

# EDWARDS HENRY SUTHERLAND

THE LIFE OF ROSSINI

**Henry Edwards**  
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*The Life of Rossini:*

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# **H. Sutherland Edwards**

## **The Life of Rossini**

### **INTRODUCTION**

ROSSINI was a very celebrated man fifty years ago. Forty-seven years ago he had already finished his Italian career. "Semiramide," the last opera he composed for Italy, was produced in 1823; and that same year the Abbé Carpani wrote the letters on which Stendhal founded, if not the best, at least the best known life of Rossini that has appeared.

Stendhal's Life of Rossini was given to the world, and found a ready acceptance, nearly half a century before Rossini's death. But it so happened, what his biographer could not have known at the time, that, in the year 1823, the composer of "Semiramide" had really completed an important, probably the most important, period of his artistic life. He began to write in the year 1808; and it was between the years 1813 ("Tancredi") and 1823 ("Semiramide") that he made his immense reputation.

During the next six years, from his visit to London in 1823 until the production of "William Tell" in 1829, he made his fortune, while continually adding to his reputation.

Finally he passed the third and comparatively inactive period of his life, from the year of "William Tell" until his death, in

the tranquil enjoyment of his fortune and reputation, reminding the world from time to time, by the "Stabat Mater," by the three choruses, "Faith," "Hope," and "Charity," and by some charming compositions for voice and piano, that he was still the Rossini of former days; and proving by his last production that, even in extreme old age, he retained his glorious powers in all their fulness.

He composed a cantata when he was sixteen, and a mass when he was seventy-two. He began to write ten years before Donizetti, and nearly twenty years before Bellini; and he continued to write when these, his immediate and most illustrious followers, were no more. It is clear, then, that in Rossini the Italian music of the nineteenth century is represented, and, as it were, comprised. Consider, in addition to this, the vast popularity of his best works, and the influence of his style on that of Herold, Auber, and Meyerbeer, and what can be more evident than that Rossini was the chief operatic composer of his time, not only as regards Italy but as regards all Europe?

The main incidents of Rossini's life are all connected directly or indirectly with music. As a youth, when Prince Eugene was Viceroy of Italy, he would have fallen a victim to the conscription but for the proofs he had already given of rare musical genius. When, at the age of 30, he took a wife, he married a singer for whom he had written some of his greatest parts. As a young man he was constantly travelling from one Italian city to another to superintend the production of his works. For the same reason he

went to Vienna, just as his Italian career was coming to an end, and there met Beethoven. He never crossed the sea but once, and then only the Straits of Dover, to pay an artistic visit to England; and he passed the latter portion of his life in the country to which he had given "William Tell," and which he had almost adopted as his own.

Rossini had no ambition apart from music, and was quite satisfied with being the first operatic composer of his epoch. He was observant, well informed, talked well on a great variety of subjects, and possessed the sort of cultivation which might have been expected from his long habit of association with eminent persons in all branches of art and of the highest social distinction.

With regard to his temperament, everyone has heard that when, writing in bed, he let fall the piece he was just finishing, he did not rise to pick it up, as a man of sluggish imagination would have done, but at once, with true musical activity, wrote another. He did not like the half-material bother of setting to work; but he was full of ideas, and, when he *did* begin, melody flowed from him as from an eternal spring. Some of his most beautiful thoughts came to him suddenly as if by inspiration. He conceived the *preghiera* in "Mosè" on seeing the words, and wrote "Di tanti palpiti" while his dinner was being served. He was too delicately organised and had too much sense to love labour for the sake of labour; but he produced five operas in 1812 when he was preparing for "Tancredi;" he composed the "Barber of Seville" in thirteen days, and the "Barber of Seville,"

“Otello,” “La Cenerentola,” and “La Gazza Ladra” (not to speak of some minor works) in little more than a year. He wrote nothing operatic after the age of 37, but how he worked for the theatre until he was 30!

As to money, he had a just regard for it. But he was neither extravagant nor penurious; and when by working a few years in France he had secured a fortune which he never could have gained in any other country by the mere pursuit of his art, he gratefully abandoned his “author’s rights” to the “Société des Compositeurs de Musique.”

There was nothing dramatic in Rossini’s life. From an obscure origin he rose in a very few years to be one of the most celebrated men in Europe; but this gave him no trouble. His success was immediate, like that of a beautiful woman, whose beauty every one can appreciate. He never met with an obstacle of any importance, and his brilliant genius was never seriously or persistently denied.

Nevertheless, he made no undue concessions to the public taste, and he was a great innovator. In the course of ten years’ very hard work he completely changed the system of Italian opera. Into opera seria he introduced the most valuable reforms; while for the farce of the old opera buffa he substituted the comedy style in which “Il Barbiere” and “La Cenerentola” are written.

It is a pity no musician has thought it worth while to write the artistic life of Rossini, showing fully and explicitly what modifications, developments, and new combinations in opera are

due to him. Without venturing too far into technicalities, I have attempted something of the kind in this volume, which aims, however, at the character of a complete biography.



