

**LA FILLE DU RÉGIMENT**  
**ONE OF THE LOVELIEST OPERA EVER COMPOSED**  
**Gaetano Donizetti**

*By George Plohn, Esplanade's house impresario*



Natalie Dessay

in Donizetti's "Fille du Régiment"



Juan Diego Flórez

Domenico Gaetano Maria Donizetti, the composer of our opera, lived between 1797 and 1848, composed about 70 operas, plus orchestral and chamber music, in a career abbreviated by mental illness and a premature death at 51. One of the great masters of *bel canto* opera alongside of Rossini and Bellini, he was prolific in output and dominated the opera scene in Italy between the death of Bellini and the rise of Verdi. He was an incredibly fast worker - he could produce a three act opera (music and words) in ten days.

He had a very sad family life. His wife died of cholera after only ten years of marriage and none of their three children survived more than a few days, tragedies from which he never recovered from. His own death was attributed to cerebro-spinal syphilis.

Apart from the ever-popular *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the comic operas *L'Elisir d'Amore* and *Don Pasquale*, all three having been presented here in the past, *La fille du régiment* (The Daughter of the Regiment) is his other great creation in this field. This opera was composed by Donizetti while he was living in Paris and as such is his first opera set to a French text. It is a comic opera in two acts, first performed on 11 February 1840 by the Opéra-Comique in Paris.

**This frothy comedy mixes humor with a rush of buoyant melody and notorious vocal challenges.** The story concerns a young orphan girl raised by a French army regiment as their mascot and begins at the moment of her first stirrings of love. Complications and comedy

ensue when her true identity is discovered. The action is startlingly simple and unencumbered by intricate subplots, allowing the full charm of the characters and their virtuosic music to come across in an uninhibited way. The opera is set in the Tyrol, a picturesque mountain landscape, but this particular production updates the original Napoleonic warfare to the time of the First World War.

Marie, the daughter of the regiment, was found once near a battlefield as an abandoned child, and was raised by the entire 21st Regiment as their 'daughter'. Her foster-father, Sulpice, the regimental sergeant, has decreed that she should marry only a soldier from the regiment.

When Marie falls for the Tyrolean Tonio, it looks as though she may have to choose between her family and true love. The situation becomes still more fraught when the arrogant snobbish Marquise de Berkenfield arrives on the scene. She discovers that Marie is her niece, and

insists on taking her away to bring her up as a lady. Tonio, who has joined the Regiment in order to marry Marie, is in despair. So is Marie, and matters get worse in her new home: she hates ladylike pursuits and is horrified to learn that she must have an aristocratic marriage.

Can she get out of it without losing her aunt's affection? And will she ever see Tonio again?

Yes, if the 21st Regiment has anything to do with it...

Not many singers have the technical ability and theatrical presence to deliver the famous fireworks arias (notably the soprano's Act I "Chacun le sait" (Everybody knows) and the tenor's Act I "Ah! Mes amis, quel jour de fête!", (Of friends, what a jour of celebration) which **requires of the tenor no fewer than nine high Cs, to be hurled off in quick succession**. Because of this, this aria has been called the "Mount Everest" for tenors. It comes comparatively early in the opera, giving the singer less time to warm up his voice. Famously, at the Met in 1971, Luciano Pavarotti's stardom was reckoned from a performance of this opera, singing alongside Joan Sutherland, when he leapt over the high fence of the string of these nine high Cs with an aplomb that left everyone gasping. More recently, Juan Diego Flórez, our tenor on this DVD, performed this aria at La Scala, and then, on a tremendous popular demand, repeated it, breaking a 74-year embargo on encores at the legendary Milanese opera house. He repeated this feat at the opening night of the 2008 season at the Met, with Natalie Dessay as Marie, to great acclaim.

And this brings us to our DVD's Marie interpreted by the great French coloratura soprano Natalie Dessay (here at age 42) in this madcap physical comedy who with her impeccable singing gives us an indelible portrait of this feisty tomboy raised by the regiment of the French soldiers. She puts on quite a show. She does laundry, peels potatoes and looks terrible. She is intermittently accompanied by clotheslines stretched across the stage from which long johns dance nearly in time to the music.

