

Opera Matters

By Robert Vineberg,

Opera Matters explores the background to the operas produced by the Manitoba Opera and what was happening in the world and in Winnipeg at the time of those operas.

La Fille du Régiment (The Daughter of the Regiment)

One might wonder why Gaetano Donizetti, an Italian opera composer, would create an opera in French. However, in the mid-19th Century, Paris was a great cultural centre and the Paris Opera was one of, if not *the*, greatest opera halls of the time. Donizetti had been famous, throughout Europe, since the 1820s and, in early 1838 he was negotiating a contract to compose two new works for the Paris Opera while preparing his opera *Poliuto* for its première at Naples, when the king prohibited the production. Fed up with Italian censorship, Donizetti left immediately for Paris. In Paris he worked with librettists, Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Jean-François Bayard to create *La Fille du Régiment*. It was first performed on February 11, 1840, in Paris and later, the same year at La Scala in Milan. It has been a staple of opera repertoires ever since.

Like any good comedic opera, the plot is silly – so silly, in fact that, master of the preposterous, W.S. Gilbert (later gaining fame with composer Sullivan) adapted the story for the English stage. It is set during the Napoleonic Wars when much of Europe glorified military life. The ruse of placing the heroine, Marie, as an orphan, raised as the “mascot” of a French army regiment provided Donizetti with a means to marry martial music with a love story and some include gorgeous tunes for Marie to sing. Also, Marie turns out, not to be an orphan but, rather, the misplaced daughter of a noble woman. She and her admirer, Tonio, a new recruit to the regiment, of course, are separated by events beyond their control, but this being a comedy, they are reunited in a splendidly ridiculous finale.

The music, however, is glorious. It is full of *bel canto* spectacles. *Bel canto*, literally ‘beautiful singing,’ is the term to describe the ornately embellished vocal style of opera in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, especially in Italy. This is now generally described as “coloratura.” Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini were the great masters of *bel canto*, this very Italian style. And “Daughter” is replete with examples of the style. Maria’s aria in Act II, *Par le rang et l’opulence*, and Tonio’s Act I aria, *Ah, mes amis*, with its nine (yes nine!) high Cs are both show-stoppers.

Donizetti was a prolific composer, writing some 75 operas and numerous instrumental pieces, but he is best remembered today, for his many operas that have stood the test of time and continue to challenge performers and delight audiences alike. These include, of course, *La Fille du Régiment* but also, *L’elisir d’amore*, *Don Pasquale*, *Maria Stuarda* and *Lucia de Lammermoor*. Gaetano Donizetti died in 1848 at the age of 50.

France in 1840

The early 1840s were a period of relative calm, politically, throughout Europe. However, economically and technologically, the world and France, too, was being transformed. The 1840s brought

development of the first real network of railways across France and suddenly long-distance transportation was available to millions of people. Rural French flocked to Paris in search of opportunity and Paris grew from about 500,000 in 1800 to almost 1,000,000 in 1840. Paris was rapidly becoming the cultural centre of the 19th Century world. Writer Emile Zola and painters Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet were all born in 1840.

Manitoba in 1840

Manitoba did not exist, as such, in 1840. The territory now occupied by Manitoba was part of “Rupert’s Land,” granted to the Hudson Bay Company in its charter from King Charles II in 1670. First Nations people dominated the sparse population of the area. Winnipeg, then known as Fort Garry, had a population of under 1,000 and served as the western headquarters of the Hudson Bay Company which not only traded for furs, but administered all of what is now Western Canada east of the Rockies. Fort Garry definitely did not have an opera company in 1853.