# PART I

## ROSSINI AND HIS EARLY WORKS

### CHAPTER I

#### ROSSINI'S YOUTH

ALTHOUGH Rossini's artistic life did not number precisely the "three score and ten years" allotted to man, we must go back a full seventy years from the date of his last work to the first incident in his musical career. When, in 1799, Paer's "Camilla," written a few years before for Vienna, was brought out at Bologna, Rossini, then little more than an infant, took the part of the child. "Nothing," says Madame Giorgi-Righetti,<sup>1</sup> the original *Rosina* in the future composer's "Barber of Seville," "could be imagined more tender, more touching than the voice and action of this extraordinary child in the beautiful canon of the third act, 'Senti in si fiero istante.' 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, born on the 29th of February, 1792, two months after the death of Mozart, was only seven years

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<sup>1</sup> Cenni di una donna gia cantante sopra il maestro Rossini.

of age when he sustained a part in the work of a composer whose fame he was destined before long to eclipse. The child came of musical parentage, for his father held the office of trumpeter to the town of Pesaro, in the Romagna; while his mother, who possessed a very beautiful voice, was able, when the father fell into trouble, to support the family by singing on the stage.

It has been said that Rossini was of obscure origin, but this only applies to his immediate progenitors. In the year 1861, too late to be of much service to him, the “Album di Roma” published Rossini’s pedigree, from which it appears that the great composer is a descendant of Giovanni, head of the family of Russini (or Rossini),<sup>2</sup> who “flourished” about the middle of the sixteenth century. Giovanni had two sons – Giovanni Francesco, direct ancestor of the composer, and Fabrizio, who was Governor of Ravenna, and died at Lugo in 1570. Next in the line comes Bastiano; then Antonio, born 9th of March, 1600; then Antonio, born the 16th February, 1637; then Antonio, born 7th September, 1667; then Giuseppe Antonio, born 1708; then Gioachino Sante, born 1739; and, finally, Giuseppe Antonio, the composer’s father, born in 1764.

The arms of the Rossini family have also been published. They consist of three stars in the upper part of the escutcheon, and a hand holding a rose, surmounted by a nightingale in the lower part. Giovanni Russini, who “flourished” in the sixteenth

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<sup>2</sup> If Mićkiewicz had known, that the composer of the “Barber of Seville” was descended from the Russini, he would have claimed him as a Slavonian.

century, must have adopted them in a prophetic spirit.

Giuseppe Rossini, the trumpeter, that is, herald and town crier to the sound of the trumpet, was a man of advanced political views, and seems to have entertained the same sympathy for the French which was afterwards manifested for that gallant and polite nation by his illustrious son. When the French army entered Pesaro in 1796, after the Italian campaign, the enthusiasm of old Rossini, in spite of his official position, was so marked that on the withdrawal of the Republican troops he was first deprived of his place, and afterwards thrown into prison.

Then it was (1798) that Signora Rossini, who had been in the habit of accompanying her husband to fairs and other musical gatherings, and singing small parts on the stage, while he played the horn in the orchestra, obtained a regular engagement; and it was probably under her auspices that the child Rossini made his first appearance in public.

This much, however, is certain, that Rossini, while still very young, joined his parents in their musical excursions, and took the second horn in the orchestras where the part of first horn was assigned to his father. No wonder that in after life he had an affection for wind instruments!

When young Rossini was twelve years old, he was taken to Bologna to see Professor Tesei of that city, who was much pleased with the little boy, gave him lessons in singing and pianoforte playing, and put him in the way of earning money by singing solos in the churches. At the end of two years he

could execute the most difficult music at first sight, and was able to act as musical director to a travelling company, which gave performances at Lugo, Ferrari, Forli, Sinigaglia, and other little towns in the Romagna. In 1807 he returned to Bologna, and was admitted to the Lyceum, where he studied composition under Father Mattei with so much success, that in the following year he was chosen to write the cantata which was expected annually from the Lyceum's best pupil.

"Pianto d'Armonia per la Morte d'Orfeo" was the subject of this, Rossini's first work, written when he was sixteen years of age, and executed at Bologna in August, 1808.

The success of the cantata was such that it procured for its composer the appointment of director of the Philharmonic concerts, in which capacity he superintended the production of Haydn's "Seasons." He had previously got up a performance of the "Creation" in the Lyceum itself; and it is interesting to know that at this period Rossini devoted himself ardently to the study of Haydn's symphonies and quartets.

While on the subject of Rossini's early studies it would be wrong to forget his eccentric pianoforte professor, Prinetti, who had two remarkable peculiarities: he never went to bed, and he taught his pupils to play the scales with two fingers, the first finger and the thumb. Pianoforte music "for four hands" is common enough; but pianoforte music for two fingers was probably never heard of except in connexion with Prinetti and his scales.

In 1809 Rossini produced a symphony and a quartet, and in the year following made his *début* as a composer for the stage. The Marquis Cavalli, impresario of the theatre of Sinigaglia, where Rossini had officiated as musical conductor, was also director of the San Mosè<sup>3</sup> theatre at Venice, and invited the young composer to write an opera for the latter establishment. This, the first work addressed by Rossini to the general public, was a trifle in one act, called “La Cambiale di Matrimonio.” It was produced in 1810, and Rossini received about eight pounds for it.

The opera or operetta of “La Cambiale di Matrimonio” was followed by the cantata of “Didone Abbandonata,” which Rossini composed for a relation, the afterwards celebrated Esther Mombelli, in 1811.