As a non-singing role, the role of the Duchess of Crakenthorp is often played by non-operatic celebrities, here the British actress Dawn French in our DVD. In 2016, **US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg**, a lifelong opera fan, played the Duchess on opening night of the Washington National Opera's production

## **SYNOPSIS**

### **ACT I**

In the Tyrolean mountains, on their way to Austria, the terrified Marquise of Berkenfield and her butler, Hortensius, have paused in their journey because they have found the French army blocking their way. When the marquise hears from the villagers that the French troops have at last retreated, she comments on the crude ways of the French people. Hortensius asks Sulpice, the sergeant of the 21st regiment, to let the marquise continue on. Sulpice is joined by Marie, the mascot, or “daughter” of the regiment, which adopted her as an orphaned child. When Sulpice questions her about a young man she has been seen with, she explains that he is a local Tyrolean who—though an enemy—once saved her life. Troops of the 21st regiment arrive with a prisoner: this same Tyrolean, Tonio, who says he has been looking for Marie. She steps in to save him, and while he toasts his new friends, Marie sings the regimental song “Chacun le sait” (Everybody knows it). Tonio is ordered to follow the soldiers, but he escapes and returns to declare his love to Marie. Sulpice surprises them, and Marie must admit to Tonio that she can only marry a soldier from the 21<sup>st</sup> regiment.

The Marquise of Berkenfield asks Sulpice for an escort to return her to her castle. When he hears the name Berkenfield, Sulpice remembers a letter he discovered near the young Marie when she was found. The marquise soon admits that she knew the girl’s father and says that Marie is the long-lost daughter of her sister. The child had been left in the care of the marquise, but was lost on a battlefield. Shocked by the girl’s rough manners, the marquise is determined to take her niece to her castle and to give her a proper education. In the meantime Tonio has enlisted so that he can marry Marie (singing the great aria “Ah, mes amis”, but she has to leave both her regiment and the man she loves singing the aria “Il faut partir” (I have to go)).

### **ACT II**

The marquise has arranged a marriage between Marie and Scipion, nephew of the Duchess of Krakenthorp. Sulpice, the sergeant, has joined the marquise at the Berkenfield castle, recovering from an injury and is supposed to help her with her plans. The marquise gives Marie a singing lesson, accompanying her at the piano. Encouraged by Sulpice, Marie slips in phrases of the regimental song, and the marquise loses her temper. Left alone, Marie thinks

about the meaninglessness of money and position. She hears soldiers marching in the distance and is delighted when the whole regiment files into the hall. Tonio, Marie, and Sulpice are reunited. Tonio asks for Marie's hand, declaring that Marie is his whole life, but the marquise declares her niece engaged to another man and dismisses Tonio. Alone with Sulpice, the marquise confesses the truth: Marie is her own illegitimate daughter whom she abandoned, fearing social disgrace.

Hortensius announces the arrival of the wedding party, headed by the Duchess of Krakenthorp. Marie refuses to leave her room, but when Sulpice tells her that the marquise is her mother, the surprised girl declares that she cannot go against her mother's wishes and agrees to marry a man that she does not love. As she is about to sign the marriage contract, the soldiers of the 21st regiment, led by Tonio, storm in to rescue their "daughter." The noble guests are horrified to learn that Marie was a canteen girl, but they change their opinion when she describes her upbringing, telling them that she can never repay the debt she owes the soldiers. The marquise is so moved that she gives her daughter permission to marry Tonio. Everyone joins in the final aria "Salut à la France."

Our DVD is a 2007 recording of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in London, a coproduction between Royal Opera House, the Wiener Staatsoper in Vienna and the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

It is sung in French with subtitles in several languages.

Again, in the title role of Marie we have Natalie Dessay, Tonio is sung by Juan Diego Flórez, the Marquise of Berkenfeld is Felicity Palmer, the Duchess Crackentorp is Dawn French, and the sergeant Sulpice is Alessandro Corbelli.

The conductor of the Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House is Bruno Vampanella. Total running time is 2:10. Today we show Act I for 1:20. Next Sunday will be Act II for a duration of 0:50.

Trailers of our DVD:

(the aria with nine high C's): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aS6M8j3pvQ>

and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE5DyvqXxsY>

and:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYHCfDNXGmk>