

THE CLARINET AND THE ITALIAN OPERA COMPOSERS OF THE 19TH CENTURY*

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(English translation by *Antonio Pasaro*)

Contrary to common thought, almost every Italian opera composer of the 19th century wrote instrumental music and particularly music for the clarinet. Some of them even learned its technique—like Vincenzo Bellini, Saverio Mercadante and Francesco Morlacchi. Others, through different orchestral and chamber music compositions, could taste its timbral and technical qualities, and later reusing them in their opera compositions. Many opera composers also wrote music for the clarinet in order to satisfy virtuoso friends or primarily for didactic purposes.

To this last group belongs all the music composed by **Bonifazio Asioli** (1769–1832) for his School of Music of Correggio (Reggio Emilia). For the teacher of clarinet Fortunato Palazzi he composed the *Breve Metodo*, while for the pupils of the same school he wrote the *Sestetto* for harpsichord (or piano), clarinet, horn, bassoon, viola and cello, the *Sestetto* for two violins, clarinet, horn, viola and bassoon and the *16 Quartetti* for clarinet, two horns and bassoon.

From **Luigi Cherubini** (1760–1842), a composer active mainly in France, we have 2 *Morceaux* for clarinet and bass written in 1822 and 1824 as a sightreading piece for the exams at the Conservatory of Music of Paris – and the *Offertorium (Ave Maria gratia plena)* for soprano and clarinet with accompaniment of two violins, viola, cello and double bass. This piece was much appreciated in England where during the 19th century it was performed many times by the clarinetists **Henry Lazarus** (1815–1895) and **Thomas Lindsay Willman** (1784–1840).

Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) wrote many sacred compositions for voices and orchestra with an obbligato clarinet or basset horn, between 1814 and 1821. Some of these compositions are: *Qui tollis*, for tenor, obbligato clarinet and orchestra, *Preces meae* for tenor, basset horn and

orchestra. As a young composer he wrote the canzonetta “*Or che la notte*,” for soprano, clarinet and piano, dedicated to Lady Teresina Spadaro; the *Piccola composizione (Concertino)* for clarinet and orchestra; the *Larghetto in Fa maggiore* for two flutes, basset horn, two horns and bassoon and two *Studi* (1821), of which the *Primo* for solo clarinet and the *Secondo* for clarinet and bass, both composed for his friend, the clarinetist **Francesco Benigni**, who played in the ’30s in different orchestras in Bergamo. In dedicating these studies to him, Donizetti writes his surname incorrectly (*per l’amico Benigni*), while in the second it is correct (*a Benigni*). On the title pages of both manuscripts, there is the addition, added later by another hand “*Proprietà di L. Benigni*” (Property of L. Benigni). Probably he is **Luciano Benigni**, a son or a relative of Francesco, active in 1886 as first clarinet in the orchestra of the Basilica of Gandino (Bergamo).

Even though of German origin, **Giovanni Simone Mayr** (1763–1845) must be remembered among the most prolific Italian composers of music for the clarinet. As a matter of fact, he said: “Rightly I must be remembered as an Italian, not as a German composer.” Today we have more than 100 compositions written by him for the clarinetists of the *Cappella Musicale* in Bergamo, of which he was the conductor. Included among these were many sacred compositions with obbligato clarinet or basset horn; the *Concerto* for piccolo, flute, clarinet, basset horn and orchestra; the *Tema con variazioni* for clarinet and small orchestra; the *Concerto* for basset horn and orchestra; the *12 Bagatelles* for flute, clarinet and basset horn; the *Trio* for clarinet, violin and bass; the *2 Sonate* for clarinet, violone and piano; the *6 Fioretti* for basset horn, and piano and many *Divertimenti*, *Sonate*, *Quintetti*, *Sestetti* and other pieces for solo wind instruments with clarinet or clarinets and/or basset horn.

All the compositions by **Saverio Mercadante** (1795–1870) date back to the time when he was a student at the *Collegio di Musica di Napoli*. For some school concerts he composed 3 *Quartetti*, Op. 50 for flute, clarinet, horn and bassoon, the *Trio* for clarinet, violin and cello, the *Concerto* in E-flat, Op. 76, the *Concerto* in B-flat, Op. 101 and the three *Concertoni*,

two of which were for flute, two clarinets, horn and orchestra and one for flute, clarinet, horn and orchestra. One of these was performed in an academy of the *Collegio di Musica di Napoli* in December 1817: [...]signor Mercadante conducted as *Concertmaster* and was the composer of six nice pieces, written with bright imagination, correct style and a rare purity of taste. The audience appreciated mostly a great *Concerto* for four wind instruments which gave to the young Mercadante the honor of the press.

