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SUTHERLAND**

THE GREAT MUSICIANS:
ROSSINI AND HIS SCHOOL

Henry Edwards

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Henry Sutherland Edwards

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CHAPTER I.

ROSSINI'S CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

A CONTEMPORARY of Cimarosa and of Paisiello, his predecessors, but not, except at the very outset of his career, his models, and of Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi, his successors, and in an artistic sense his followers, Rossini is a central figure in the nineteenth-century history of Italian music.

Lives of Rossini have been published freely enough during the last fifty or sixty years. It but rarely happens, even to the greatest man, to have his biography written or his statue erected during his lifetime. But Rossini lived so long that it seemed impossible to wait for his death; and more than one writer seized upon him when he was still a young man. Perhaps it occurred to the Abbé Carpani, the first of Rossini's biographers, that he was already approaching the critical age at which so many great composers – not to speak of painters and poets – had ceased not only to work but to live; Mozart, for instance, Cimarosa, Weber, Hérold, Bellini, Schubert, and Mendelssohn. It has been suggested, indeed, that Rossini might perhaps have wished his career to be measured against those of so many other composers whose days were cut short at about the age he had attained when he produced *William Tell*. Rossini was but thirty-seven when *William Tell*, his last work for the stage, and his last work of any importance with the exception of the *Stabat Mater* was brought out. But when, soon after the production of *Semiramide*, played for the first time in 1823, Stendhal published that *Life of Rossini* which is known to be founded almost entirely on the Abbé Carpani's work, Rossini, at the age of thirty-one, had already completed the most important portion of his artistic life. Readable, interesting, and in many places charming, Stendhal's *Life of Rossini* is at the same time meagre, and, worse still, untrustworthy. But there is no reason why a tolerable *Life of Rossini*, including an account of all the changes and reforms introduced by this composer into Italian opera, should not have been published when he was only thirty-one years of age. There would have been nothing of moment to add to it but a narrative of Rossini's visit to London, of his residence in Paris, and above all, of the circumstances under which he produced *William Tell* together with his reasons – if they could only be discovered – for abandoning composition when he had once produced that work.

The life of Rossini divides itself, more naturally than most things to which this favourite mode of division is applied, into three parts. During the first period of his existence, extending from his birth to the year 1823 when *Semiramide* was brought out, he made his reputation. From 1823 when he visited London and Paris, until 1829 when he produced his great masterpiece in the serious style, and afterwards threw down his pen for ever, he made his fortune. Finally, from 1829, the year of *William Tell*, until 1869, the year of his death, he enjoyed his fortune and his reputation; caring not too much for either, and so little desirous to increase the former that he abandoned his "author's rights" in France – fees, that is to say, which he was entitled to receive for the representation of his works – to the Society of Musical Composers.

Rossini made his appearance in public when he was only seven years of age; doing so not, it need scarcely be said, in the character of a composer, but in that of a singer. It was in Paer's *Camilla*, composed for Vienna and afterwards brought out at Bologna, that Rossini, in the year 1799, took the part of a child. "Nothing," says Madame Giorgi-Righetti, the original Rosina in the *Barber of*

Seville,¹ "could be more tender, more touching, than the voice and action of this extraordinary child in the beautiful canon of the third act; *senti si fiero instante*. The Bolognese of that time declared that he would some day be one of the greatest musicians known. I need not say whether the prophecy has been verified."

Gioachino Antonio Rossini was born on the 29th February, 1792; and the circumstance of his having come into the world in a leap-year justified him, he used to maintain, in counting his birthday, not annually according to the usual custom, but once every four years. According to this method of computation he had numbered nineteen birthdays when, at the age of seventy-seven, he died. What is better worth remembering is the fact that Rossini was born, as if by way of compensation, the very year in which Mozart died; Mozart who, indebted to the Italians for much of the sweetness and singleness of his lovely melodies, was to give to Italy, through Rossini, new instrumental combinations, new dramatic methods, and new operatic forms.

It may have been very desirable to show that Rossini was of distinguished ancestry, and that he had a great-uncle, who, in the middle of the sixteenth century, was governor of Ravenna. But it is more interesting to know that he was of good musical parentage. His father, it is true, was nothing more than town trumpeter at Pesaro; herald and crier, that is to say, to the sound of the trumpet. But his mother was what musicians call "an artist." She possessed a very beautiful voice; and when the town trumpeter fell ill or in some other manner incapacitated himself for supporting the family, she replaced him as bread-winner by taking an engagement as an operatic singer. According to one of Rossini's biographers, Rossini the trumpeter came to grief through his political opinions, which were of a more decided character than any that were ever professed, publicly at least, by his eminent son. When, after the Italian campaign, the French army in 1796 entered Pesaro, the old Rossini so far forgot his official position and the duty he owed to the state, as to proclaim his sympathy and admiration for the Republican troops; on whose retirement he was punished for his want of loyalty, being first deprived of his employment and afterwards cast into prison.

The trumpet was not the only instrument cultivated by the elder Rossini. He also played the horn; playing it, not like an ordinary town crier, from whom only a few loud flourishes would be expected by way of preliminary announcement, but in true musicianly style.

The horn, eighty years ago, was not a very important instrument in Italian orchestration. But such as it was the elder Rossini played it in more than one operatic band; and in due time, and to all appearances as soon as it was physically possible to do so, the father taught the art of playing the horn to his precocious son. Rossini was still very young when he accompanied his parents on musical excursions, or "tours" as they would now be called; and on these occasions, when the father took the part of first horn in some local orchestra – which was sometimes nothing more than the band of a travelling show – the part of second horn was assigned to the son. The mother at the same time sang on the stage. Rossini, then, at once vocalist and instrumentalist, began his career in both characters at a very early age. It has been seen that at seven he appeared on the stage as an operatic singer. Between the ages of seven and twelve he was much occupied in horn playing; and his performances in company with his father had probably some effect in developing that taste for wind instruments and especially for horns, for which his orchestration was one day to be remarkable.

In his thirteenth year Rossini was taken to Bologna and presented to Professor Tesci of that city. The professor heard the little boy sing and play, and was so pleased with his performances that he procured him an engagement as chorister in one of the local churches. It was of this period in Rossini's life that Heine was thinking when, in his well-known article on Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, he wrote: "The true character of Christian art does not reside in thinness and plainness of the body, but in a certain effervescence of the soul which neither the musician nor the painter can appropriate to himself either by baptism or by study; and in this respect I find in the *Stabat* of Rossini a more

¹ *Cenni di una donna già cantante sopra il maestro Rossini.*

truly Christian character than in the *Paulus* of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy; an oratorio which the adversaries of Rossini point to as a model of the Christian style. Heaven preserve me from wishing to express by that the least blame against a master so full of merits as the composer of *Paulus*; and the author of these letters is less likely than any one to wish to criticise the Christian character of the oratorio in question from clerical, or, so to say, pharisaical reasons. I cannot, however, avoid pointing out that at the age when Mendelssohn commenced Christianity at Berlin (he was only baptized in his thirteenth year), Rossini had already deserted it a little, and had lost himself entirely in the mundane music of operas. Now he has again abandoned the latter to carry himself back in dreams to the Catholic recollections of his first youth – to the days when he sang as a child in the choir of the Pesaro [for which read Bologna] cathedral, and took part as an acolyte in the service of the holy mass."

Besides enabling him to earn money by singing in the churches, Professor Tesci gave his young friend lessons in singing and pianoforte playing, so that after two years he could execute the most difficult music at first sight. He now was found competent to act as musical director, and accepted an engagement in that character with a travelling company which gave performances at various little towns in the Romagna. When he was fifteen years of age Rossini gave up his engagement as director to the wandering troop and went back to Bologna, where (1807) he was admitted as a student to the Lyceum. Such application and such intelligence did he now show, that after he had been but one year at the academy he was chosen by the director, Professor Mattei, to compose the cantata expected annually from the Lyceum's best pupil.

Rossini's first work, written when he was sixteen years of age and executed at the Lyceum of Bologna in 1808, was the cantata in question, which, if not based on the favourite subject of Orpheus, was at least connected with it. *Pianto d'Armonia per la Morte d'Orfeo* was at once the subject and the title of this memorable composition. At this period Rossini was an ardent student of Haydn's symphonies and quartets; and after the production of his cantata, which obtained remarkable success, he was appointed director of the Philharmonic concerts, and profited by his position to give a performance of Haydn's *Seasons*. A distinct reminiscence of this time, and more than a distinct reminiscence of one of the best known melodies in the *Seasons*, was to be found eight years afterwards in the lively trio ("Zitti, Zitti") of *The Barber of Seville*.

