

BY PAUL THOMASON

Royal Fireworks

Donizetti's bel canto masterpiece *Roberto Devereux* offers one of opera's most compelling portraits of Queen Elizabeth I



CREMICHAEL COOPER/CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY/DT

Three days after the premiere of *Roberto Devereux* on October 28, 1837, Gaetano Donizetti wrote to the publisher Tito Ricordi, “It is not up to me to tell you how it went, for I am more modest than a whore, and therefore I would blush. But it went very, very well indeed.” In fact, the audience at Naples’ Teatro San Carlo had been extremely enthusiastic, and for more than 40 years the opera was given in a number of theaters, even reaching New York in 1849.

Donizetti must have been gratified by the acclaim for his new work since it had been written during some of the darkest days of his life. Four months earlier, on June 17, 1837, his wife, Virginia, gave birth to a son who died an hour later. Six weeks after that, Virginia herself died at age 28. Donizetti was so overwhelmed with grief that his friends were afraid of what he might do to himself and moved him to the home of a friend where he remained in bed for several days, unable to get up. For the rest of his life, he never again spoke or wrote Virginia’s name. The cause of her death is something of a mystery. Cholera was rampant in Naples at the time. Donizetti himself blamed measles, but that is unlikely. Far more probable is that she died of syphilis contracted from her husband who had, himself, become infected before their marriage. (Donizetti would die of the disease in 1848.) Somehow, he eventually found the inner strength to begin work on his new opera that was scheduled to begin rehearsals within a few weeks.

The libretto was by Salvatore Cammarano who had first worked with the composer two years earlier on *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In all, he would provide eight libretti for Donizetti before working with Verdi on four operas, including *Luisa Miller* and *Il Trovatore*. For *Roberto Devereux*, Cammarano had the advantage of having not only François Ancelot’s 1832 Parisian play *Elisabeth d’Angleterre* but also Felice Romani’s libretto for *Il Conte d’Essex*, Saverio Mercadante’s opera that had been unsuccessful at its 1833 premiere in Milan. If the drama is not exactly historically accurate (see accompanying article), the characters are sharply defined, especially the multifaceted portrait of Elisabetta who towers above everyone else, and the situations in which they find themselves create riveting drama. Cammarano gave Donizetti plenty of opportunities throughout to write gripping music conveying the shifting emotions the characters are experiencing—opportunities Donizetti exploited fully.

Roberto Devereux was not the first time Teatro San Carlo experienced the premiere of an opera about England’s Queen Elizabeth I, nor was it the first time Donizetti had composed an opera with her as a major character. Twenty-two years before *Roberto Devereux*, Gioachino Rossini had written *Elisabetta, Regina d’Inghilterra*. It was the first of a remarkable string of operas Rossini would write for the San Carlo, and the first to star Isabella Colbran who would later become his wife. Unlike *Devereux*, *Elisabetta* ends happily when the Queen forgives the man she loves, the Earl of Leicester, for marrying another woman and publicly blesses their union.

Donizetti wrote three operas in which Queen Elizabeth I is a character—all, oddly enough, for the Teatro San Carlo. The first was *Il Castello di Kenilworth (Kenilworth Castle)* in 1829. The plot revolves around the Earl of Leicester’s attempts to keep his marriage a secret from Elizabeth or Elisabetta who, though she loves him, gives her blessing to the marriage at the end. (Joan Sutherland recorded an aria from the opera on her 1985 *Bel Canto Arias* album.)

Better known today is *Maria Stuarda*, written for Teatro San Carlo in 1834 but banned after the dress rehearsal by the King of Naples himself. Perhaps it was because the Queen, Maria Cristina, was a direct descendant of Mary Stuart who is beheaded at the end of the opera. Perhaps it was also the notoriety that had been attached to the opera after the first orchestra rehearsal.

In the second act, the two queens confront each other. Eventually things turn ugly and Mary—sung by Giuseppina Ronzi-de Begnis—denounces Elisabetta—Anna del Sere—in scathing terms, ending with calling her a *vil bastarda* (vile bastard). Del Sere apparently felt that Ronzi had delivered the caustic phrases a little too personally and lunged at her rival soprano, pulling her hair and pummeling her with her fists. There were even reports of biting. Ronzi fell to the floor, then got up and charged del Sere to repay her in kind. Del Sere fainted and had to be carried home. Ronzi thought Donizetti was out of earshot and complained, “Donizetti protects that whore of a del Sere.” To which Donizetti promptly replied, “I do not protect any of you, but those two queens were whores, and you two are whores.” The censors demanded some



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Top: Donizetti’s wife, Virginia, died just four months before *Roberto Devereux*’s premiere on October 28, 1837.

Bottom: Prolific Neapolitan librettist Salvatore Cammarano (1801–1852) also collaborated with Donizetti for *Lucia di Lammermoor* and six other operas.

Opposite: Sondra Radvanovsky as *Elisabetta* in Canadian Opera Company’s production of *Roberto Devereux*, staged by Stephen Lawless.

changes, Donizetti complied, and eventually the dress rehearsal was given before a delighted audience. But then the King banned the opera. The music was fitted to a new text that had nothing to do with English history and was presented as *Buondelmonte*. The original *Maria Stuarda* was finally given at Milan's La Scala in 1835. (The American stage premiere of *Maria Stuarda* was given by San Francisco Opera on November 12, 1971 with Joan Sutherland as Mary Stuart and Richard Bonyngue conducting.)