He produced the same year, also at Bologna, an opera buffa in two acts, called “L’Equivoco Stravagante.” This work, of which not even fragments have been preserved, seems nevertheless to have been thoroughly successful. One of Rossini’s very earliest productions, it was probably written, less in what we now consider his own particular style, than in that of his immediate predecessors. The concerted pieces, however, were much remarked, as was also a final rondo for the prima donna, Madame Marcolini. The rondo is especially noticeable as the first of those final airs for which Rossini seemed to have a

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<sup>3</sup> The Italian theatres are for the most part named after the parishes in which they stand.

particular liking, until he produced the most brilliant specimen of the style in the “Non piu Mesta” of “Cenerentola” – and then abandoned it to the after-cultivation of other composers.

“L’Inganno Felice,” written in 1812 for Venice, is the first of Rossini’s operas which, many years after its production, was thought worthy of revival. It was played at Paris in 1819, and some years later at Vienna, where the illustrious Barbaja, for whom Rossini wrote so many fine works, at Naples, between the years 1814 and 1823, brought it out.

After the success of “L’Inganno Felice” at Venice, Rossini was invited to write an oratorio for the Teatro Comunale of Ferrara. The result was “Ciro in Babilonia,” produced at the beginning of Lent, 1812. Madame Marcolini, the prima donna of the “Equivoco Stravagante,” played a principal part in this work, which, as a whole, was not very successful. Rossini saved from the remains of “Ciro,” a chorus which he introduced into “Aureliano in Palmira” (and from which he afterwards borrowed the beautiful theme of *Almaviva*’s air, “Ecco ridente il Cielo,” in “Il Barbiere”), and a concerted finale which re-appeared, in the year 1827, in the French version of “Mosè in Egitto.”

One would like, as a curiosity, to hear the air Rossini wrote in this opera of “Ciro” for the seconda donna. The poor woman, as Rossini himself told Ferdinand Hiller, had only one good note in her voice, and he accordingly made her repeat that note and no other, while the melody of her solo was played by the orchestra.

In addition to the two works just mentioned, Rossini wrote

“La Pietra del Paragone,” for Milan, and two one act operettas, “La Scala di Seta” and “L’occasione fa il ladro,” for Venice, in this fertile year of 1812.

“La Pietra del Paragone” contained leading parts for Galli, the afterwards celebrated basso, and Madame Marcolini, who, as in the “Equivoco Stravagante,” was furnished with a brilliant and very successful final rondo.

The libretto of “La Pietra” is based on an idea not absolutely new, and which, for that very reason perhaps, is generally successful on the stage. Count Asdrubal, a rich and inquisitive man, wishes to know whether his friends and a certain young lady, the heroine of the piece, are attracted to him by his wealth or really esteem and love him for his own sake. To decide the question he causes a bill for an immense sum drawn in favour of a Turk (the Turk was a great operatic character in those days) to be presented at his house. He himself, in Turkish costume, appears to receive the money, which the steward, having been instructed to recognise the signature as that of the Count’s father, duly pays.

Some of the friends bear the test, others prove insincere. As for the young lady she comes out in the most brilliant colours. Too timid and too scrupulous before the appearance of the Turk to manifest in an unmistakeable manner the love she really feels for Count Asdrubal, she has now to force the count to make a declaration to *her*. For this purpose she finds it necessary to appear before him in the uniform of a captain of hussars; in which becoming costume Madame Marcolini sang her final

rondo, saluting the public with her sabre in acknowledgment of their reiterated applause.

A still more successful piece in “La Pietra del Paragone” was the finale to the first act, known as “La Sigillara,” in which the sham Turk insists that seals shall be placed on all Count Asdrubal’s property.

It was the destiny of this work to be demolished, that its materials might be used for building up “Cenerentola,” in which the air “Miei rampolli,” the duet “Un soave non so che,” the drinking chorus, and the baron’s burlesque proclamation, all belonged originally to “La Pietra del Paragone.” Indeed the air now known as “Miei rampolli,” before finding its last resting-place in “Cinderella,” figured first in “La Pietra del Paragone,” and afterwards in “La Gazzetta,” a little opera of the year 1816.

The success of “La Pietra del Paragone” was an event in Rossini’s life; for just after its production the young composer, then twenty years of age, was claimed by the army. He had a narrow escape of making the Russian campaign; and though Paisiello and Cimarosa had both been to Russia with profit to themselves, it is doubtful whether Rossini, undertaking the journey under quite different circumstances, would have derived from it the same advantages. Fortunately Prince Eugene, the Viceroy of Italy – not the only one of Napoleon’s generals who, like Napoleon himself, had a cultivated taste for music – could appreciate the merit of “La Pietra del Paragone;” and, in the interest of art, exempted him from the perils of war. If Rossini



had fallen due in 1811, before he had written either “La Pietra del Paragone” or “L’Inganno Felice,” the conscription would have taken him. Napoleon would have gained one soldier more, and the world would have lost the “Barber of Seville” and “William Tell.”

Of the two operettas written for the San Mosè of Venice in the year 1812 nothing need be said, except that the music of the second, “L’occasione fa il ladro,” was presented at Paris, in a new shape, and under rather remarkable circumstances, only ten years ago.

