

ANNA BOLENA

OPERA BY GAETANO DONIZETTI

Presentation by George Kurti Plohn

Anna Bolena, an opera in two acts by Gaetano Donizetti, is recounting the tragedy of Anne Boleyn, the second wife of England's King Henry VIII.

Along with Gioachino Rossini and Vincenzo Bellini, Donizetti was a leading composer of the *bel canto* opera style, meaning beauty and evenness of tone, *legato* phrasing, and skill in executing highly florid passages, prevalent during the first half of the nineteenth century. He was born in 1797 and died in 1848, at only 51 years of age, of syphilis for which he was institutionalized at the end of his life. Over the course of his short career, Donizetti was able to compose 70 operas.

Anna Bolena is the second of four operas by Donizetti dealing with the Tudor period in English history, followed by *Maria Stuarda* (named for Mary, Queen of Scots), and *Roberto Devereux* (named for a putative lover of Queen Elizabeth I of England). The leading female characters of these three operas are often referred to as "the Three Donizetti Queens."



Anna Bolena premiered in 1830 in Milan, to overwhelming success so much so that from then on, Donizetti's teacher addressed his former pupil as Maestro. The opera got a new impetus later at La Scala in 1957, thanks to a spectacular performance by

Maria Callas in the title role. Since then, it has been heard frequently, attracting such superstar sopranos as Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills and Montserrat Caballe.



Anna Bolena is based on the historical episode of the fall from favor and death of England's Queen Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII. While many operas use history as a point of departure for storytelling, this opera stays closer to real events than most. It was the time when Thomas Cromwell, the cunning master of the court of Henry VIII, serving the pleasures of the embittered and slothful 400-pound self-indulgent and wife-killing king, inspired him on a path of tearing apart the old order and even forcing a new egocentric religion on his subjects.

The Anne Boleyn who became Henry VIII's second wife was historically not the beloved, long-suffering queen of the opera. As a young teenager she and her older sister Mary were sent to France where they

King Henry VIII in 1536,
the year when Anne Boleyn was executed

were part of the court of King Francis I. "The court followed the lead of the King in making a mannerly art of adultery," wrote one historian. "The clergy adjusted themselves after making the requisite objections. The people made no objections either, but gratefully imitated the easy "code of the court", wrote the same historian. One can only wonder at the effect of such behavior on the psyche of the young teenage Anne Boleyn, especially after her sister Mary became the French king's mistress, (and later became a mistress to King Henry VIII).

The Anne who returned to England in 1522 was described by the Venetian ambassador as "not the handsomest woman in the world; she is of middle height, dark-skinned, long neck, wide mouth, rather flat-chested." But she was vivacious, quick tempered, witty, outspoken, and knew how to make the most of her flashing dark eyes, long hair, and graceful neck. Thanks to her training at the French court, and her own ambition, she soon attracted serious male attention, including that of

Henry Percy, son of the earl of Northumberland, who was already betrothed. In the opera, Percy claims he and Anna were promised to each other in the sight of God before she ever married the king, and Anna does not deny it. Whether or not this is historically accurate is open to debate. What is known is that young Henry Percy was hustled away from court by order of King Henry, and that Percy's wife (who loathed him) later claimed it was true. The inquiry seeking evidence of Anne's adultery on behalf of the king could not verify the persisted rumors about the Queen and Percy, so (unlike his fate in the opera) he was never brought to trial and his life was spared.

Initially Anne played her cards right with Henry VIII. She refused to become his mistress, and the more she resisted his advances, the more besotted the King became. "This passion is the most extraordinary thing," wrote the Papal ambassador. "He sees nothing, he thinks of nothing, but his Anne; he cannot be without her for an hour." What is never mentioned in the opera is the biggest plum Anne could offer Henry, the possibility of a son, an heir [eyr] to the throne and political stability for the Tudor line at a time when many Englishmen still remembered the devastating effects of the War of the Roses. Henry's wife, Queen Catherine, had not provided a son who survived, and she was past child-bearing age. Henry decided Anne could give him an heir and determined to make her his queen, setting off a series of international crises before he succeeded.

By the time they were married Anne was pregnant, but the child was a girl, Elizabeth, later to become one of England's most illustrious monarchs, and a key figure in Donizetti's other operas *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux*. Later pregnancies ended in miscarriages. Anne's charms began to wear thin, and her lack of friends at court did not help when Henry, ever on the quest for a male heir, decided one of Anne's ladies in waiting, Jane Seymour (Giovanna in the opera), would be the wife he needed. Henry seized on rumors of Anne's indiscrete behavior and had her charged with multiple counts of adultery (including incest with her own brother) and treason. The only person who confessed to the behavior was a court musician, Mark Smeton, who was possibly tortured. (In the opera he is tricked into confessing, believing it will save Anna's life.) The historic Anne Boleyn did not go mad as in the opera, and did not die as the people cheered the marriage between Henry and Jane Seymour. That actually took place 11 days later. She was England's queen for just three years. But

her influence far outlived her brief time wearing the crown. She's been cited as a key figure in the increased power of the Anglican Church in its conflict with the Vatican, and her daughter became one of England's most powerful monarchs, Queen Elisabeth I.

The drama in the opera focuses attention squarely on the innocent Anna Bolena and the suffering she endures while awaiting her tragic fate, a fate she shares with the man she truly loves, Henry Percy, even though she has been faithful to her husband, King Henry VIII (Enrico in the opera). The characters are all sharply etched, and they are brought together in situations that further the drama while revealing new aspects of the people involved. The libretto is not good history, but it is marvelous drama, and Donizetti turned it into a sensational opera. Ultimately Anna is accused of having illicit relationships with three other men (Percy, her brother, and her page) and all four are executed.

By now, the persona of Anne Boleyn has achieved celebrity status not just in history but in all sorts of popular entertainment, from numerous novels and plays to a wide range of films, in which Anne has been portrayed by Merle Oberon, Vanessa Redgrave, Genevieve Bujold and Helena Bonham Carter, as well as by Natalie Portman.

This recording, which we will see today, was made by the Vienna Opera House featuring the famous Russian soprano Anna Netrebko in the role of Anna Bolena, the equally exceptional and attractively beautiful Latvian mezzo-soprano Elīna Garanča as Giovanna Seymour (Jane Seymour), and the Italian bass-baritone Ildebrando D'Arcangelo as Enrico (King Henry VIII).

Duration time: 2:50.

And now, let the show begin...

["Anna Bolena" di Gaetano Donizetti \(Wiener Staatsoper, Netrebko, Garanca, D'Arcangelo, dir. Pidò\)](#)

<https://youtu.be/TQbBZbTRSiY>

