



Maria Stuarda Listening Guide

Donizetti's fierce score captures the tension and the intense hatred between the two historical queens. From soft and gentle cavatinas to blazing wild cabalettas, Donizetti captivates the audience with his emotional writing. If Mary Stuart and Queen Elizabeth I were alive today, would they agree with Donizetti's portrayal of their heated relationship? The tracks listed below correspond to the complimentary Listening Guide CD provided to school group bookings only.

Not coming to the opera but looking to explore *Maria Stuarda* in the classroom? The excerpts below can be found in the recording of *Maria Stuarda* with Joan Sutherland, Huguette Tourangeau and Luciano Pavarotti, with Richard Bonyngue conducting the Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna, on the Decca label.

Track #	Musical excerpt	Connection to the story	Musical elements and significance	Strategies for Listening
1	Aria: "Ah! dal cielo discenda un raggio" ("Ah! may a ray of light from heaven")	Elisabetta, Queen of England, prays for guidance in dealing with her cousin, Maria Stuarda. She wonders whether to show her kindness, or to seek vengeance against the woman she feels may have stolen her beloved, Roberto, the Earl of Leicester.	This aria (solo) is typical of the <i>bel canto</i> style which requires a type of singing that is very ornamental. Composers wrote music that was long and challenging to test the artistic skills of the singer. This <i>aria di sortita</i> (an aria sung when a character enters the scene) begins relatively calmly but, as Elisabetta contemplates the possibility that Maria may have stolen Roberto from her, she becomes more agitated as her musical line breaks into runs. The soprano must show how she can "run" from a low to a high note or high to a low note [2:20 to the end].	Opera singers use a natural vocal technique called "vibrato" (vibrating sound). How do you think a singer makes their voice sound like that?
2	Aria: "Ah! rimiro il bel semblante adorato" ("Ah! I see once more her lovely face, so adored")	Roberto rejoices at his memories of Maria and, since she is being held prisoner by her cousin, Elisabetta, swears he will free her or die with her.	The role of Roberto was stretched in the opera. Historically he was in fact in love with Elizabeth but when she turned him down she suggested that he marry Mary Stuart instead, in order to cement English and Scottish relations. Mary Stuart, in turn, rejected his proposal! Musically, this excerpt is a good example of a standard <i>bel canto</i> form: the aria begins with the <i>cavatina</i> , a slow paced and melodious section in which the singer displays	Can you think of modern versions of techniques used in <i>bel canto</i> singing? Think of some pop singers that may elaborate or ornament words to show their vocal capabilities. How do these modern day ornamentations differ from those of <i>bel canto</i> ? How do they sound the same?

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			<p>their ability to maintain long, sustained phrases with a beautiful and consistent tone. This is followed by the more upbeat <i>cabaletta</i> which provided the singer the opportunity to display their technical skill and vocal flexibility through fast moving runs and trills.</p>	
3	<p>Cabaletta: “Nella pace del mesto riposo” (“In the tranquility of my sad retreat”)</p>	<p>Maria laments her status as the prisoner of her cousin, Elisabetta.</p>	<p>This <i>cabaletta</i> is all about vocal display. A <i>cabaletta</i> is a musical form which consists of two verses followed by embellished variations on the melody. Even though in the text Maria speaks of her lack of courage, the runs, leaps and high notes in the music indicate she is not entirely without strength. The singer here, Joan Sutherland, was largely responsible for reviving operas like <i>Maria Stuarda</i> during the 1960s and 1970s following a long period in which they were absent from the stage.</p>	<p>What would you miss the most if you were suddenly imprisoned?</p> <p>What do you think Maria misses the most?</p> <p>How do you think an opera singer would prepare to sing such a demanding aria?</p>
4	<p>Ensemble: “Deh! l'accogli” (“Speak to her!”)</p>	<p>Despite Maria’s attempts to ask for forgiveness and pity, Elisabetta pours scorn on her rival. Unable to bear this treatment any longer, Maria insults the English Queen, calling her “the unchaste daughter of Anne Boleyn” and “a base, lascivious harlot... the English throne is profaned, despicable bastard, by your presence!” The words “vil bastarda” (vile bastard) prompted censors to ban performances of <i>Maria Stuarda</i> after the operas premiere.</p>	<p>The meeting between Maria and Elisabetta never happened in real life, but was included in <i>Mary Stuart</i>, the Schiller play on which the opera is based. Both Schiller and Donizetti recognized the strong dramatic potential provided by this fictional fight!</p> <p>Musically, the tempo (speed of music) increases as Maria bursts out more and more insults. The dramatic confrontation ends in an extremely lively finale with the queens and spectators all commenting on the heated encounter that has just ensued.</p>	<p>Have you ever said something inappropriate when you were angry? What happened because of it?</p> <p>What makes a word offensive? How do censors make decisions about what is offensive? Have you ever disagreed with a censor’s decision?</p> <p>How does Donizetti musically evoke anger?</p>

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5	Chorus: "Vedeste?" ("Did you see?")	Maria's friends lament the tragic death that awaits their queen.	The function of this chorus is to set the scene for Maria's final entrance. The words being sung are largely descriptive: "The block... the axe... the funeral room... What a sight! How dreadful!" The chorus enters <i>sotto voce</i> (singing with a hushed quality). This technique, offset by the <i>szforzandi</i> (suddenly loud singing), heightens the horror of the queen's execution, expressed by Maria's supporters. This is the beginning of a long, complex musical movement in which the moods, and the way they are expressed, are constantly changing.	How does Donizetti's music set the atmosphere of this scene? How many times does the mood change in this piece? How does the music indicate a shift in mood?
6	Cavatina: "Deh! Tu di un umile preghiera il suono odi" ("Ah! listen to our humble prayer")	Maria begins her final, extended death scene with a simple prayer asking for God's mercy and forgiveness.	A <i>cavatina</i> is a short and simple song without a second verse or any repetition. The vocal line here is very simple and sustained. It gradually rises and gains in intensity as other characters and the chorus join in. Despite her desperate situation, Donizetti gives Maria music which is dignified and suits her station as queen.	Why is the musical form of <i>cavatina</i> appropriate for a prayer?
7	Aria: "D'un cor che muore reca il perdono" ("Take the forgiveness of a heart which is dying")	In this <i>larghetto</i> (slightly slow) section of the final scene, Maria asks for the forgiveness of Elisabetta, the very person who has condemned her.	Donizetti gave this section of the finale a special heading, calling it the "Aria del Supplizio" ("The Aria of the Execution"). It starts out in a forceful, declamatory style, but is transformed [2:39] as Maria's voice ascends to a soft, high <i>pianissimo</i> (extremely quiet), floating over the choral phrases below, as she sings of how her shed blood will cancel all her sins.	Do you think the chorus is supportive of Maria's actions? Support your answer by using musical examples.
8	Cabaletta: "Ah! se un giorno da queste ritorte il tuo braccio involarmi dovea" ("Ah! if once your arm was going to free me from my bonds")	As Maria is about to go to the scaffold, she implores Roberto to console her with the strength of his love.	Donizetti communicates Maria's tragic fate in this final section of the finale. Her pleas to Roberto are sung in a lyrical manner but the musical line becomes more forceful and dramatic as she renounces the idea of calling down the wrath of God on an England ruled by Elisabetta.	How would you describe the character of Elisabetta, basing your decision solely on her music?

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