An Italian poet, M. Berettoni, determined that so much good work should not be lost, added to it some pieces from “La Pietra del Paragone” and “Aureliano in Palmira,” and arranged the whole in a new dramatic form. “Un Curioso Accidente” was the title given to this pasticcio in two acts, which was announced as a new Opera by Rossini.

Rossini, who is supposed to have been so entirely careless of his reputation, did not choose that a production made up of pieces extracted from the works of his youth, and put together without his sanction, should be announced as a new and complete work from his pen; and lost no time in addressing to M. Calzado the following letter: —

*“November 11, 1859.*

“Sir, — I am told that the bills of your theatre announce a new Opera by me under this title, ‘Un Curioso Accidents.’

“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 this ‘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.”*

The effect of this letter was to cause the entire disappearance of “Un Curioso Accidente,” which was not heard of again. At the one representation which took place a charming trio in the buffo style, for men’s voices, taken from the “Pietra del Paragone,” and a very pretty duet for soprano and contralto from “Aureliano in Palmira,” were remarked.

In addition to the five works already mentioned as having been written by Rossini during the year 1812, “Demetrio e Polibio” may be mentioned as belonging to that year by its production on

the stage, if not by its composition.

“Demetrio e Polibio” was Rossini’s first opera. He wrote it in the spring of 1809, when he was just seventeen years of age, but is said to have re-touched it before its representation at Rome in the year 1812.

“Demetrio e Polibio” seems to have been altogether a family affair. The libretto was written by Madame Mombelli. Her husband, Mombelli, a tenor of experience, has the credit of having suggested to Rossini, from among his copious reminiscences, some notions for melodies. The daughters, Marianna and Esther, played two of the principal parts, while the third was taken by the basso, Olivieri, a very intimate friend of the family, of which Rossini himself was a relative.

An officer whom Stendhal met at Como one night when “Demetrio e Polibio” was about to be played, furnished him with this interesting account of the Mombellis, which tallies closely enough with the description of them given some forty years afterwards by Rossini himself to Ferdinand Hiller.

“The company,” he said, “consists of a single family. Of the two daughters, one who is always dressed as a man takes the parts 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 in the house is 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."

The year 1813 was a much greater year for Rossini than that of 1812, already sufficiently promising. The latter was the year of "L'Inganno Felice" and "La Pietra del Paragone;" the former that of "Tancredi" and "L'Italiana in Algeri."

Rossini's first work of the batch of three brought out in 1813 was a trifle, but owing to peculiar circumstances, a very amusing trifle, called "Il Figlio per Azzardo." This operetta, or *farza*, was written for the San Mosè theatre, and was the last work furnished by Rossini to that establishment.

The manager of the San Mosè was annoyed at Rossini's having engaged to write for another Venetian theatre, the Fenice, and in consequence treated him with great incivility, for which the young composer determined to have his revenge. He had moreover deliberately, and of malice prepense, given Rossini a libretto so monstrously absurd that to make it the groundwork of even a tolerable opera was impossible; yet Rossini was bound by his engagement to set it to music or pay damages. He resolved to set it to music.

If the libretto was absurd, the music which Rossini composed to it was ludicrous, grotesque, extravagant to the last degree of caricature. The bass had to sing at the top of his voice, and

only the very lowest notes of the prima donna were called into requisition. One singer, whose appearance was always a signal for laughter, had to deliver a fine-drawn sentimental melody. Another artist who could not sing at all had a very difficult air assigned to him, which, that none of his faults might pass unperceived, was accompanied *pianissimo* by a *pizzicato* of violins. In short, it was an anticipation of Offenbach, and it is astonishing that this musical burlesque of Rossini's has never been reproduced substantially, or by imitation (it is scarcely probable that the original score was preserved), at the Bouffes Parisiens.

Nor must the orchestra be forgotten, which Rossini enriched on this occasion by the introduction of instruments previously unknown. In one movement the musicians, at the beginning of each bar, had to strike the tin shades of the candles in front of them; when the sound extracted from these new "instruments of percussion," instead of pleasing the public, so irritated it, that the audacious innovator, hissed and hooted by his audience, found it prudent to make his escape from the theatre.

This practical joke in music was one which few composers could have afforded to make; but Rossini had to choose between a bad joke and a bad opera, and he preferred the former.

## CHAPTER II

# ITALIAN OPERA UNTIL "TANCREDI."

THE first opera of Rossini's which became celebrated throughout Europe was "Tancredi," which in the present day seems just a little old-fashioned. In regard to the recitatives and their accompaniments "Tancredi" is indeed somewhat antiquated. But it was new, strikingly new, in the year 1813, when Mozart's great operas had scarcely been heard out of Germany, and when, moreover, no one thought of comparing Rossini's works with any but works by other Italian composers. It was very unlike the serious operas of Rossini's Italian predecessors, and, in the opinion of many who admired those operas even to prejudice, was full of culpable innovations.

When Rossini began to write for the stage, the lyric drama of Italy was divided by a hard line into the serious and the comic; and comic opera, or rather opera buffa, was, musically speaking, in a much more advanced state of development than opera seria. The dialogue, especially in serious opera, was carried on for interminable periods in recitative. Choruses were rarely introduced; and concerted pieces, though by no means unknown, were still reserved, as a rule, for the conclusion of an act.

The singers were allowed great liberty of adornment, and

treated the composer's melodies as so much musical canvas, to be embroidered upon at will.