During his studies at the Lyceum Rossini did not neglect the piano. He entertained a high respect for this admirable instrument, this orchestra on a reduced scale, minus, of course, the variety of *timbres*; and one of his latest works was a fantasia for pianoforte on airs from *L'Africaine*, dedicated to his friend Meyerbeer. Rossini used at this time to style himself "pianist of the fourth class;" and that he obtained no higher rank in the pianistic hierarchy is perhaps due to the peculiarity of the instruction he received from his professor at the Lyceum of Bologna, Signor Prinetti. Prinetti taught his pupils to play the scales with the first finger and thumb. A pianist taught to depend on his first finger and thumb to the neglect of the three other fingers could scarcely be expected to graduate very highly in the pianoforte schools.

Rossini was just seventeen years of age when he produced his first symphony, which was followed by a quartet; and a year later he brought out his first opera. During his musical travels in the Romagna, where, among other places, he was in the habit of visiting Lugo, Ferrara, Forli, and Sinigaglia, he had, at the last-named place, inspired with confidence the Marquis Cavalli, director of the local theatre. The marquis was also impresario of the San Mosè Theatre at Venice (the San Mosè, like most other Italian theatres, took its name from the parish to which it belonged), and he wished Rossini to compose an opera for his Venetian establishment. Rossini's previous work had been performed before the professor's pupils and a few invited friends at the Lyceum of Bologna. The opera ordered by the Marquis Cavalli was the first of his works performed before the general public. It was a one-act piece, entitled *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*. It was given for the first time in 1810 when Rossini was just eighteen years old. The sum paid for it was 200 francs, or, in English money, 8*l*.

La Cambiale di Matrimonio was succeeded by a cantata on the oft-treated subject of the abandonment of Dido. *Didone Abbandonata* was composed for a relative, the brilliant Esther Mombelli, and it was performed in 1811. The same year Rossini brought out at Bologna *L'Equivoco Stravagante*, an *opera buffa* in two acts. In this work, of which nothing seems to have been preserved, the concerted pieces were much admired. The final rondo, too, is still cited as a type of those final airs for which Rossini seemed to have a particular taste until, after producing the most brilliant specimen of the style in the "Non più mesta" of *Cinderella*, he left them to the care of other less original composers; for of Rossini's final airs "Non più mesta" was the final one of all.

None of Rossini's earlier operas were engraved; a circumstance which allowed him to borrow from them the best pieces for other works, but which also prevents us in the present day from arriving at any precise idea as to their value and importance.

The first opera of Rossini's which, years afterwards, was deemed worthy the honour of a revival was *L'Inganno Felice*, composed in 1812 for Venice. It was brought out at Paris in 1819; and the impresario, Barbaja, for whom Rossini composed so many admirable works, gave it at Vienna, where he was carrying on an operatic enterprise simultaneously with two other operatic enterprises at Milan and at Naples.

L'Inganno Felice was the first opera by which Rossini made a decided mark, and such was its success that he was now requested to furnish works for Ferrara, Milan, and Rome. For Ferrara he was to compose an oratorio.

But although *Ciro in Babilonia* is generally described in the catalogues of Rossini's works as an oratorio, yet, like *Mosè in Egitto* composed six years later, it was an opera so far as regards form, and was only called an oratorio from the circumstance of its being given in Lent without the usual stage accessories. *Ciro in Babilonia* was by no means successful as a whole. The composer, however, saved from the wreck of his oratorio two valuable fragments: a chorus which afterwards figured in *Aureliano in Palmira*, and from which he borrowed the theme of Almaviva's beautiful solo in *The Barber of Seville*, "Ecco ridente il cielo;" and the concerted finale which, in the year 1827, found its way into the French version of *Mosè in Egitto*.

Some forty years after the production of *Ciro in Babilonia* Rossini spoke to Ferdinand Hiller (who has recorded the words in his highly interesting *Conversations with Rossini*) of a poor woman who had only one good note in her voice, which he accordingly made her repeat while the melody of the solo given to her in *Ciro* was played by the orchestra. So in the French burlesque of *Les Saltimbanques*, an untaught player of the trombone is introduced, who, being able to play but one note, is told that that will suffice, and that if he keeps strictly to it "the lovers of that note will be delighted."

