

# Opera and the Art of Anaesthetics

Delia Casadei

Review-essay of the opera *Il diluvio universale*. Music by Gaetano Donizetti, libretto by Domenico Gilardoni. Riccardo Frizza (Conductor), Masbedo (Project, directors, live directors and costumes), Mariano Furlani (Visual dramaturgy), 2050+ (Scenography). Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo (November–December 2023).

*Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself:*  
Susan Buck-Morss, 1992

A few months ago, a short run of performances of Gaetano Donizetti's *Il diluvio universale* in Bergamo saw the appearance of that rare bird of operatic audience behavior: vocal dismay, scandal, even physical disruption of the performance.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, boos and whistles are only to be expected from the highly educated, highly conservative audiences of La Scala's *loggione* on opening night. It is remarkable for such behavior to occur in a smaller, sleepier city on the occasion of a three-performance run (17 November–3 December) of what is a largely forgotten work.

1 Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, no. 62 (Autumn 1992): 22.

2 The audience reaction at the premiere was well-documented in the press. See, for instance, Sergio Rizza, "Donizetti sotto un 'diluvio universale': boati di dissenso per la regia dei Masbedo," *Corriere della Sera*, November 17, 2023, [https://bergamo.corriere.it/notizie/cultura-e-spettacoli/23\\_novembre\\_17/donizetti-sotto-un-diluvio-universale-boati-di-dissenso-per-la-regia-dei-masbedo-55d17d41-3b67-400b-bc48-5ab4e5f1c1k.shtml](https://bergamo.corriere.it/notizie/cultura-e-spettacoli/23_novembre_17/donizetti-sotto-un-diluvio-universale-boati-di-dissenso-per-la-regia-dei-masbedo-55d17d41-3b67-400b-bc48-5ab4e5f1c1k.shtml); Irene Caravita, "Il diluvio universale a Bergamo, cos'ho imparato assistendo alle prime critiche a scena aperta della mia vita," *Vogue Italia*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.vogue.it/article/diluvio-universale-masbedo-critiche-pubblico>.

The basic issue seems to have been the production, rather than the musical performance, which was widely praised and rightly so. Staged by artistic duo Masbedo,<sup>3</sup> the opera featured extensive video footage mounted on a led wall and screened throughout the performance, featuring scenes of the end of the world. Another seemingly problematic aspect of the production for theatergoers was the performance staged in the dehors of the Teatro Donizetti before the opera began.<sup>4</sup> Some young people (many of them recruited, touchingly, from local high schools) as well as singers and performers, all dressed as “Fridays for Future” activists, carried flatscreen displays showing various forms of aquatic wildlife, sometimes silently, and confrontationally, walking up to people waiting to go in. Masbedo’s additions were deemed too distracting, and so disrespectful of Donizetti’s music. The proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back was one point in the second performance in which the music stopped altogether to allow a short film to play silently—prompting one audience member to get up and loudly demand the music be brought back stat!<sup>5</sup>

I wasn’t there to witness this. I caught only the third performance, by which time things had (sadly) calmed down: the offending short film had been shortened; the performance outside the theater didn’t seem to confuse or anger anymore. Yet I saw, and still see, why people were offended by this staging—indeed, by this particular, specific combination of topic, music, visuals—and believe there to be something more to it than a conservative disdain for any and every experimental staging of bel canto opera. Visually provocative stagings, and especially the use of projected video footage, are nothing new in the operatic world anymore; even outside of La Scala, modern dress, video footage, and a dab of climate consciousness tend to make an opera production merely *au courant*. My argument in what follows is that Masbedo’s staging deliberately and aggressively distracted its audienc-

3 Masbedo is the name of celebrated artistic duo Iacopo Bedogni and Nicolò Massazza; the two have staged Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Magic Flute* for the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona in 2015. For more information about their career and work see <https://masbedo.org> (accessed April 11, 2024).

4 Insights about the performance are drawn from a combination of personal experience during attendance of the 2 December performance, and a video recording of the opera that Masbedo shared with me, which is available (upon payment) at <https://donizettitv.uscreen.io/programs/donizetti-opera-2023-il-diluvio-universale> (accessed April 11, 2024). The recording however, being mostly focused on the singers, does not do justice to the video footage being shown onstage.

5 The incident from the second performance, on 25 November 2023, was relayed to me by a friend who was in the audience.

es (myself included), thus bringing us uncomfortably close to the quotidian dissociative states, overstimulation, and numbing out from which modern theater (with its imperative stillness and dimmed lights) was designed to shelter us. And I believe these dissociative states to be part and parcel not only of Masbedo's production but also of Donizetti's particular take on a topic all-too-familiar to us: the end of the world.

