

*b* Bergamo, November 29, 1797; *d* Bergamo, April 8, 1848

With nearly 70 operas to his credit, Gaetano Donizetti was the leading Italian composer in the decade between Vincenzo Bellini's death and the rise of Giuseppe Verdi. Donizetti was born in the northern Italian city of Bergamo to an impoverished family. After showing some musical talent he was enrolled in the town's Lezioni Caritatevoli and had the good fortune to study with Giovanni Simone Mayr, *maestro di cappella* at Santa Maria Maggiore. Originally from Bavaria, Mayr was a successful composer in Italy during the era preceding Rossini's rise to fame, with dozens of operas to his credit. Though offered many prestigious appointments throughout Europe, Mayr remained loyal to his adopted community and greatly enhanced the local musical institutions. Donizetti arrived at a time when Mayr was writing his greatest operas, and his impression on the younger composer was pronounced. Throughout his life Donizetti regarded him as a second father, though he would outlive his master by only three years.



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 2001 production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*

When it came time, Donizetti furthered his education at the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna (shadowing Rossini who had once studied there). He had already penned several short operas before receiving his first commission in 1818 from the Teatro San Luca in Venice – this was *Enrico di Borgogna* to a libretto by Bartolomeo Merelli (who, in later years as impresario of Milan's La Scala, was instrumental in the beginnings of Verdi's career). Further works were produced in Venice, but Donizetti returned to Bergamo for a few years of relative inactivity. A letter of introduction from Mayr to poet Jacopo Ferretti led Donizetti to Rome, where in 1822 he would have his first unequivocal success, *Zoraide di Grenata*. His career was just getting started.



A scene from Minnesota Opera's 2004 production of *Lucrezia Borgia*

Later that year Donizetti settled in Naples and used it as a base for the next 16 years. He arrived just as Rossini was finishing his seven-year contract with the royal theaters. Like Rossini he had the ability to work at the increasingly rapid pace demanded by the Italian theater industry and was able to produce three to four operas a year for most of his life. He worked with the leading librettists of the day, including Ferretti, Andrea Leone Tottola, Gaetano Rossi, Felice Romani and Salvatore Cammarano. Throughout the major cities of Rome, Florence, Genoa, Mantua and Venice, Donizetti produced a large body of works, some superior, some inferior – though he could tell the difference between a good and a bad libretto, the nearly impossible schedule dictated by theater impresarios necessitated the setting of both kinds. Consequently, several of his operas were not well-received at their premieres and still today seem dramatically flawed.

A larger percentage, however, remain timeless operatic gems. *Anna Bolena* (1830) gained Donizetti international esteem and was indicative of the composer's healthy appetite for English history [two later works of

distinction, *Maria Stuarda* (1835) and *Robert Devereux* (1837) complete what is known as the “Tudor trilogy”]. *L’elisir d’amore* (1832), *La fille du régiment* (1840), and *Don Pasquale* (1843) demonstrated his expert handling of lighter subjects, while *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), *Gemma di Vergy* (1834), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), *Maria de Rudenz* (1838), and *Maria Padilla* (1841) displayed the composer’s mastery of the Italian melodrama fueled by impassioned and unrestrained literature of the Romantic period. His influence on Verdi cannot be underestimated.

Donizetti’s success in dealing with both comic and tragic settings was due in part to his own manic-depressive personality. Well-acquainted with personal misfortune, Donizetti lost in the span of eight years his mother, father, two infant sons, an infant daughter and Virginia Vasselli, his wife of seven years. He never truly recuperated after her death, locking the door to her room and refusing to utter her name again. His melancholia may have been induced by early symptoms of syphilis, a disease he contracted as a young man, and also perhaps the responsibility he may have felt for harboring the disease that most likely cost him his wife and children.



A scene from Minnesota Opera’s 2005 production of *Maria Padilla*

Donizetti made his Paris debut in 1835 with *Marino Faliero* at the Théâtre Italien and later premiered *Les Martyrs* (1840) at the Paris Opéra. A French translation of *Lucia* made his name a household word, and in 1840 the composer captivated audiences with *La favorite*, which became hugely popular throughout Europe and North America. One of his very last works for the stage, *Dom Sébastien* (1843), was cast in the mold of French *grand opéra* and was extremely well-received.

The composer had hoped to assume Niccolò Zingarelli’s post as director of the Naples Conservatory, but when the 85-year-old composer died in 1837, Donizetti’s considerable musical contribution to the city was overlooked and the position went to a lesser composer, Saverio Mercadante, chiefly because he was a native Neapolitan. After a brief stint in Paris, Donizetti turned toward the Austrian state, where he became music director of the imperial theaters. Two of his final works had their premiere at Vienna’s principal venue, the Kärntnertortheater: *Linda di Chamounix* (1842) and *Maria di Roban* (1843). After

the success of *Linda*, he was appointed Composer to the Austrian Court, a position Mozart had held a half century before.



A scene from Minnesota Opera’s 2010 production of *Robert Devereux*

By 1845, symptoms of his illness had become incapacitating, and his erratic behavior could no longer be excused by overwork. With his family’s intervention Donizetti was placed in a French sanitarium at Ivry for 17 months, then transferred to a Paris apartment. There he was regularly visited by musicians and colleagues, including Verdi, but by this point he was paralyzed, disoriented and rarely spoke. In September 1847 friends arranged his return to Bergamo, where he passed his final days at the home of a wealthy patroness.