The orchestra was in a very subordinate position; the harmony was meagre, the instrumentation mild – many instruments, that were afterwards employed prominently and with great effect by Rossini, being kept in the background or entirely ignored.

Clarinets, for instance, were only admitted into Italian orchestras on condition of being kept quiet; while bassoons were used only to strengthen the basses. Brass instruments, with the exception of horns, were all but proscribed; and some of the brass instruments used by all composers in the present day – opheicleids, for instance, cornets, and all the family of saxhorns – were unknown.

Rossini did not stop, in the way of orchestrations, at “Tancredi;” and the drums and trumpets of the “Gazza Ladra” overture, the military band of “Semiramide,” the sackbuts, psalteries, and all kinds of musical instruments employed in his operas for the French stage, shocked the early admirers of “Tancredi” as much as the innovations, vocal and instrumental, in “Tancredi” had shocked those who cared only for the much simpler works of Paisiello and Cimarosa. Thus we find Stendhal complaining that in “Otello,” “Zelmira,” and above all “Semiramide,” Rossini, in the matter of orchestration, had ceased to be an Italian, and had become a German – which, in the opinion of Stendhal and his Italian friends, was about as severe a thing as could be said.

Lord Mount Edgcumbe in his “Reminiscences of the Opera” gives a fair account of the reforms introduced by Rossini into the operatic music of Italy, which is interesting as proceeding from an old operatic habitu   to whom these changes were anything but acceptable. It would be a mistake to suppose that Rossini’s operas encountered formidable opposition anywhere; and in England, as in France, those musicians and amateurs who, here and there, made it their business to decry them, did so with the more energy on account of the immense favour with which they were received by the general public.

“So great a change,” says Lord Mount Edgcumbe, “has taken place in the character of the (operatic) dramas, in the style of the music and its performance, that I cannot help enlarging on that subject before I proceed further. One of the most material alterations is that the grand distinction between serious and comic operas is nearly at an end, the separation of the singers for their performance entirely so.<sup>4</sup> Not only do the same sing in both, but a new species of drama has arisen, a kind of mongrel between them called *semi seria*, which bears the same analogy to the other two that that nondescript, melodrama, does to the legitimate drama and comedy of the English.”

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<sup>4</sup> The serious opera consisted of the following persons: The *soprano* or *primo uomo* [*homo*, but not *vir*], *prima donna* (generally a *mezzo soprano* or *contralto*) and tenor; the *secondo uomo* (*soprano*) *seconda donna* and *ultima parte* (bass). The company for the comic opera consisted of the *primo buffo* (tenor) *prima buffa*, *buffo caricato* (bass), *seconda buffa* and *ultima parte* (bass). There were also the *uomo serio* and *donna seria*, generally the second man or woman of the serious opera.



Specimens of this “nondescript” style are of course to be found in Shakspeare’s plays and in Mozart’s operas; but let Lord Mount Edgcumbe continue his perfectly intelligible account of Rossini’s reforms.

“The construction of these newly invented pieces,” he proceeds, “is essentially different from the old. The dialogue, which used to be carried on in recitative, and which in Metastasio’s operas is often so beautiful and interesting, is now cut up (and rendered unintelligible if it were worth listening to) into *pezzi concertati*, or long singing conversations, which present a tedious succession of unconnected, ever-changing *motivos* having nothing to do with each other: and if a satisfactory air is for a moment introduced which the ear would like to dwell upon, to hear modulated, varied, and again returned to, it is broken off before it is well understood, by a sudden transition into a totally different melody, time and key, and recurs no more; so that no impression can be made or recollection of it preserved. Single songs are almost exploded ... even the prima donna, who would formerly have complained at having less than three or four airs allotted to her, is now satisfied with one trifling cavatina for a whole opera.”

Rossini’s concerted pieces and finales described are not precisely a “tedious succession of unconnected, ever-changing *motivos*,” but from his own point of view Lord Mount Edgcumbe’s account of Rossini’s innovations is true enough.

It seems strange, that in the year 1813, when Rossini produced

“Tancredi,” the mere forms of the lyric drama should have still been looked upon as unsettled. For though opera could only boast a history of two centuries – little enough considering the high antiquity of the spoken drama – it had made great progress during the previous hundred years, and was scarcely the same entertainment as that which popes, cardinals, and the most illustrious nobles in Italy had taken under their special protection in the early part of the seventeenth century. No general history of the opera in Europe can well be written, for its progress has been different in each country, and we find continual instances of composers leaving one country to visit and even to settle in another, taking with them their works, and introducing at the same time and naturalising their style. But its development in Italy can be followed, more or less closely, from its origin in a long series of experiments to the time of Scarlatti, and from Scarlatti (1649) in an unbroken line to Rossini.

Indeed, from Scarlatti to the immediate predecessors of Rossini, the history of the development of the opera in Italy is the history of its development at Naples; and Rossini himself, though not educated at Naples, like almost all the other leading composers of Italy, soon betook himself to the great musical capital, and composed for its celebrated theatre all his best Italian operas in the serious style.

Without proposing to imitate those conscientious historians who cannot chronicle the simplest events of their own time without going back to the origin of all things, I may perhaps find

it more easy to explain to the unlearned reader what Rossini did in the way of perfecting operatic forms if I previously mark down the steps in advance taken by his predecessors.