Before I continue, two rather large disclaimers. First, I know Masbedo and many of the people they worked with, which means that, despite my best efforts, I may fail to be impartial in my critique. Second, I dislike Donizetti, though I enjoyed some parts of *Il diluvio*; in general, most bel canto opera is lost on me, despite frequent and early exposure as a child. It is, though, from an honest reckoning with my own distaste that this review takes its lead.

Whatever your operatic orientation, you can't deny that Donizetti's *Diluvio* is a strange musical creature. It was performed only three times in the composer's lifetime, and then not again until 1985; it was recorded only once, in 2005, and was, for this 2023 production, on its first visit to Donizetti's hometown. Most remarkably, *Il diluvio* was composed as a staged work, but premiered as an oratorio in order not to interfere with Lent in 1830 Naples. While the practice of turning operas into partly staged church works (oratori) has a long history in catholic-land music making, it is not often that an opera premiered and adapted as oratorio fully retransitions back to the stage. Nor is it common that an opera (particularly in the romance-plot oriented bel canto tradition) takes as its subject the biblical flood.

The weirdness of *Il diluvio* lies in its lack of dramaturgical commitment. It is a composition stuck, like a Pompeii body cast into torsion by lava, between stage work and church oratorio, and also between the representations of incommensurable orders of events: romantic love and God-ordained natural catastrophe. It veers awkwardly between, on the one hand, choruses about the impending flood so anguished and well-composed that they speak to a contemporary audience almost directly, and, on the other, duets between sparring lovers whose prettiness feels both timeless and oddly untimely. Masbedo rendered this veering between apocalypse and love visually, in a staging that amplified the contrast to the point of camp. Chorus singers were flanked by silent performers on stage, meaning that the choral pieces corresponded to a stage full of people. The opening chorus "Oh Dio, di pietà" was searing, heartfelt, frightening even. It was delivered by the formidable chorus (who, like the orchestra, was on loan from La Scala) joined onstage by the same silent performers and local high school



Fig. 1 – *Il diluvio universale*, Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo (2023) © Gianfranco Rota.

students we'd seen outside the theater, still wearing their Greta Thunberg outfits: knee-length pastel waterproof capes, stern expression, holding a placard. When the group marches to the very proscenium, the sense of intimacy with the audience is so stark as to feel threatening, reminding me of Judith Butler's remarks about the power of simultaneity in large groups of people: the common thread between performance and demonstration (something that is true, and so powerful, about Thunberg's protests too).<sup>6</sup>

At the other extreme, the romance aspect of *Diluvio* exists in a deliberately stereotyped visual dimension. Musically, this corresponds to the *solita forma* of bel canto, the standard operatic formula for love duets, consisting of a series of short sung movements alternating recitative and aria to build dramatic momentum. Usually, this form unfolds around a basic structure that maps a change of heart around a particular topic: a relatively calm aria (cavatina) followed by new information (tempo di mezzo) delivered through dialogue, followed by an agitated aria where the news is processed and a new course of action decided (cabaletta). The problem in *Diluvio* is that the core couple is dramaturgically uninteresting, and so their *solite forme* are quite depressing to witness. Sela (gorgeously sung by Giuliana Galfandoni) and her husband Cadmo (a suitably boorish Enea Scala) are in the terminal stages of their marriage—she has become an eager follower of

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Noah, and he, who hates Noah, is about to fall in the arms of another woman, Ada (a fun, vampish début by Maria Elena Pepi). Domenico Gilardoni's libretto for *Diluvio* gives no indication that Sela and Cadmo ever even actually liked one another and the music doesn't quite fill the gap. The staging of the love triangle is, perhaps intentionally, stereotypical to the point of parody. Everyone wafts in and out in gowns and coattails with a colorway straight out of a Molly Ringwald film: Sela, the good girl, is a fair-haired soprano in a bedazzled pink gown, and Ada the temptress is of course a mezzo swathed in red satin, her dark hair styled in voluptuous waves. By contrast, the male roles are almost accessory, musically as well as visually. This is a bel canto opera problem more generally: male characters tend to be morally immobile and, as such, less convincing when they work out their feelings through the cavatina-tempo di mezzo-cabaletta combo. Cadmo, the bad guy in *Diluvio*, is a flood-denier and seemingly interested only in dispatching Noah (Nahuel di Pierro, unfortunately indisposed after Act I and ably substituted by his understudy) and his acolytes. Noah, for his part, stands firm in his prediction of doom and need to evacuate the premises. The women of the show are instead flighty, torn, loud: in a word, operatic. Sela is torn between her loyalty to her husband and her belief in Noah and God, while Ada is a complex duplicitous character who plays confidante to Sela only so she can seduce Cadmo.