Ostensibly, Donizetti did not hold Ronzi's behavior—or her cutting remarks—against her because she created the role of Elisabetta in *Roberto Devereux* three years later. It was the last of the five operas he wrote specifically for her in which she performed. (He later wrote the part of Paolina in *Poliuto* for her, but she was unable to appear in it.) Since Ronzi did sing Anna Bolena (originally written for Giuditta Pasta), she was the first soprano to sing all three operas known today as Donizetti's Tudor trilogy, although she sang Elisabetta rather than the title role of *Maria Stuarda*. The idea of a soprano singing Anna Bolena, Maria Stuarda, and Elisabetta in *Devereux* as a cycle seems to be a 20th-century invention with Beverly Sills (in the U.S.) and Leyla Gencer and Montserrat Caballé (in Europe) doing so. In 1964, Gencer sang the first performance of *Roberto Devereux* given since 1882 and did so at the theater that saw its world premiere.

Roberto Devereux is a bel canto opera, firmly in the tradition of arias and duets that are structured in a certain way: recitative, then a slow, lyrical number followed by a cabaletta, a faster showpiece. But Donizetti brings a new dramatic urgency to this blueprint. Vocal embellishments are not used just to show off the singer's voice but are employed throughout to add emphasis to the drama. For instance, in the sec-

ond act, Elisabetta confronts Roberto after being given the scarf that was taken from him when he was arrested, a scarf that proved to Elisabetta he loves another woman (even though he has denied it). Rather quietly, she reminds him of his denials. "'No,' you answered. 'No, no.'" There is a long silent pause, and then she explodes, "You're faithless, a villain, a liar." Each accusation is embellished with a descending octave sixteenth-note run, each note like an angry slash of a knife. The coloratura amplifies Elisabetta's fury far more than if she just sang the two notes of the descending octave.

Another characteristic of bel canto opera is the emphasis on conveying the drama through the voice itself, rather than the orchestra. Time and again, Donizetti asks the singers to sing a cappella at key moments, allowing the singer the freedom to shape the drama. A few minutes after Elisabetta confronts Roberto, she tells him his life is in peril, but she will spare him if he names her rival. There is a long pause, then she sings the word "Parla" ("Speak"). There is another pause and she repeats "Parla," drawing out the word this second time. Both times she is singing a cappella. It is a brilliant stroke on Donizetti's part to silence the orchestra, leaving Elisabetta totally exposed, the voice mirroring her emotional state at that moment. It also allows the soprano great leeway in how she sings those words. Does she beg? Demand? Is she a wounded woman pleading with the man she loves? Is she utterly furious with him? When Roberto does not respond to her first "Parla," does she change the way she sings the word a second time? By making those two words a cappella, Donizetti opens a world of nuance for the soprano to plunder.

"The second act of *Roberto Devereux* achieves, in its very own Italian way, the Wagnerian ideal of music drama," writes William Ashbrook in *Donizetti and His Operas*. It consists of only three numbers, but the drama moves like a whirlwind, culminating in a rousing ensemble only moments after Elisabetta's "Parla." As the



orchestra quietly plays rather ominous music, Elisabetta intones on the same note, “The Council of Peers has handed me this man’s death sentence. I am”—and then she and the orchestra move up one half step—“signing it.”

It is a chilling moment that continues as she says that the sun has already started rising in the sky and when it reaches its peak, the ax will fall. Very gradually as she pronounces this death sentence, her vocal line and the orchestra creep up, as if mirroring the rise of the sun. Then she looks at Roberto and sings “Và” (“Go”). That “Và” is another a cappella moment, allowing the soprano to put her own stamp on the drama. Is she enraged? Filled with regret? Sorrowful? Does she speak the word rather than sing it? There is another moment of silence, and then she completely detaches: “Go! Death hangs over your head! Dishonor descends over your name!” Her jagged vocal line starts low, lunging its way up to a high A above the staff which is approached as a leap from the C-sharp below, giving that climactic A the impression of a lightning flash. Eventually, Roberto and Nottingham join in, followed by the chorus, creating a sensational ending to the act.

Donizetti gives new importance to the orchestra in *Roberto Devereux*, without ever forsaking bel canto tradition. For instance, in the middle of the Act III duet between Sara and her husband, Nottingham, the orchestra begins to play a rather sinister march, letting us know the soldiers are even then going to the Tower of London to retrieve Roberto for his execution. The next scene takes place in Roberto’s cell in the Tower, and the orchestra sets the stage with a lengthy introduction, reminiscent of the opening of Florestan’s aria in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and looking forward to the way Verdi would introduce Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

It all culminates in Elisabetta’s great final scene, one of the crown jewels in all of bel canto opera. She desperately hopes Roberto will send her the ring so she can spare his life. But when Sara finally rushes in with the ring, it is too late. Donizetti brilliantly captures the shifting emotions rushing through Elisabetta at that moment. “Elisabetta was full of shrill sound and unbridled fury,” Beverly Sills once explained. “She’d lost the only man she’d ever loved, and she knew it all too well. The Queen of England had suddenly become a bitter, heartbroken old lady. She’d continue to be the most powerful woman in the world, but the rest of her days would be filled with frustrated, relentless rage.”

It is a long journey from the Elisabetta at the beginning of the opera who is filled with love for Roberto and eagerly looks forward to seeing him. “The role of Elisabetta, I think, is the most taxing in the entire soprano bel canto repertoire,” said Beverly Sills. William Ashbrook summed it up quite accurately when he wrote, “In Elisabetta, [Donizetti] created a complex tragic portrait that can, without any embarrassment, be placed beside Bellini’s *Norma*.”

Writer, lecturer, and teacher Paul Thomason is currently writing a book on the music of Richard Strauss.



RON SCHERL

Above: San Francisco’s only previous performance of Roberto Devereux in 1979 starred Montserrat Caballé and Carlo Bini.

Left and right: Beverly Sills as Elisabetta in Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts’ 1975 production of Roberto Devereux.



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