The compositions written by **Giovanni Pacini** (1796–1867) belong to his artistic maturity. Except for the youthful *Potpourri* for clarinet, two violins and cello, published in 1824, all the other compositions date back to the period when he was chapel master and director of the *Istituto Musicale* in Lucca. In these situations he composed the *Laudamus* and *Gratias* for baritone, obbligato clarinet and orchestra, the *Quoniam in La*, for bass, clarinet and orchestra, the *Concertone* for oboe, clarinet, trumpet, trombone with orchestra. In the last years of his life he composed the very good *Divertimento* for clarinet, cello and piano. This was performed for the first time in an academy given on October 19, 1865, at the Theatre of Buti (Pisa) by the clarinetist **Luigi Angeli** (1828–1877), the cellist Tesi and the pianist Leonetta Giulli, for whom it was explicitly composed.

Considered one of the best opera composers of the second half of the 19th century, **Amilcare Ponchielli** (1834–1886) composed also some valuable pieces for the clarinet. In 1857 he wrote *Il Convegno Divertimento*, Op. 76 for two clarinets and orchestra, “explicitly composed and dedicated with true affection to the friends Alessandro Peri and Massimiliano Sacchi.” The author also made an arrangement with piano accompaniment, published by Edizioni Lucca in Milan and reprinted in 1888 by Edizioni Ricordi (I-Mc). In the same year he also most likely composed the *Duetto*, Op. 78 *Paolo e Virginia*, for violin, clarinet and piano, and the *Ricordanze della Traviata Divertimento*, Op. 82, for flute, oboe, clarinet and piano.

He composed in 1857 the *Quartetto*, Op. 110 for flute, oboe, piccolo clarinet in E-flat and clarinet in B-flat with piano accompaniment, performed for the first time on September 16, 1857, at the *Teatro della Concordia* in Cremona: “On that night the

skilled orchestra-players Alessandro Peri, Tronconi Giuseppe, Massimiliano Sacchi and Valdemi Antonio performed a quartet for clarinet, clarone, oboe and flute, a very beautiful composition by our skilled Maestro Amilcare Ponchielli. It was welcomed with many roaring applause.”

In 1873 the composer edited a new version of this piece with orchestral accompaniment, performed on the 8th of September of the same year in an academy given at the Conservatory of Milan by the flutist **Daide Carcano**, oboist **Abele Zani** and clarinetists **Emilio Porrini** (1858–1900) and **Luigi Maldura** (1858– post. 1907).

Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868) has always paid great attention to the clarinet, not only as a composer but also as a consultant (but actually the director) of the *Liceo Musicale* of Bologna. As a matter of fact, in 1841 he asked the singer Domenico Donzelli (1791–1873) to buy in Vienna new scores for the pupils of the class of clarinet of his friend Domenico Liverani (1805–1877):

“You will ask any Maestro or connoisseur of music to select some pieces for solo clarinet, clarinet and piano, trios, quartets, quintets, septets, etc. for wind instruments and strings. I have been said that there are many good pieces composed by Mendelssohn; please be careful about the choice of the pieces and the money you are going to spend, because these pieces are for the Liceo Comunale [...]. You do not have to select solely pieces by Mendelssohn: all the composers will be good. Weber, for example, has composed beautiful pieces, and so did many others [...].”

During his studies he composed the *Variazioni a più strumenti obbligati* for concertante clarinet, two violins, viola, cello and orchestra (1809) and the *Variazioni a Clarinetto o Oboè* with orchestra. The latter were composed around 1810, probably as a public experiment of counterpoint in the school of Mattei. In the final section of the manuscript he wrote down some variations and arpeggios, completely ignored by modern editions, while on the title page the word *Oboé* has been lately erased. This last aspect is very important, and, if the variations were written by Rossini around 1810, probably this composition was performed for the first

time with oboe.

