

"I have finished, orchestrated,
and delivered a little opera..."

Gaetano Donizetti and *La Fille du Régiment*

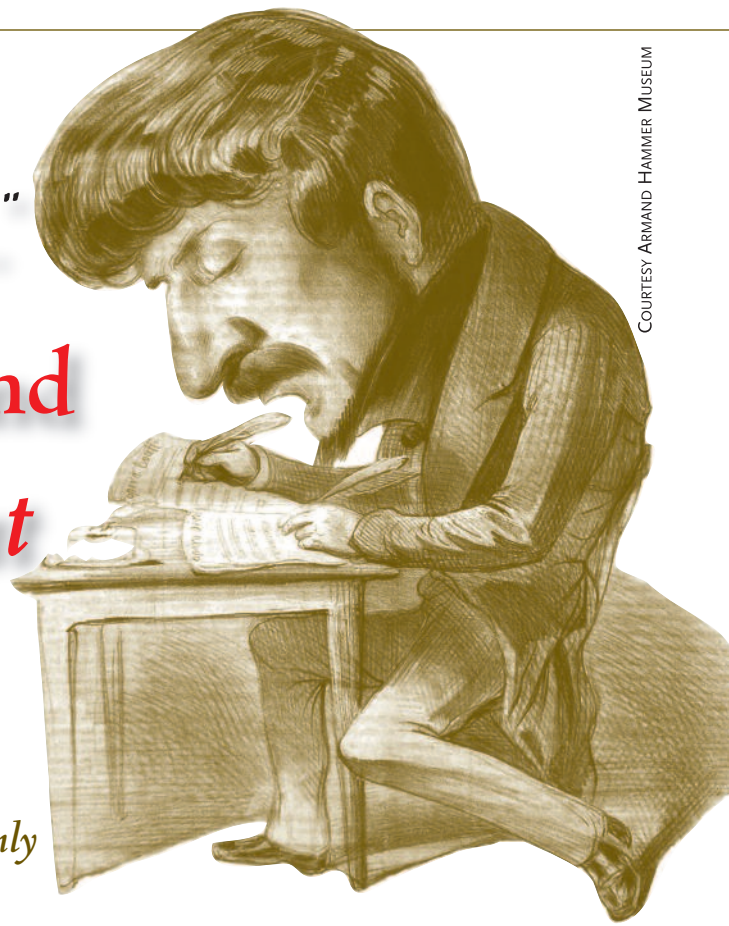
*"Donizetti, whose brilliant genius has given us
a hundred different masterworks, soon will have only
one homeland and that will be the entire universe."*

So reads the caption for a brilliant caricature of Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), published in the April 26, 1840 issue of *Le Charivari*, the satirical French newspaper. Ticked by this "honor," the delighted composer wrote to his friend Antonio Dolci, "You're laughing, eh! To see me this way in this newspaper? I'm writing with two hands, the right [for opera buffa] and the left [for opera seria], to show how fast I write; the verses are flattering." (April 27, 1840) The occasion for this piece of humor derived not only from Donizetti's prodigious output (he had composed fifty-two operas by this time), but also that in two years, three Parisian theaters had produced six new productions of his works: *Roberto Devereux* (1838); *L'Elisir d'Amore* and the French version of *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1839); and *La Fille du Régiment*, *Les Martyrs*, and *La Favorite* (1840).

Several of Donizetti's operas were already familiar to the Parisian public through performances at the Théâtre Italien managed by Gioachino Rossini. Following the stagings of *Anna Bolena* (1831) and *Gianni di Parigi* (1833), Rossini commissioned Donizetti's first composition for Paris, *Marino Faliero*, an imprimatur that bolstered the composer's reputation. The opera premiered on March 12, 1835 and achieved a *succès d'estime* in a season that also featured the first performances of Vincenzo Bellini's *I Puritani*.

Paris in the late 1830s, with a population of over 900,000, was

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the capital ruled by the "citizen king" Louis-Philippe. The familiar landmark of the Eiffel Tower did not yet exist. The *Arc de Triomphe* completed construction only in 1836, and the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur on the Montmartre appeared first in 1873. Most streets were narrow, dark, and unpaved—perfect for building barricades during times of political unrest. Hundreds of streetlights lit by natural gas made their appearance, as did the first form of public transportation, the *omnibus*. The grandiose Paris Opéra, known today as the Palais Garnier in honor of its architect, opened in 1875. The wide and grand boulevards such as the Avenue de l'Opéra did not take form until the massive urban renewal projects of Georges-Eugène Haussmann began during the reign of Emperor Napoleon III.

Performances of opera, ballet, and plays held great public appeal and attending these was tantamount to going to the movies. More than twenty-five theaters, including three opera houses, flourished in and around the center of Paris. Plays of all kinds were enormously popular. Six separate theaters stood next to one another within a quarter-mile stretch on the Boulevard du Temple, a precursor of today's gigantic movie megaplexes. Circuses and melodramas entertained members of the middle and lower classes with spectacular productions that sometimes rivaled the Opéra.