CHAPTER II. LA PIETRA DEL PARAGONE

ROSSINI had already written two operas in 1812, and he was destined in this fertile year to produce three more: two at Venice, *La Scala di Seta* and *L'Occasione fa il Ladro*; and one at Milan, *La Pietra del Paragone*.

La Pietra del Paragone was Rossini's next great success after *L'Inganno Felice*. The leading parts were assigned to Galli, afterwards one of the most famous bass-singers of his time, and to Madame Marcolini, who had played the principal character in *L'Equivoco Stravagante*, and who had particularly distinguished herself in that work by her singing of the final rondo before mentioned.

In *La Pietra del Paragone* Madame Marcolini was furnished with a final rondo of the pattern already approved, and in this, as in the earlier one, she gained a most brilliant success.

The libretto of *La Pietra del Paragone* is founded on an idea at least as old as that of *Timon of Athens*. Count Asdrubal, surrounded by friends and beloved by a charming young lady, is rash enough to wish to know whether the friendship and the love he seems to have inspired are due to himself and his own personal qualities, or to the riches he is known to possess. To determine the point he causes a bill of exchange for a large sum to be presented at his house. He himself appears in disguise to claim the money; and, in accordance with instructions given beforehand, the count's steward recognises the signature and honours the draft. The sum for which the bill has been made out is so large that to pay it the count's exchequer is absolutely drained. Some few of the friends stand the test well enough, but others, as might have been expected, prove insincere. As for the young lady, the "touchstone" has the effect of bringing out her character in the brightest colours. Timid by nature, she had hitherto refrained from expressing, except in the most reserved manner, the love she really entertains for Count Asdrubal. After his apparent ruin, however, the advances are all from her side; and she finds herself obliged to resort to all kinds of devices in order to compel him to a formal declaration. She even feels called upon to appear – though whether for logical or merely for picturesque reasons can scarcely at this distant date be decided – in a Hussar uniform; and in this striking garb Madame Marcolini sang the celebrated final rondo, saluting the public with her sabre in acknowledgment of their applause, and repeating the salutes again and again as the applause was renewed.

La Pietra del Paragone is quite unknown to the opera-goers of the present day. It belongs to the year 1812, and probably no one now living ever heard it. Many, however, have heard portions of it; for *La Pietra del Paragone* not having proved thoroughly successful as a whole, the composer extracted the best pieces from it and introduced them into *La Cenerentola*, which, five years later, was represented for the first time at Rome. The air "Miei rampolli," the duet "Un soave no so chè," the drinking chorus, and the baron's burlesque proclamation, were all borrowed or rather taken once and for ever from the score of *La Pietra del Paragone*. Some other pieces, too, from the same work were nearly fifty years later heard at least once in an opera attributed to Rossini brought out at Paris in the year 1859. It has been said that among Rossini's operas of the year 1812 were two written for the San Mosè of Venice. The second of these, *L'Occasione fa il Ladro*, made its appearance substantially at Naples in conjunction with the pieces just spoken of, extracted from *La Pietra del Paragone*. An Italian poetaster, Signor Berettoni, gave to his new arrangement of *L'Occasione fa il Ladro* (which, by the way, he had enriched with selections not only from *La Pietra del Paragone*, but also from *Aureliano in Palmira*) the title of *Un Curioso Accidente*.

Rossini, however, though he did not mind borrowing from himself, did not choose to be borrowed from without permission, as without dexterity, by other persons; and finding that a *pasticcio* made up of pieces taken more or less at random from the works of his youth was to be brought out

as a new and original work, he addressed to the manager of the Théâtre des Italiens, M. Calzado, the following letter on the subject: —

"November 11th, 1859..

"SIR, – I am told that the bills of your theatre announce a new opera by me under this title *Un Curioso Accidente*.

"I do not know whether I have the right to prevent the representation of a production in two acts (more or less) made up of old pieces of mine; I have never occupied myself with questions of this kind in regard to my works (not one of which, by the way, is named *Un Curioso Accidente*). In any case I have not objected to, and I do not object to, the representation of *Un Curioso Accidente*. But I cannot allow the public invited to your theatre, and your subscribers to think either that it is a new opera by me or that I took any part in arranging it.

"I must beg of you then to remove from your bills the word *new*, together with my name as author, and to substitute instead the following: – 'Opera, consisting of pieces by M. Rossini, arranged by M. Berettoni.'