And so, love triangles of male and female rivalry play out even as the apocalypse looms. Musically, this is a challenging technical conundrum: the apocalypse is delegated to the chorus, while romance is driven by tenor-soprano axis. Even when the axis is joined by third or even fourth parties (like Sela and Cadmo are disrupted by Noah's bass and Ada's mezzo), the plot rotates around the tenor-soprano dyad. Switching convincingly between marital squabbles and choruses announcing the apocalypse. The entire opera plot rests on a foregone conclusion: human affairs are utterly irrelevant in the face of the oncoming flood. And yet, by dint of melodic force and structural repetition, our attention is jerked towards marital issues and trysts, and we watch everyone on stage dither about while the skies are about to come crashing down upon us.

We are more than familiar with the above condition. It is the very rhythm of everyday consciousness in twenty-first-century, ecocidal late capitalism. We live, by all accounts, in the end times, and yet are incapable of feeling any kind of way about the rising water levels, deadly wildfires, extinguished species, and toxic levels of plastic. At the time of the performance under review (and every day since) my attention had also



Fig. 2 – From left to right: Maria Elena Pepi as Ada, Enea Scala and Giuliana Galfandoni (foreground) as Cadmo and Sela. The two further people in the background are silent stage performers playing with cubes of red jelly. *Il diluvio universale*, Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo (2023) © Gianfranco Rota.

been fragmented by the fleeting yet unbearable images coming in daily from Palestine. Sure, breakups are more tangible than environmental and humanitarian breakdowns. But it isn't just this. To this pervasive and devastating set of news, we respond with the only coping mechanisms readily available: shortening attention spans, extended states of dissociation, and a kind of bored dread.<sup>7</sup>

Yet what I also realized as I watched Donizetti's *Diluvio* unfold in a series of lovers' squabbles, with the formulaic music that was made for this kind of plot, is that if there is a nineteenth-century version of the dopamine hit addiction fostered by Instagram reels and TikToks, this music comes close to this. I get the sense that, when wrestling with *Diluvio*, with its multiple genres, registers, Donizetti also was torn between the piercing choruses and the pleasant repetitiveness of *solita forma*. We, the living, are not special in our collective dissociation: what accomunates us to nineteenth-century audiences may be, in fact, our existence in a state of concerted desensitization. Here I am picking up the seminal argument made more than thirty years ago by Susan Buck-Morss who, glossing Walter Benjamin, suggested that

<sup>7</sup> These are of course the widely experienced states we have learned to name during the pandemic lockdowns: screen fatigue, decision fatigue, attention deficit disorder, anxiety and depression, burnout.

the nineteenth century was the dawn not just of mass culture and media technology, but also of systematic ways of distancing and not feeling that were crucial to survival.<sup>8</sup> This she calls “anaesthetics,” a range of practices ranging from the dawn of general anesthesia, to a whole system of dulling the pain of existence, be it opioids or small addictive nuggets of narration, or even the handling of time as a series of identical units.

It is hard to find better words to describe the work of Masbedo staging *Diluvio*—a deliberate enactment of precisely this process of overload and numbness. But the reason it worked is because Donizetti’s music, too, may be an early and complex expression of anaesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Here lies the more profound truth about this bold staging. Masbedo’s production, at its best, responded to this aspect of Donizetti in kind. Their production was not a mere blunt projection of modernist *hubris* onto a nineteenth-century number, but a recognition of a common ailment across nearly two centuries. Of course, this is still a questionable, bold interpretation, more so even than a superficial modernist window dressing. But it is undoubtedly far more thought-provoking and difficult to ignore. I think Masbedo’s staging takes its cue from what is perhaps most dislikable about Donizetti’s music for those of us who do not appreciate it: the unfolding of stereotypical dramatic plots to a repetitive, ubiquitous form, the simultaneous centrality of love plots and the kind of looping mechanism that handles these plots. Masbedo is, from what I can tell, staging an opera they don’t actually like (an all-too-common occurrence among modern stagings of opera) but they make no mystery of their distaste: in fact, they flaunt it. And this works well to high-

8 Buck-Morss writes: “Being ‘cheated out of experience’ has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of *anaesthetics*.” Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 18.

9 I am aware that Buck-Morss’ examples, including musical examples, are largely from the second part of the nineteenth century. Her example for the prototype of an overwhelming and desensitizing opera is Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and in this she follows the broad lead of the Frankfurt School (and of course specifically Theodor W. Adorno) in attributing to Wagner the symptomatology of a kind of sensorial alienation from reality. But of course, this is a circumstantial geographical bias; the kind of urban and technological realities Benjamin and Buck-Morss discuss are easily reflected—in different forms—in other European output, including Donizetti’s work. And Donizetti and his work were of course no strangers to Paris, which was, according to Benjamin, the melting pot for this new relationship between media, aesthetics, and politics.

light the anaesthetic quality of a music, Donizetti's *Diluvio*, that doesn't always seem to like itself either.