The first operas seem to have been little more than spoken dramas interspersed with choruses in the madrigal style. “Dafne,” performed for the first time in the Corsi palace in 1597, passes for the first *opera musicale* in which recitative was employed.

In “Euridice,” represented publicly at Florence on the occasion of the marriage of Henry IV. of France with Marie de Medicis in 1600, each of the five acts concludes with a chorus, the dialogue is in recitative, and one of the characters, *Tircis*, sings an air which is introduced by an instrumental prelude. Here, then, in germ, are the overture, the chorus, the air, the recitative of modern opera.

Monteverde (1568 – 1643), who changed the whole harmonic system of his predecessors, gave greater importance in his operas to the accompaniments, increased the number of musicians in the orchestra, and made use of a separate combination of instruments to announce the entry and return of each dramatic personage – an orchestral device which passes in the present day for new.

Scarlatti (1649 – 1745), who studied in Rome under Carissimi, gave new development to the operatic air, and introduced measured recitative. Scarlatti’s operas contain the earliest examples of airs with *obbligato* solo accompaniments,

and this composer must always hold an important place in the history of the opera as the founder of the great Neapolitan school.

Alessandro Scarlatti was followed by Logroscino and Durante;<sup>5</sup> the former of whom introduced concerted pieces and the dramatic finale, which was afterwards developed by Piccinni, and introduced into serious opera by Paisiello; while the latter succeeded his old master, contemporaneously with Leo, as professor at Naples, where Jomelli, Piccinni, Sacchini, Guglielmi, Paisiello, and Cimarosa, were formed under his guidance.

The special innovations of Piccinni and Paisiello have been mentioned. Cimarosa, without inventing or modifying any particular form, wrote the best overtures that the Italian school had yet produced, and was the first to introduce concerted pieces in the midst of dramatic action.

We have seen that Rossini was a pupil of the Bologna Lyceum; but though he was the first great Italian composer who never studied at the Conservatories of Naples, to him fell all the rich inheritance of the Neapolitan school.

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<sup>5</sup> Durante passed from one Conservatory at Naples to another, and was necessarily professor at all three.

## CHAPTER III

### FOUR HISTORICAL OPERAS

IN bringing forward Monteverde, Scarlatti, Durante, Logroscino, and Pergolese, Jomelli, Piccinni, Paisiello, and Cimarosa, as the founders of opera, one seems to be tracing operatic history merely through names. To opera goers, who do not limit the sphere of their observation to London, it would be simpler to cite four examples of works belonging to the century before Rossini, which, if not living in the full sense of the word, are, at least, capable of revival, and have been presented to the public in their revived state during the last few years.

Pergolese's "Serva Padrona," an opera or operetta of the year 1731, was reproduced at Paris in 1862, for the *début* of Madame Galli-Marié. In this little work, which passed for its composer's masterpiece, the accompaniments are all for stringed instruments, and as there are only two speaking characters in the drama, it naturally follows that all the musical pieces are of the simplest form. But when "La Serva Padrona" was produced, a composer, however many characters he might have to deal with, was not expected to go in the way of concerted pieces beyond a duet; and it was not until twenty years afterwards that Logroscino ventured upon a trio, and upon the first very simple model of the dramatic finale.

In Gluck's "Orfeo" we have a well-known specimen of an

opera, somewhat later in date, and much more advanced in regard to dramatic form, than the one just named. It must be remembered that "Orfeo" was originally produced in 1764, not in France, but in Italy. In Gluck's operas we find an abundance of recitative; airs; choruses taking part in the dramatic action, occasionally duets; very rarely concerted pieces, and never finales. Gluck, like his rival Piccinni, but certainly not more than Piccinni, extended the limits of operatic art. If, as is generally admitted, he excelled in his dramatic treatment of chorus and orchestra, he neglected concerted pieces, and was not equal to the handling of those grand dramatic finales which Piccinni was the first to produce, in anything like their modern form, which Paisiello naturalised in serious opera, and which were brought to perfection in both styles by the comprehensive genius of Mozart.

A third opera by a præ-Mozartian composer, which, as it is still occasionally represented, may be cited for the further progress it exhibits in the development of operatic forms, is Cimarosa's "Matrimonio Segreto." Before writing this, one of his latest works (1792), its composer had been already completely distanced by Mozart, who adopted all that was worth adopting in the methods of all his contemporaries and predecessors; but to Cimarosa all the same belongs the merit of having introduced quartets and other concerted pieces, not as ornaments at the end of an act, but as integral parts of the musical drama. This important innovation occurs for the first time in Cimarosa's "Il fanatico per le antiche Romane," composed

in 1773, thirteen years before the production of the “Marriage of Figaro.”

Cimarosa’s “Matrimonio Segretto” is also remarkable in an historical point of view for its overture, the finest that the Italian school had up to that time produced. Paisiello’s overture to the “Frascatana” had previously made a decided mark; but Rossini was the first composer of his nation who wrote a whole series of operatic overtures – “Tancredi,” “Barber of Seville,” “Gazza Ladra,” “Semiramide,” “Siege of Corinth,” “William Tell” – which became celebrated apart from the works to which they are prefixed.