"I request that this alteration may appear in the bills of to-morrow, in default of which I shall be obliged to ask from justice what I now ask from your good faith.

"Accept my sincere compliments,
(Signed) "GIOACHINO ROSSINI."

On receiving this letter the manager withdrew the well-named *Curioso Accidente*, in connection with which no accident was more curious than that of its production. It had already been played once; and at this single representation much success had been obtained by a trio in the buffo style for men's voices borrowed from *La Pietra del Paragone*, and a duet for soprano and contralto from *Aureliano in Palmira*.

It is not so easy as it may at first appear to decide which deserves to be considered the first of Rossini's operas. The opera or operetta of *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* (1810), was the first produced on the stage; and *L'Inganno Felice* (1812), was the first which made a marked impression, and which, played throughout Italy, at Paris, and at Vienna, gained for its author something like a European reputation. But the first opera that Rossini ever composed was *Demetrio e Polibio*, which, written in the spring of 1809 when he was just seventeen years old, was produced at Rome – though not until it had undergone a process of retouching – in 1812.

An Italian officer, whom Stendhal met at Como one night when *Demetrio e Polibio* was to be represented – or perhaps it was the Abbé Carpani who met him; in any case the story is to be found in Stendhal's *Life of Rossini* – gave this curious account of the Mombelli family, all of whom were connected in one way or another with the performance of Rossini's earliest opera.

"The Mombellis Company," he said, "consists of a single family. Of the two daughters, one, who is always dressed as a man, takes the part of the musico (or sopranist); that is Marianna. The other one, Esther, who has a voice of greater extent though less even, less perfectly sweet, is the prima donna. In *Demetrio e Polibio* the old Mombelli, who was once a celebrated tenor takes the part of the King. That of the chief of the conspirators will be filled by a person called Olivieri, who has long been attached to Madame Mombelli, the mother, and who, to be useful to the family, takes utility parts on the stage and acts in the house as cook and major domo. Without being pretty, the Mombellis have pleasing faces. But they are ferociously virtuous, and it is supposed that the father, who is an ambitious man, wishes to get them married."

Madame Mombelli, moreover, had written the libretto, while the old Mombelli – once a "celebrated tenor" and still "so ambitious" as to wish to see his daughters legitimately married – had from among his plentiful reminiscences given Rossini ideas for melodies. Not only did the company, in the words of Stendhal's officer, consist of a single family; this family included, moreover, among its members, the composer himself, who was somehow related to the Mombellis.

From 1812 to 1813 was for Rossini a great step in advance; for during this latter year were produced *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri*, works destined within a very short time to find their way all over Europe. But before producing *Tancredi*, Rossini began the year by bringing out a little operetta entitled *Il Figlio per Azzardo*.

Rossini caused in his time a great deal of trouble to managers; and if those with whom he had to deal were for the most part bald, that, he said, was to be accounted for by his having driven them repeatedly to tear their hair. Some of the directors suffered from his apparent laziness, which at most could be called dilatoriness; for that Rossini was a composer of extraordinary activity is shown by the fact that by the time he was thirty-seven he had written thirty-seven operas; while, during the period of his greatest fertility, he frequently produced as many as four operas in one year. More than once, too, he completed an opera within a fortnight; but this fortnight was usually the last and never the first of the space of time assigned to him for the composition of a given work. Sometimes, however, he was annoyed and worried by managers without sufficient cause; and in these cases he knew how to retaliate. The manager of the San Mosè theatre, that Marquis Cavalli who also directed the theatre of Sinigaglia, and who, as already mentioned, had given Rossini his first commission, thought that having begun by writing for the San Mosè, the young composer ought not to work for any other theatre at Venice. He had engaged, however, to write an opera for the Fenice, where *Tancredi* was destined to be brought out; and the Marquis was so annoyed at this that he treated Rossini on more than one occasion with absolute incivility. He had supplied him, moreover, with a libretto so monstrously absurd that it was impossible to treat it seriously, or even in the spirit of mere comedy. Rossini, however, had to choose between setting this nonsense to music or paying a fine; and he preferred the former alternative. The task he now set himself was to compose to his ridiculous libretto music more ridiculous even than the words. Tenor music was given to the bass, who, to execute it, had to shout at the top of his voice. The soprano, on the other hand, had been furnished with a contralto part, which made demands only upon the lowest notes of her voice. A singer of notorious-incompetence was provided with a most difficult air, accompanied *pianissimo*, so that his faults might at least not be concealed. Another singer, whose burlesque appearance never failed to throw the house into convulsions, had to sing a sentimental melody of the most lackadaisical kind. The orchestration was quite as remarkable as the writing for the voices. One of Rossini's great merits consists in his having introduced new instruments into the operatic orchestra of his time; and in scoring *Il Figlio per Azzardo*, he wrote parts for instruments of percussion never before and probably never afterwards employed. These were the tin-shades of the candles with which the desks of the players were furnished, and which, in one movement, had to be struck at the beginning of each bar. For a time the public smiled at Rossini's pleasantry, until at last it occurred to some one that the composer was taking liberties with his audience. Then hoots and hisses were heard from every part of the theatre, and the end of Rossini's practical joke was that the practical joker had to rush from his post at the head of the orchestra and seek safety in flight.

