

About the Composer

Gaetano Donizetti was born November 29, 1797 in Bergamo, Italy. He, Bellini and Rossini were the three great masters of the opera style known as *bel canto*. *Bel canto* operas had set numbers of separate arias and ensembles that featured particularly florid vocal writing designed to show off the human voice to maximum effect. These works demanded great virtuosity from the singers and served as star vehicles for leading operatic performers. Donizetti dominated the Italian opera scene during the years between Bellini's death and Verdi's rise to fame after *Nabucco*.

Donizetti's musical talents were apparent at an early age, and he was admitted to the Lezioni Caritatevoli school on full scholarship when he was nine years old. The school was founded by Simon Mayr, who had a significant influence upon Donizetti's musical development and helped the young composer launch his professional career. Mayr sent Donizetti to Padre Stanislao Mattei, the teacher of Rossini, for further compositional instruction. Mayr also partially paid for the lessons with Mattei and arranged for Bartolomeo Merelli to write the librettos for Donizetti's early stage works.



Between 1817 and 1821, Donizetti received several commissions from Paolo Zanca. His first staged opera was *Enrico di Borgogna* in 1818. He wrote several other works during this period, including chamber and church music as well as opera. It was the success of his fourth opera, *Zoraide di Grenata*, that caught the attention of Domenico Barbaia, the most important theater manager of his time. Barbaia offered Donizetti a contract. The young composer accepted it and moved to Naples, which was Barbaia's primary business location. For the next eight years Donizetti wrote works for Rome and Milan as well as Naples, with mixed success. It was not until 1830, with the performances of *Anna Bolena* in Milan, that Donizetti achieved international fame.

Donizetti was a prolific composer, writing both comic and serious operas as well as solo vocal music. Throughout his career he battled with the powerful Italian censors to put his works on stage. Two of his best-known comedies, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) and *Don Pasquale* (1843), are considered masterpieces of comic opera and continue to hold their places in the standard performing repertoire. Perhaps his most famous serious opera is *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), although *Anna Bolena* has enjoyed considerable success in this century through the efforts of such artists as Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland. Donizetti was well acquainted with the greatest singers of his day, and he created many of the roles in his operas for their specific vocal talents.

As Donizetti's fame grew, he was able to accept a variety of engagements, writing operas for Paris as well as the famous opera houses of Italy. He relocated to Paris in 1838. It was there that he composed *La Fille du Régiment* in 1840, which is still frequently performed. Donizetti was also appointed music director for the Italian opera season at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, a position secured for him by Mirelli, the librettist for his early works.

Donizetti was a friendly and sincere man, supportive of fellow composers and other artists, and loyal to his long-time mentor Mayr. Unfortunately, he endured great tragedy in his personal life. Donizetti had met his wife Virginia Vasselli while he was in Rome in the 1820s and married her in 1828. They had three children, none of whom survived. His parents died in the mid 1830s. A year after his parents' death, his wife succumbed to a cholera epidemic. Donizetti himself suffered from cerebro-spinal syphilis. Symptoms of his illness became evident as early as 1843; by 1845 his condition deteriorated to the point that he was institutionalized for almost a year and a half. His friend from Vienna, Baron Lannoy, interceded with Donizetti's nephew to have the composer moved to a Paris apartment where he could be cared for and receive visitors. Verdi came to see him there and was deeply saddened by his colleague's condition. Friends in Bergamo finally arranged for Donizetti to be brought back to his home town, where he stayed at Baroness Scotti's palace until his death in 1848.

Donizetti was reputed to have great facility and could compose very quickly. His favorite librettist was Salvatore Cammarano, with whom he first collaborated on *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Donizetti often assisted in writing the librettos for his operas. He completed 65 operas during his career; *L'elisir d'amore*, *Don Pasquale*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* are generally considered the outstanding examples of his work. His compositional style proved influential for future Italian opera composers, most notably Verdi.

Classroom Activity #1

Photocopy the biographical information about Donizetti on the previous page for your students. Have your students read the information and then engage them in the following questions and activities.

1. Have your students construct a timeline highlighting the events in the life of opera composer Gaetano Donizetti. Listed below are some initial dates. Encyclopedias, the Internet and the following biography sheet are good sources of information.

Donizetti's Life

- 1797 Gaetano Donizetti is born in Bergamo, Italy
- 1806 Begins studying at Palazzo della Misericordi
- 1815 Travels to Bologna to further his studies
- 1816 Writes his first opera, a one-act comedy
- 1818 Stages first opera *Enrico di Borgogna*
- 1820 Marianna Pezzoli-Grattaroli, a woman who believed in supporting promising young musicians, helps Donizetti avoid military service by paying for his exemption
- 1822 His first major success, *Zoraida di Granata* is performed in Rome, raising Donizetti from obscurity
- 1830 Composes *Anna Bolena* for Milan, marking the first of his international successes
- 1832 *L'elisir d'amore (The Elixir of Love)* premieres in Milan
- 1834 Donizetti signs a contract to produce three operas in Naples
- 1835 Begins to suffer difficulties with censors over choice of storylines; composes *Lucia di Lammermoor*
- 1837 Donizetti's wife dies; to escape depression and censorship, he accepts an invitation to Paris by Gioacchino Rossini
- 1843 Composes comic masterpiece *Don Pasquale*
- 1846 Confined to a mental institution near Paris with violent headaches and depression
- 1848 Dies on April 8 in Bergamo, Italy

2. Play examples of Donizetti's music in class. Start with a simple piano sonata and work your way up to symphonic and operatic excerpts. Track #1 on your CD contains the overture to DON PASQUALE. Ask your students to describe what they hear. What are the common qualities to his music? Are there similarities between different types of music? Does his music have an identifying "sound"? Later, play similar types of music but by different composers. How does a Beethoven piano sonata differ from one by Franz Liszt? Does an opera by Donizetti sound different than one by Puccini? Ask your students to describe the differences.