The only opera of Paisiello’s which has been presented in recent times, is his original musical setting of the “Barber of Seville,” written in 1780 for the Court Theatre at St. Petersburg. This interesting work, which was revived a couple of years ago, and is still occasionally played at one of the half dozen musical theatres in Paris called Les Fantaisies Parisiennes, is anterior to Mozart, more even in character than by date. Produced twenty years before “Il Matrimonio Segretto,” and only six years before the “Marriage of Figaro,” it seems very much further removed from Mozart’s than from Cimarosa’s work. Mozart went so far beyond his contemporaries that he may almost be described as a great anticipator. Like Shakspeare he is much more modern than his immediate successors.

However Paisiello’s “Barbiere” may sometimes be heard, and is therefore better worth speaking of than works of equal or

greater importance, which can only be looked at on paper; and it is interesting as marking a stage in the history of opera by the number and merit of its concerted pieces.

The opera, then, was at first nothing but recitative, or recitative and chorus; the chorus having no dramatic character, but confining itself, in imitation of the most ancient models, to solemn criticism and comment. To relieve the drawling recitative or chant, an occasional air was introduced; then more airs; then airs and duets. We have to wait until the middle of the eighteenth century for a simple trio. Then trios, quartets, finales, fully developed finales, occur. In the meantime Gluck had given great prominence to the chorus, and had cultivated choral writing with the happiest dramatic effect; and while operatic forms, especially in regard to the employment of the voices, had been gradually varied and extended by the Italians, the instrumental writers of Germany, more especially Haydn, had invented new orchestral combinations. Mozart appeared; and appropriating all in music that had gone before – joining to all the vocal forms of the Italians all the instrumental forms of the Germans, while improving, developing, and perfecting both – helped dramatic music on to that point at which even now, speaking broadly, it may be said to remain.



## CHAPTER IV

# MOZART AND ROSSINI

NEW instruments have been introduced since Mozart's time. It has become the fashion still farther to shorten recitatives; the chorus has been made more prominent than ever in Italian Opera, and Verdi gives it flowing melodies to sing as to a soloist of fifty-voice power. Nevertheless, in all essentials, no progress in the composition of dramatic music has been made since "Don Giovanni;" and if Mozart's operas had been known in Italy when Rossini began to write, then, instead of saying that Rossini took this idea from Cimarosa and from Paisiello, that from Gluck, that from Haydn, it would be much simpler to say that he took all that was new in the construction of his works from Mozart.

Rossini could scarcely have studied Mozart's works – certainly not their effect on the stage – when, in 1813, he produced "Tancredi;" in fact, "Tancredi" presents much less modern forms than the "Marriage of Figaro" and "Don Giovanni," written a quarter of a century earlier. But it must be remembered that Rossini did not perfect his style until about 1816, the year of "Otello" and of the "Barber of Seville;" and in the meanwhile La Scala had represented "Don Giovanni" (1814), and with much greater success "Le Nozze di Figaro" (1815).

Mozart may have prepared the way for Rossini's European success, and Rossini certainly profited in a direct manner by all

Mozart's reforms in the lyric drama. Still he may be said to have arrived independently of Mozart's influence at many of Mozart's results. Even in what passes specially for a reform introduced by Rossini, the practice of writing airs, ornaments, and all, precisely as they are to be sung, Rossini had been anticipated by Mozart, by Gluck, by Handel, by all the German composers. Nevertheless, it was not in deliberate imitation of the more exact composers of Germany, it was for the sake of his own music that Rossini made this important innovation, which no composer has since departed from.

Out of Germany Mozart's operas only became known a very short time before those of Rossini. Mozart was at once appreciated by the Bohemians of Prague, but his success was contested, by the Germans of Vienna, and it may be said with only too much truth that his masterpieces met with no general recognition until after his death. Joseph II. cared only for Italian music, and never gave his entire approbation to anything Mozart produced, though some of the best musicians of the period, with Haydn and Cimarosa at their head, acknowledged him to be the greatest composer in Europe.

The Emperor thought there were "too many notes" in the "Entführung aus dem Serail," in spite of Mozart's assurance that there were "precisely the proper number." The "Marriage of Figaro," not much esteemed by the Court, was hissed by the Viennese public on its first production; while "Don Giovanni" itself, in spite of its success at Prague, was quite eclipsed at

Vienna by the “Assur” of Salieri. Cimarosa in the meanwhile was idolised at Court. The Emperor Leopold, at the first representation of “Matrimonio Segretto,” encored the whole work, and loaded the composer with honours and riches; but he never really appreciated Mozart’s works.

The influence of a clique of hostile Italian musicians living at Vienna, also, no doubt, counted for something. In taking an important part in the establishment of German Opera, Mozart threatened to diminish the reputation of the Italian school. The “Entführung aus dem Serail” was the first blow to the supremacy of Italian Opera; “Der Schauspiel-direktor” was the second; and when, after the production of this latter work at the New German Theatre of Vienna, Mozart proceeded to write the “Nozze di Figaro” for the Italians, he simply placed himself in the hands of his enemies.

It cannot be said that in Italy Mozart’s recognition was delayed by mere national prejudice; but his works presented great executive difficulties; many of the pieces were too complex for the Italian taste, while in others too much importance was assigned to the orchestra, too little to the voices. Mozart, moreover, was not in the country to propose and superintend the production of his works, and the Italian composers, his contemporaries, thought, no doubt, that they did enough, in getting their own brought out.