CHAPTER III. ITALIAN OPERA UNTIL THE TIME OF ROSSINI

Tancredi was Rossini's first serious opera, and the first opera by which his name became known throughout Europe. In this work, too, we find indicated, if not fully carried out, all those changes in the composition of the lyric drama which, without absolutely inventing them, he introduced from Germany, and especially from Mozart's operas, into Italy.

It seems strange, what was nevertheless the case, that when Rossini began to write, the mere forms of the lyric drama were, in Italy at least, far from being looked upon as settled. Opera could not at that time boast a history of more than about two centuries, and though it had made great progress during the previous hundred years and was scarcely the same entertainment as that which the most illustrious nobles in Italy had taken under their protection in the early part of the seventeenth century, it was still far from resembling the opera of the present day; so much more developed, so much more elaborated.

No general view of the progress of operatic art in Europe can well be taken; for its advance has been different in each country. But its progress in Italy was sufficiently regular from its birth, or rather its invention, towards the end of the sixteenth century up to the period of Scarlatti; and from Scarlatti in a continuous line to Rossini.

Without going back to the origin of music in general, it may not be inappropriate, in connection with Rossini's innovations, and with a view to these innovations being better understood, to sketch in the briefest manner the history of the musical drama in Italy from its deliberate invention until, after its various developments, it became what Rossini made it between the years 1813, the year in which *Tancredi* was brought out, and 1823, the date of the production of *Semiramide*.

The opera, so far as a natural origin can be claimed for it at all, proceeds from the sacred musical plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as the modern drama proceeds from the so-called mysteries of the same period. Indeed the earliest musical dramas of modern Italy, from which the opera of the present day is directly descended, were mysteries differing only from the dramatic mysteries in having been written for the singing, not for the speaking voice. The opera, or drama in music, is not, compared with the spoken drama, a very ancient form of art. Persons afflicted with a rage for seeking in the distant past traces and origins of a form of art which was created and forced into existence in comparatively modern times, see the first specimens of opera in the Greek plays; a view which will be worth considering when writers on the subject of Greek music have come to an understanding as to its exact nature. One thing is quite certain, that the Greek plays are remembered solely by what musicians call the "words," whereas, with the exception of Herr Wagner's highly poetical, highly dramatic works, there are no operas written to be performed throughout in music, which, by their words alone, would have the least chance of living. Nor did the musical mysteries or musical plays of the fifteenth century – which were partly declaimed, partly sung, and always by solo voices – bear any great resemblance to the grand operas of the present day with their airs, duets, concerted pieces, and elaborate dramatic finales, supported by an orchestra which is always being varied and reinforced through the addition of new instruments, and in which composers aim constantly at the formation of new instrumental combinations. Of course, too, the sacred musical plays of the fifteenth century differed from our modern operas by their subjects. A primitive sort of opera on the *Conversion of St. Paul*, which was performed throughout in music at Rome in 1440, is not the sort of work that would be likely to interest our modern audiences, who entertain a marked preference for operas in which a leading part is assigned to the prima donna, and who have no objection to the prima donna's representing a thoroughly mundane character, such as

the fascinating *Carmen*, in the late M. Bizet's opera of that name, or the less fascinating *Violetta*, in Verdi's *Traviata*.

