

## ***The Daughter of the Regiment*** **Historical Background** **by Stephen Willier**

In the 1830s and 1840s there were three opportunities for opera composers working in Paris, the operatic capital of Europe: a work in Italian at the Théâtre-Italien, a serious work in French at the Opéra, and a French comedy at the Opéra-Comique. Gaetano Donizetti achieved all three, sometimes simultaneously, a feat that nonplused the French composer and critic Hector Berlioz, who wrote: "It seems Monsieur Donizetti is treating us as conquered territory: it is a genuine invasion. One can no longer say 'the operatic stages of Paris,' merely 'the operatic stages of Monsieur Donizetti.' In 1839 Donizetti was in Paris finishing his French opera *Les Martyrs*, which he was adapting from his Italian opera *Poliuto*. While beginning a new French grand opera, *Le Duc d'Albe*, he took a break and wrote the bright, effervescent comedy, *La Fille du régiment* about the *vivandière* Marie and her love for the regiment and Tonio the tenor in particular. The lead role can be a comic and vocal *tour de force* and has been played with comic brilliance in our time by Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, and, more recently, Natalie Dessay. The role demands coruscating coloratura and was a favorite of such legendary vocalists of the past as Jenny Lind, Henriette Sontag, Adelina Patti, Luisa Tetrazzini, and Lily Pons. The premiere on 11 February 1840 was a qualified success but it gradually gained in popularity among the Parisians. By 1914 it had achieved its thousandth performance. In Italy it became popular in a translation by Calisto Bassi (*La Figlia del reggimento*) but several important arias are missing from Donizetti's Italian score and others were added. The original French version is more vibrant and, with Marie's military "Salut à la France," has often been associated with French patriotism. There was in fact a tradition for many years of performing this opera on Bastille Day at the Opéra-Comique.

The fun begins with the overture, which especially features Marie's "Chacun le sait." Musical numbers are separated by spoken dialogue, replaced by *recitativo secco* in the Italian version. Donizetti composed at least two Italian comic masterpieces, *L'Elisir d'amore* and *Don Pasquale*, but it is evident from the beginning of *La Fille* that he has not merely written an Italian *opera buffa* in the French language but has mastered the true French opéra comique style. Opera journalist Charles Osborne sees *La Fille du régiment* as "the link between the comic operas of Grétry and Adam and the operettas of Offenbach." Vocal brilliance in this work is accorded not only to the soprano Marie but also to the tenor. In the second section ("Pour mon âme") of his double aria "Ah, mes amis!" during which he receives the permission of the regiment to marry Marie, he is asked to emit eight high Cs in a row, a great test for a tenor. Most tenors, of course, cannot resist also adding an extra high C or two at the cadence. The launching of Luciano Pavarotti's international career is linked to the astonishing way he tossed off these high notes.

Act 2 begins with a highly comic scene in which the Marchioness of Berkenfield, seated at the piano and playing rather clumsily, tries to teach Marie a proper song befitting a young lady but she is thwarted both by her pupil (who produces a great deal of coloratura screeching) and Sulpice, who eventually break into the military Rataplan. Marie's subsequent aria, "Par le rang," begins in a melancholy manner but turns to rapture when Tonio and the regiment arrive. A rousing cabaletta, "Salut à la France" is sung by all, and then an infectious trio, "Tous les trois réunis" by Marie, Tonio, and Sulpice. The work ends with a tender aria for Tonio, "Pour me rapprocher de Marie," and by the act 2 finale, which features a repeat of "Salut à la France." As Jeremy Commons has written, "[*La Fille du régiment*] is one of the most infectiously gay operas Donizetti ever wrote; the music is so light, bright, and catchy that one's impulse is to jump to one's feet. . . .The music cries out for the audience to join in."

Stephen Willier is an accomplished music historian whose writings have appeared in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, *Opera Quarterly*, *Opera News* and *Grove Dictionary of Opera*.