Masbedo's dislike of the music is evident in the way they handle their visuals: the video footage rarely if ever responds to musical cues, and a lot of time it actively distracts (as I mentioned earlier) from the music, creating a kind of stubborn counter-text, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes comical. One section has a patchwork of real found footage of ecological catastrophes (like so many phone screens doom-scrolling at once) accompanying the Act I showdown between Cadmo and Sela, where he accuses her of having an affair with Noah's son, Jafet; as marital squabble blossoms into a grand finale about impending collective doom, the eco-anxiety montage rolls on impassible, to great effect. When Sela comes back in Act II to see her children one last time, Masbedo set the scene as the after-hours of a banquet. Masbedo themselves (Iacopo Bedogni and Nicolò Massazza) snuck onstage to film live footage of silent performers lewdly feeding one another cubes of red and green jelly, the cameras panning on their faces and hands to a porny, grotesque effect. The variety of video material is dizzying: earlier we were regaled with a close-up video of a praying mantis, at a different point we see a kind of old-fashioned larder (with game hanging from the ceiling and all kinds of produce on the wooden table) rot in timelapse, like an animated Brueghel still life. One of Sela's early numbers, (a cabaletta of pious ardor "Ma qual raggio qui divino") is sung to a video close-up of Sela in full makeup, but underwater. Not all of it works. The close-up of Sela feels tautological and unnecessary (I also struggle with videos of close-ups of singers, though it is a styleme of contemporary opera stagings). Yet whatever was on the screen, it was, remarkably, never boring to watch (unlike many productions which use video as a kind of laptop screensaver for the back panel). If it is true that the footage could have been more sensitively timed to Donizetti's music, it is also undeniable that it followed a music of its own: it had a rhythm (usually slower than the musical rhythm), it bore the mark of truly thoughtful and creative montage, and so it genuinely honored the gazes it held hostage for two hours. It competes with the music earnestly, flooding it with a layer of genuine visual information that caused the focus to careen in and out of the music in a way that understandably angered some people into reaction.

The cry of that dismayed audience member on the second night was the climax, I believe, of an evening where many felt the video competed with, even distracted from the score. It was hard to focus, and in a theater, we expect the opposite. As such, when the music stopped for the video, it felt like



the culmination of a struggle between music and visuals where the music had lost. Of course, we could here make the easy argument that opera in Donizetti's time was not played to hushed audiences and dimmed lights (which are a late nineteenth-century practice),<sup>10</sup> that if we want to be true to Donizetti, demanding devotion to the music alone is a form of historical ignorance dressed as purism. But I don't wish to go there, partly because I don't think it is unreasonable to expect the staging not to interfere with the music, since it rarely ever does these days, and since we are expected not to be distracted by phones, videos, and chatter in the theater. I think people are right to be annoyed. It is annoying, yes, to have all these images of floods or obscene feeding of jelly intrude on the music. But it is also alienating to be dragged through two hours of cavatinas and cabalettas of (mostly) marital back-and-forths when the ark is ready to go and the thunder rumbles in the distance. And that alienation is somehow not so distant from the boundary between feeling and not feeling caused when a clip of a devastating wildfire or even a mangled body has the same length, formatting, and algorithmic frequency of an ad for skincare or a clip from our favorite film. Masbedo's staging, as I saw it, makes this case—the case for a continuity of anaesthetics between Donizetti and us—and asked us not to assume nineteenth-century opera can save us from our terrible case of the anaesthetics, particularly as, onstage and offstage, the dark clouds gather.

<sup>10</sup> A convincing cultural history of the practice of light-dimming and audience silence during concerts and opera is given in James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

## Works Cited

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**Delia Casadei** is a scholar, critic, and translator who works broadly on the intersection of voice, ideologies of language and intelligibility, recording technology and politics in twentieth-century music and sound practices. She was Assistant Professor of Musicology at UC Berkeley from 2017–2023. She obtained her PhD in Musicology from the University of Pennsylvania in 2015 with a thesis entitled *The Crowded Voice: Speech, Music and Community in Milan, 1955–1974*. Between 2015–17 she was a junior research fellow at the University of Cambridge. In 2021/2022 she was a Humanities Research Fellow at UC Berkeley and an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies of Princeton University. She has published in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, the *Opera Quarterly*, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, and her two latest articles were published in *Representations*, one about a recording of a Milanese riot, and the other about Giambattista Vico and sound theories of history. Her musical criticism has been featured on the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Conversation*. For the past few years, she has been working on laughter as an aural cipher of the twentieth-century relationship to the notion of the human, of language, and to ideologies of biological and social reproduction, including sound reproduction. Her first monograph, *Risible: Laughter without Reason and the Reproduction of Sound*, came out in February 2024 with the University of California Press.