The first opera on a profane, or rather on a secular subject – for it is surely a mistake to regard everything not sacred as necessarily profane – was the descent of Orpheus into the infernal regions, drawn thither, as is well known, by his wife, Eurydice. The subject of Orpheus, alike lyrical and dramatic, has been a favourite one with composers for the last four hundred years, from Poliziano, who produced his *Orfeo* at Rome in 1440, up to Gluck, nearly three centuries later, and from Gluck down to Offenbach, who delights a good many persons in the present day. The *Orfeo*, which was brought out just four centuries ago, at Rome, bore no more resemblance, in a musical point of view, to a modern opera, than did the sacred musical plays before spoken of; and up to the year 1600 we meet with no musical work which bears more than a fundamental or general sort of resemblance to the modern opera. But almost immediately after the production of the second *Eurydice* a great reformer appeared. Monteverde, the innovator in question, changed, or at least gave new development to, the harmonic system of his predecessors, assigned far greater importance in his operas to accompaniments, and increased greatly both the number and the variety of the instruments in the orchestra, which, under his arrangement, included every kind of instrument known at the time. Monteverde employed a separate combination of instruments to announce the entry and return of each personage in his operas; a dramatic means made use of long afterwards by Hoffmann – better known by his fantastic tales than by his musical works – in his opera of *Undine*; and which cannot but suggest a similar device employed with more system and with greater elaboration by Wagner.

Monteverde, like so many of his predecessors and followers, felt attracted by the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and his first work was on the subject of *Orfeo*, which was produced in 1608 at the Court of Mantua; ordered, it may be, by that gallant but dissolute Duke of Mantua whom Signor Mario used to impersonate so admirably in *Rigoletto*. Monteverde's *Orfeo* contained parts for harpsichords, lyres, violas, double basses, a double harp with two rows of strings, two violins, besides guitars, organs, a flute, clarions, and even trombones. It is interesting to know that, apart from the instrumental combinations which announced the entry and return of each character, the bass-violas accompanied Orpheus; the violas, Eurydice; the trombones, Pluto; the organs, Apollo; while Charon – a most unsentimental personage, one would think – sang to the accompaniment of that sentimental instrument, the guitar.

I have, of course, no intention of following out the history of opera from Monteverde to Verdi. It will be sufficient to remark that Monteverde, the real founder of opera in something like its present form, produced a number of works at Venice, until at last the fame of the Venetian operas spread throughout Italy, so that by the middle of the seventeenth century the new entertainment was established at Verona, Bologna, Rome, Turin, Naples, and Messina. Opera, whatever its merits and defects, is essentially a royal and aristocratic entertainment. The drama was started by Thespis in a cart. The opera, on the other hand, was founded by popes, cardinals, and kings. The first operatic libretto, that of Poliziano's *Orfeo*, was the work of Cardinal Riario, nephew of Sixtus IV. Pope Clement IX. was the author of no less than seven libretti. The popes, indeed, used, in former days, to keep up an excellent theatre; and even in these degenerate times the taste for music has not, or had not until lately, died out at the Vatican.

It has been said that the history of opera, though Italy cannot claim to have been the one scene of its development, can be more conveniently because more continuously traced in Italy than in the various European countries where it has been cultivated, and where, in the case of three of these countries – Italy, Germany, and France, – it has made distinct advances. Nor, in considering the history of opera in Italy, is it necessary to observe its progress in Italy generally. It is sufficient to note the changes through which it passed at Naples alone. From Scarlatti (end of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century) to the immediate predecessors of Rossini, the history of the development of the opera in Italy is indeed the history of its development at Naples; and though,

unlike previous celebrated composers, Rossini did not pursue his studies at Naples, he soon made Naples his head-quarters, and produced at the San Carlo theatre between the years 1815 and 1823 all his best Italian operas in the serious style: *Otello*, for instance, *La Donna del Lago* and *Semiramide*.

Scarlatti, the founder of the great Neapolitan school, studied at Rome under Carrissimi; and he is memorable in musical history as having given new development to the operatic air, while he introduced for the first time measured recitative. Of Scarlatti's immediate followers, Logroscino and Durante, the former introduced concerted pieces and the dramatic finale which afterwards received new development at the hands of Piccinni. This important feature to which modern opera owes so much of its importance and so much of its effect, was introduced into serious opera by Paisiello. Paisiello, like Scarlatti, Logroscino and Durante, was professor at the Conservatorio of Naples; and under his guidance were formed Jomelli, Piccinni, Sacchini, Guglielmi, and Cimarosa. The particular innovations due to Piccinni and Paisiello have already been mentioned. Cimarosa composed the best overtures which, up to his time, the Italian school could boast of, and he was the first to introduce quartets and other concerted pieces in the midst of dramatic action; not, that is to say, as ornaments at the end of an act, which hitherto had been the place conventionally assigned to them, but as integral parts of the musical drama. This innovation occurs for the first time in *Il Fanatico per gli antichi Romani*, which Cimarosa composed in 1773. It was not until nineteen years afterwards that this master produced his *Matrimonio Segreto*. But meanwhile Cimarosa had been completely distanced by Mozart, who, himself a great inventor, and, so to say, anticipator, adopted moreover everything that was worth adopting in the methods of all his contemporaries and predecessors.