A rapidly growing middle-class attended the Académie Royale de Musique, known simply as the Opéra. Grandiose stagings occurred three to four times weekly. In 1839–1840, the repertory consisted mostly of grand operas of Meyerbeer, Halévy, Auber, and Rossini's French operas. Families enjoyed attending daily per-



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Previous casts of *La Fille du Régiment* at San Francisco Opera featured, as Tonio and Marie, William Harness and Beverly Sills (1974, left), and Frank Lopardo and Kathleen Battle (1993, right).

performances at the Opéra-Comique for its wholesome and lighter fare of music theater with dialogue, and the theater soon gained the reputation as a place where parents could show off their children and seek out potential marriage partners. Aficionados of dazzling singing attended the Théâtre Italien, where only imports of Italian operas—not only of Rossini, but also of Mozart, Donizetti, and Bellini—were seen and heard with star singers of the time.

After the 1835 premiere of his *Marino Faliero*, Donizetti departed for Italy. Three years later, he returned to Paris armed with new commissions for the Opéra (*Les Martyrs*), the Théâtre de la Renaissance (*L'Ange de Nisida* and *Lucie de Lammermoor*), and one for the Opéra-Comique—*La Fille du Régiment*. Requests to supervise rehearsals of *Roberto Devereux* and *L'Elisir d'Amore* at the Théâtre Italien awaited Donizetti's arrival, and the composer remained for almost two years amidst this whirlwind of activity.

A chain of events not only led to the creation of *La Fille du Régiment*, but also that of *La Favorite*. In the first six months of 1839, Donizetti completed the transformation of *Poliuto* into *Les Martyrs* for performance at the Opéra. Originally intended for the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, the politically and culturally repressive royal court banned *Poliuto* due to its portrayal of a saint on the stage. For the Théâtre de la Renaissance, Donizetti substantially revised *Lucia di Lammermoor* to accommodate the French text and added new music. Despite the successful premiere of *Lucie de Lammermoor* on August 6, 1839, the precarious finances and eventual bankruptcy of the Renaissance derailed any plans for Donizetti's first French opera, *L'Ange de Nisida*.

At the same time, Donizetti was in the midst of sketching musical scores of *Adelaide* for the Italien and *Le Duc d'Albe* for the Opéra. After some discussion, Leon Pillet, the director of the Opéra, declined to stage *Le Duc d'Albe* not ostensibly for artistic reasons, but for the lack of a major role for his mistress, the soprano Rosina Stolz. Donizetti then proposed his *L'Ange de Nisida*, originally intended for

the Renaissance, which would become one his finest operas, *La Favorite*. The opera, with its leading role for Stolz, premiered at the Opéra to great acclaim on December 2, 1841.

Scheduling conflicts at the Opéra forced the postponement of *Les Martyrs* into early spring of 1840. After the first performances of *Lucie de Lammermoor* and the score for *Les Martyrs* essentially completed and awaiting rehearsals, Donizetti found himself bored and at loose ends. Sometime in August, the direction of the Opéra-Comique approached the composer and commissioned a comic opera with dialogue. Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Jean-François-Alfred Bayard, experienced writers for the theater, created a libretto with a humorously absurd plot of a very young woman, Marie, raised from childhood by her “papas” of a French regiment—the 21st to be precise. She loves Tonio, a young man from the mountains of Tyrol, who joins the army and the regiment to be with her.

Donizetti rapidly composed *La Fille du Régiment*, his fifty-fifth opera. He gleefully reported to Tommaso Persico, “Meanwhile, [I have] finished, orchestrated, and delivered a little opera to the Opéra-Comique, which will be performed in a month or at the latest within forty days....” (October 9, 1839) Donizetti was too optimistic and the premiere was postponed to February 11, 1840. Little documentation remains of the creative process. Donizetti's autograph score is lost, and the music exists in a variety of manuscript and printed sources. Only a few generic prints of the staging survive, although the published libretto with the spoken dialogue and a staging manual exist.

La Fille du Régiment was Donizetti's first opera composed in French to reach the Paris stage, and he paid tribute to French pride and nationalism while at the same time mildly lampooning army life. One scene in each act stands out with the central character of Marie and the soldiers of her beloved 21st Regiment. Marie proudly sings the regimental song in the first act, titillating the public with a soldier's language coming from the mouth of a young woman:



Marie

Chacun le sait, chacun le dit,
Everyone knows it, everyone says it,
Le régiment par excellence,
The best of all regiments,
Le seul à qui l'on fait crédit
The only one to have credit
Dans tous les cabarets de France...
In all of the bars of France...
Le régiment, en tous pays,
The regiment, in every country,
L'effroi des amants, des maris...
The terror of lovers, of husbands...
Mais de la beauté bien suprême!
But the beauty that is supreme!
Il est là, morbleu!
That's the one, by God!
Le voilà, corbleu!
Here it is, by Jove!
Le beau Vingt-et-unième!
The glorious 21st Regiment!

Tonio

Vive le Vingt-et-unième!
Long live the 21st Regiment!

*(Sulpice and the soldiers hush Tonio,
indicating another verse to come)*

Marie

Il a gagné tant de combats,
We've won so many battles,
Que notre empereur, on le pense,
That our Emperor, so we think,
Fera chacun de ses soldats,
Will make every soldier,

AD

A la paix, maréchal de France!

