this time he was composing *Il campanello di notte*, "during the first half of 1836" Ashbrook says. Its first performance took place at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples on 1 June 1836. What else? Almost

contemporaneously he was negotiating with Lanari for the contract for *Pia de'Tolomei* which would not appear until 1837 while his *Betty* and his remarkable *L'assedio di Calais* lay in between these two poles.

A precise timetable for this tiny composition can thus only be conjectural. Maybe - such was his resilience in the face of personal disaster, as witnessed by the passionate output following the death of Virginia so soon to come - that Barbieri's perfunctory project must have appeared as a solace to the heartache over the disappearance of his neglected parents in their domestic shrine at Bergamo, that he had so abjectly failed to visit during his journey from Venice.

And was Professor Barbieri himself present at this "Birthday" in Rome? On the surface it seems unlikely, some of his text - however 'improvised' - was utterly unflattering in view of the misspellings in the copyist manuscript that survives (and which he would have changed on the spot?). It is tempting, if entirely conjectural, to guess that the entire substance of the cantata, words and music, may have been scribbled on the back of a menu after a bibulous reunion in a Roman tavern a few days before, and then painfully deciphered for the performance to come?

And was the party a success? Who else was there?. This may be answered partly by a letter written by one of the participants - namely the fourteen-year old Marie Puggard who 'acted' a part in one of the allegoric *tableaux* that were presented that evening. Marie reports that la Signora Barbieri was indeed present and had been assigned parts in two of the set-pieces put on in honour of the famous sculptor: that is, she posed as the *Sistine Madonna* of Raphael and later as a *Santa Cecilia*. Marie does not mention the poet, the husband of the lady [but according to Bjarne Jornæs writing in the Thorvaldsen Museum Bulletin (Copenhagen 1989) 161 "*The Danske Prometheus. A rediscovered song by Donizetti*"] he did attend irrespective of any injury done to his literary renown. Marie mentions that a "*choralsong*" was performed. No composer is mentioned, it can only have been that supplied by Donizetti. She also reports that the famous sculptor was enchanted: "*Thorvaldsen was Soulhappy and the whole Party was joyous. After the Tableaux there was a bit of dancing and at half-past four the guests went home.*"

Thorvaldsen kept the music. Since his death the manuscript of this "*choralsong*" (Marie uses the Danish word "korsang") that fleeting crossing of two major activists on the cultural scene of their day currently resides in the archive of the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen - at the heart of the enlightened metropolis where the Italophil artist returned to end his days two years after this momentous "Birthday". A portion of his huge fortune went into the endowment of a splendid neo-classical museum, in which, begun in 1839, and surrounded by some of the most imposing monuments known to man - he now lies proudly interred.

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Finally, a comment upon the scarcely-inspired text and pleasing music of this instant laurel-wreath destined for the venerable Dane. Both are very simple, the verse in six quatrains is quite banal, as if written without reflection, but no more so indeed that any other such improvised *poesie* especially when transcribed by someone other than the author. Set in 'jog-trot' quatrains the text includes one or two technical terms given to sculpture and with an endearingly modern emphasis upon money - upon remuneration in gold (though neither Barbieri - his name misspelled 'Barberi' - nor Donizetti) could have been expected to receive any.

The text is as follows:

*Con le grazie, con le muse,
venga Apollo a noi cortese,
il Prometeo Danese
con l'alloro a coronar.*

*Con la crota, con li sassi,
forme umane a fare imprese,
il Prometeo Danese
e col dito le animo.*

*Vanni eroi, persone illustri,
alla vita al fatto ei rese,
il Prometeo Danese
che le senti a palpitar.*

*Se dal Nord, tanto fuoco,
a noi venne e qui l'accese,
pel Prometeo Danese
or l'Italia che sarà?*

*Lo terrà per mille lustri
a dar gloria al suo paese,
e il Prometeo Danese
mille allori porgerà.*

*Lo terrà per mille lustri
a dar gloria al suo paese,
e il Prometeo Danese
mille allori ei porgerà*

...mille allori ei porgerà

This “Birthday” offering survives in a heterographic manuscript of oblong format in the *Thorvaldsens Museums Arkiv* [marked ‘Skrevne Digte’] consisting of four pages of music in one bifolio, 28 cms by 20cms, each of ten staves, with three systems upon each page and composed for tenor and keyboard. As the manuscript title-page tells us, the tenor soloist at this “Birthday party” was an amateur, a friend probably, and otherwise unknown, the “dilettante Carlo Santi”. The work presents no vocal problems. The music, 52 measures in a resolute G major has a simple melodic contour of some fluency, the word “*Danese*” not infrequently underpinned by a *forte* (in bar 23 for example) but followed abruptly by a piano softening upon the phrase ‘*che le senti a palpitar*’ in bar 24, witnessing a maestro whose private emotions at that time were overwhelming. The change of pace at bar 34 quickens the mood of glory of the two final quatrains and reaches a vocal climax with the double-bar of 49 - intended no doubt, in the absence of any dynamic - to be capped by a fortissimo *unisono* repeat upon the “golden handshake” due to their hero: “**mille allori ei porgerà!**”.

It is a trifle, not more, a memento merely of a bitter-sweet incident in the life of the busy musician, generous with his notes. A mini-cry to the heavens anticipating in matrix his far-more celebrated *Dalla Francia un saluto t’invia* destined for his beloved master Mayr some five years later. If only in its terminal *unisono* cry. An important milestone this latter, his heartfelt contribution to a birthday much more dear to his past and present and about whose interpretation he wrote with tender emotion: “*Quanto al mio grido, ed al mio augurio, il suo core sarà il miglior interprete...*”

An observation, after all, true for almost every note of his grateful pupil's music.

¹ Pietro Canonica (1869-1959) The opera by this long-lived composer-sculptor with a libretto by Carlo Bernardi, after Goethe, was first staged in Rome – city of sculptors – in 1918

² Donizetti seems invariably to have lodged in the apartment of his brother-in-law Toto Vasselli in the Palazzo Gavotti, via della Muratte 78

³ The work of the Bergamasc sculptor Giovanni Maria Benzoni

⁴ To whom he frequently sent salutations and called “*nostro Marchesi*”. The music he wrote for him, a ‘*Marcia funebre*’ [Zavadini p189] was published by Cottrau and republished by the Mayr-Donizetti Press (London-Davos nd)

⁶ Barbieri was the author and publisher of a series of translations “*trasporta in versi italiani dal Professore G.Barbieri*” entitled “*Repertorio scelto ad uso de’teatri italiani* (pub. 1823-4), primarily translations of French plays and the source

upon which Tottola had based his libretto for *Il castello di Kenilworth* (1829) for Donizetti. It had been adapted by Barbieri from Scribe's text for *Leicester, ou Le Chateau de Kenilworth* by Auber (1823). For Pacini, Barbieri had supplied the libretti of *Il talismano* (1828) and *Giovanna d'Arco* (1830) as well as that of Pacini's "family" opera *Il convitato di pietra* (1832)

⁷ Francesco Regli *Dizionario Biografico* (Turin 1866) [voce Gaetano Barbieri]

⁸ Giovanni Pacini *Le mie memorie artistiche* (Florence 1865) 57

⁹ On 13 June 1833, to be sung by the tenor Pietro Angelini according to Cametti

ⁱ 26 July

ⁱⁱ Carved in three months as a superfluous boost to the ego of the visiting Napoleon in 1812