To resume, in as few words as possible, the history of opera in Italy up to the time of Rossini, this form of art was at first nothing but recitative, or recitative with a chorus at the end of each act. Then occasional airs were introduced, then duets; and it is not until the middle of the eighteenth century that we find an example of an operatic trio. Quartets and dramatic finales followed in due course; and while the Italians had been developing new methods of employing the solo voices, Gluck had given prominence to the chorus as a dramatic factor, and had cultivated choral writing with the happiest effect. Other Germans, with Haydn foremost among them, had produced new orchestral combinations, until at last Mozart joined to the vocal forms of the Italians the instrumental forms of the Germans, while developing and perfecting both. Rossini introduced quite gradually into Italian opera those reforms which are particularly associated with his name; and perhaps in no other way could he have got them accepted. But he might, had he felt so disposed, have borrowed them one and all in a piece from the works of Mozart.

Let it be remembered, however, as a matter of fact, that when in 1813 Rossini produced *Tancredi*, which marks the commencement of the reforms introduced by him into serious opera, he had enjoyed no opportunity of seeing any of Mozart's works on the stage. Probably he had studied the music of Mozart, as we know him to have studied that of Haydn, in score; but it was not until 1814 that *Don Giovanni*, nor until 1815 that the *Marriage of Figaro*, was performed for the first time in Italy at the Scala theatre.

Rossini's success, due above all to the fascinating character of his easily appreciable melodies, was instantaneous; and it spread like wild-fire from Italy all over Europe. More than a quarter of a century, however, passed before Mozart's great works made their way from Vienna to the chief cities of Italy, and to the capitals of France and England. This tardy recognition of Mozart's dramatic genius may be explained in part by the outbreak of the French revolution soon after their production, and by the wars which distracted Europe from the time of the French revolution until the pacification of 1815.

CHAPTER IV. TANCREDI

Tancredi, composed a year after *La Pietra del Paragone*, was Rossini's first serious opera. It was also the first opera by which he became known throughout Europe.

To amateurs of the present day its melodies appear of old-fashioned, or at least of antique cast. The recitatives seem long, and they are interminable compared with those by which Verdi connects his musical pieces. But when *Tancredi* was first brought out *opera seria* consisted almost entirely of recitative, relieved here and there and only at long intervals by solo airs. For much of this declamation Rossini substituted singing; for endless monologues and dialogues supported by a few chords, concerted pieces connected and supported by a brilliant orchestral accompaniment.

Rossini, in fact, introduced into serious opera the forms which comic opera already possessed. The parts were at that time differently distributed in *opera seria* and *opera buffa*; and in the latter less restricted style the bass singer was not as a matter of course kept in the background. *Tancredi* was the first serious opera in which a certain prominence was given to the bass, though it was not until some years later – in *Otello*, 1816, in *La Gazza Ladra*, 1817, and in *Mosè*, 1818 – that Rossini ventured to entrust bass singers with leading parts. *Opera seria*, when Rossini was beginning his career, was governed by rules as strict, as formal, and as thoroughly conventional as those which gave so much artificiality and so much dulness to the classical drama of France. The company for comic opera consisted of the *primo buffo* (tenor), *prima buffa*, *buffo caricato* (bass), *seconda buffa*, and *ultima parte* (bass). The company for serious opera was made up of the *primo uomo* (soprano), *prima donna*, and tenor, the *secondo uomo* (soprano), *seconda donna*, and *ultima parte* (bass); and in serious opera the *ultima parte* was not only kept in the background, but, except in concerted pieces, was scarcely ever heard.

As a solo singer, the bass in serious opera had no existence. Gradually Rossini brought him forward, until he became at last as prominent as the tenor, or even more so. In *Semiramide*

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