When peace comes, a Marshal of France!

Car, c'est connu... le régiment

Because, it's known... the regiment

Le plus vainqueur, le plus charmant,

Is the most victorious, the most charming,

Qu'un sexe craint, et que l'autre aime,

Feared by one's sex, loved by the other,

Il est là, morbleu!

That's the one, by God!

Le voilà, corbleu!

Here it is, by Jove!

Le beau Vingt-et-unième!

The glorious 21st Regiment!

Act II finds Marie in the château of the Marquise de Berkenfield, sad, lonely, and longing for her family of the 21st Regiment. When she hears the roll of the drums at the appearance of her beloved soldiers, she sings a song of praise to France, which she will repeat with the entire ensemble to bring down the curtain at the end of the opera:

Salut à la France!

Hurrah for France!

A ses beaux jours!

For happy times!

A l'espérance!

For hope!

A nos amours!

For love!

Salut à la gloire!

Hurrah for glory!

Voilà pour mon cœur,

Now for my heart,

Avec la victoire,

With victory,

L'instant du bonheur!

The moment of happiness!

The song itself became an enormous hit with the public, published and sold separately, and enshrined as an unofficial French national anthem after *La Marseillaise*.

With one major exception, *La Fille du Régiment* received mostly cordial reviews in more than thirty Parisian newspapers and journals, and the opera was deemed a success with the public. Universally admired was Juliette Bourgeois, making her operatic debut as Marie with praise for her voice and "pretty figure." Only one reviewer singled out Tonio's show-stopping cavatina, "Pour mon âme quel destin," simply as "une brillante chansonette militaire."

One critic proved vitriolic and not wholly for artistic reasons. Hector Berlioz harbored great resentment of Donizetti's successes at the seeming expense of French composers. Berlioz, still smarting from the failure of his *Benvenuto Cellini* after ten performances at the Opéra in September 1838, was forced to earn his living writing newspaper articles. His sputtering review, published in the *Journal des Débats*, cast aspersions on Donizetti and claimed:

The music of a little opera, imitated or translated from the *Châlet* of [Adolphe] Adam, and to the success of which

Donizetti probably only attached very little importance.... The score of *Fille* is precisely one of those [pieces] that neither the composer nor the public takes seriously. The harmony, melody, rhythmic effects, instrumental and vocal combinations; it's music, if you wish, but not *new* music. The orchestra consumes itself in useless noises...." Berlioz's venomous resentment is apparent when the Italian composer "seems to treat us like a conquered country; it is a veritable invasion. One can no longer speak of the opera houses of Paris, but only of the opera houses of Donizetti [at the expense of our French colleagues]. (February 16, 1840)

Donizetti gently refuted Berlioz's claim of plagiarism in a letter to the editor of *Moniteur Universel* published the following day:

The author of the feuilleton is not afraid to claim that my score has already been heard in Italy, at least in great part, and that it is a little opera imitated or translated from *Le Châlet* by Adam. If Monsieur Berlioz, who rightly places conscience among the prime duties of an artist, had taken the trouble to open the score of my *Betty*, which has been engraved and published in Paris, and of which the poem is indeed a translation of *Le Châlet*, he would have assured himself that the two operas he cites do not have any pieces in common. Let it be permitted in fairness to affirm that the pieces that comprise *La Fille du Régiment* were all composed expressly for the Opéra-Comique and that not one of them has figured in any of my previous scores whatever.

Despite the carping of Berlioz and other critics, *La Fille du Régiment* proved popular with the public. More than fifty-five performances were recorded before Bastille Day, July 16, 1841. The 1848 revival of *La Fille du Régiment* propelled the opera to even greater success, with more than one thousand performances recorded by the first decade of the twentieth century.

Two singers from the premiere contributed descendants who would greatly influence music and opera. Mécène Marié de l'Isle (Tonio) was the father of the mezzo-soprano Célestine Galli-Marié, who herself became a star in her own right at the Opéra-Comique. She created the role of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) and, through her tireless efforts, elevated the opera to its iconic status. The granddaughters of Marie-Julienne Haligner Boulanger (Marquise of Berkenfeld) were Lili Boulanger, a composer, and her sister Nadia—also a composer, conductor, and (more importantly) an enormously influential teacher. Many of her students went on to stellar careers in music and journalism: Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, John Eliot Gardiner, and Philip Glass.

Any production of *La Fille du Régiment* offers splendid opportunities for humor, drama, and pathos, but also gentle satires of society and the romanticized view of the lives of French soldiers. Donizetti did not neglect vocal fireworks. The famous tenor aria with its nine high Cs "Pour mon âme quel destin," immortalized by Luciano Pavarotti, Alfredo Kraus, and Juan Diego Flórez, is guaranteed to stop the show. Together with Donizetti's music and Laurent Pelly's production, shared with the Metropolitan Opera; the Royal Opera, Covent Garden; the Vienna State Opera; and now San Francisco Opera, *La Fille du Régiment* is placed in its richly deserved position in the permanent opera repertory. ❁