The class of clarinet taught by **Petronio Avoni** (?-1839) was started in the *Liceo Musicale* in Bologna, only in the school year 1811–12, when Rossini had already completed his studies (November 1810) and had moved to Venice. After 1812 he composed the septet *La Notte, Temporale, Preghiera, Caccia* for two flutes, clarinet and string quartet and the *Tema con variazioni* for flute, clarinet, horn and bassoon. The latter—published for the first time in Paris in 1828 by the sons of the publisher Schott, together with the first five *Sonate a Quattro* for two violins, cello and double bass transcribed for flute, clarinet and bassoon by **Frédéric Berr** (1794–1838)—was dedicated to his friend Sonda and was composed almost certainly not in 1812, as stated lately by the same Rossini. Divided into two movements, (Andante and Allegretto), this work with its brilliant and pleasant writing style testifies to the great talent of the young Rossini in exploiting the technical and expressive peculiarities of the four wind instruments. In ca. 1819 he composed the *Variazioni in Sib* for clarinet and orchestra, written for the professor of clarinet **Alessandro Abate**. From a letter posted to Rossini written in Florence on the 29th March 1852 by the violinist **Ferdinando Giorgetti** (1796–1867), we know that the composer, “With true modesty said that it is a thing done only for fun and to satisfy the wish of an old friend.” This composition—today known with the title of *Introduzione, Tema e Variazioni*—was composed when Rossini was in Naples, reusing some of his previous operatic melodies. For instance, the introductory Andante is based on the Air *La pace mia smarrita* from Act II of the opera *Mosè in Egitto*; while the variations are developed on the theme of the cavatina *Oh quante lagrime* from Act I of the opera *La donna del Lago*; in the final coda there is the development of the fragment which is at the end of the same cavatina. Published around 1822 by Cipriani of Florence, these variations were printed also in Germany in 1825 by Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig. In 1829 the *Fantasia* for clarinet and piano was published for the first time in Milan by Ricordi and in Paris by the sons of the publisher Schott. According to E cudier brothers, this *Solo de Clarinette* was composed and dedicated by Rossini to his friend **Valentin de La-**

pelouze (1777– ?), an amateur clarinetist and member of the editorial staff of the *Courier Français*.

The only composition by **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) that we know something about is the *Tema originale*, performed by the clarinetist **Giuseppe Mari-gliani** in Busseto on October 12, 1834, in the vocal and instrumental academy performed in the living room of the Barezzi home.

The compositions for clarinet by **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801–1835), written when he was a student and quoted in some 19th century biographies, have probably been lost.

Among the other compositions written by “minor” opera composers, there are the *Sestetto* for oboe, two clarinets, horn and two bassoons by **Giovanni Bolzoni** (1841–1919); the *Divertimento L’Ommaggio* for flute, clarinet, trumpet, two violins, viola and double bass by **Gaetano Braga** (1829–1907); the *Solo* for clarinet and other instruments by **Michele Enrico Carafa** (1787–1872); the *Nonetto* for oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, piano and string quartet by **Nicola D’Arienzo** (1842–1915); the 3 *Fantasie* op. 1–3 for clarinet and piano by di **Raffaele Giannetti** (1817–1872); the *Andante melanconico* for clarinet and piano by **Filippo Marchetti** (1831–1902); the *Finaletto* for flute, clarinet, horn, violin, viola and cello by **Francesco Morlacchi** (1784–1841); the *Beatus Vir* for soprano, obbligato clarinet and orchestra by **Ferdinando Paer** (1771–1839); the *Sestetto concertato* for flute, two clarinets, two horns and bassoon by **Giacomo Panizza** (1804–1860); the *Preludio e Fuga* for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon by **Pietro Platania** (1828–1907); the *Adagio obbligato* for flute, clarinet, horn and bassoon with orchestra by **Ferdinando Provesi** (1770–1833); the *Tema con variazioni* for clarinet and orchestra by **Vittorio Trento** (1861–1833); the *Variazioni* for clarinet and orchestra by **Nicola Vaccaj** (1790–1848); the *Sestetto* for two flutes, two clarinets and two bassoons and the two *Esercizii* for two clarinets by **Nicola Zingarelli** (1752–1837).

* This article is taken from my last book: *Il Clarinetto in Italia nell’Ottocento (The Clarinet in Italy in the 19th century)*, Perugia, Accademia Italiana del Clari-

netto, 2009. Readers are urged to refer to it for the notes and bibliographical abbreviations found in it.

Photo captions:

1) B. ASIOLI, *Sestetto* (Milan, Ricordi, 1818; I-Mc, I-Nc)

2) G. DONIZETTI, *Piccola Composizione* (autograph manuscript; I-BGm)

3) S. MERCADANTE, *Concerto op. 101* (autograph manuscript; I-Nc)

4) G. ROSSINI, *Variazioni* (Florence, Cipriani, 1822 ca.; I-MOi)

5) G. ROSSINI, *Variazioni in Do* (autograph manuscript, 1810; I-Bc)

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