Ultimately it was through Italian singers that both “Don Giovanni” and “Le Nozze di Figaro” became known throughout

Europe; but Mozart's two great operas, though written fully thirty years before Rossini's best works, were not introduced in Italy, France, and England, until about the same time. It took Mozart upwards of a quarter of a century to make the journey from Vienna to London; whereas Rossini, from Rome and Naples, reached both London and Paris in three or four years.

# CHAPTER V

## ROSSINI'S REFORMS IN SERIOUS OPERA

WE have seen that when Rossini's "Tancredi" was first brought out in London, Lord Mount-Edgumbe did not know what to make of it, and thought Italian Opera was coming to an end; whereas, as far as that generation was concerned, it was only just beginning. "Tancredi" has, in the present day, somewhat of an old-fashioned, or rather, let us say, antique character. Many of the melodic phrases, by dint of fifty years' wear, have lost their primitive freshness; and they are often decorated in a style which, good or bad, does not suit the taste of the present day. But it marks the commencement of the reforms introduced by Rossini into opera seria, and it is the first work by which he became known abroad. A very few years after its first production at Venice, "Tancredi" was played all over Europe.

To most opera goers of the present-day, the recitatives of "Tancredi" will appear sufficiently long – they are interminable compared with the brief recitatives by which Verdi connects his pieces. But before the time of "Tancredi," dialogue in recitative may be said to have formed the ground-work and substance of opera; and many an opera seria consisted almost entirely of recitative broken here and there by airs for a single voice.

The opera buffa was richer in concerted music; and Rossini, speaking broadly, introduced the forms of opera buffa into opera seria. For much declamation he substituted singing; for endless monologues and duologues, ensembles connected and supported by a brilliant orchestra. The bass singer was still kept somewhat in the background. But he had a part; his personality was recognised; and some of the amateurs of the old school pointed to him in "Tancredi" with prophetic eye, and sadly foretold that, having been allowed to make his first step, he would be gradually brought forward until, at last, he would stand prominently in the front – as he in fact did a very few years afterwards in Rossini's "Mosè."

Before "Tancredi" the bass took no part in tragic opera. Then, in addition to the new distribution of parts, the new arrangement of the dramatic scenes, the elaborate finale, the bright sonorous instrumentation, there were the charming melodies, there was the animation of the style, which, whatever the plan of the work, would certainly have sufficed to ensure it a large measure of success. All who heard the opera must, consciously or unconsciously, have felt the effect of Rossini's admirable innovations; but what chiefly excited the enthusiasm of the public was the beauty of the melodies. All Venice sang the airs from "Tancredi," the gondoliers made them into serenades; Rossini was followed by them wherever he went. It is said that they used even to be introduced in the law courts, and that the judges had more than once to stop the humming of "mi rivedrai,

te revedro.” “I thought when they heard my opera,” said Rossini, “that the Venetians would think me mad. But I found that they were much madder than I was.”

It was indeed with some fear and trepidation that Rossini witnessed the preparations for the first performance of “Tancredi.” He had not met the Venetian public since that affair of the lamp-shade accompaniment, into the humour of which they had positively refused to enter; and it was not at all certain that by way of a practical joke on their side, they would not hiss a work which the composer meant this time to be enthusiastically applauded. The manager of the *Mosè*, moreover, was now an enemy of Rossini, and, independently of that, would certainly not be sorry to hear of a failure at the “other house.” The *Fenice*, then, was full, the musicians of the orchestra were at their posts, the time for commencing the overture had arrived, and still Rossini was nowhere to be found.

It was at that time the custom in Italy for the composer of a new opera to preside at its representation three successive times; but Rossini seemed determined to escape at least one of these trial performances.

However, he intended the overture as a sort of peace-offering. It was begun in his absence under the leadership of the first violin; and the first allegro was so much applauded that Rossini at once felt justified in leaving his hiding place by the entrance to the orchestra and taking his seat on the conductor’s chair. The crescendo, a means not invented by Rossini, but employed

by him more persistently and with more success, than by any other composer, produced an effect which was repeated again and again in subsequent works, and never once too often. In fact, the whole of the animated and rather joyous prelude to what, if not a very serious opera, is at least an opera on a very serious subject, was received with expressions of delight.

No operatic overture was at one time more popular than that of "Tancredi." Perhaps it is our fault as much as that of the music, if it appears a little old-fashioned now. Certainly it is trivial in character. It does not fill the mind with thoughts and visions of noble deeds; nor does it present the slightest picture of the crusades as a modern programme-overture (with the aid of the programme) might do. But it caused the Venetians to forget the affair of the lamp-shade accompaniment; it predisposed them to enjoy the melodic beauties of which "Tancredi" is full; and, reduced for the piano-forte, it became, during only too long a period, an effective show-piece for young ladies.

The crescendo, which pleased the audience in the overture, must have delighted them in the concerted finale, where it is reproduced on a more extended scale. This effect is said to have been suggested to Rossini by a similar one in Paisiello's "Re Teodoro." But the great maker of crescendo movements before Rossini was Mosca, who circulated numerous copies of one of his pieces containing crescendo effects, by way of proving his exclusive right to manufacture them. He was very indignant with Rossini for interfering with what he had accustomed himself to



regard as his own private monopoly, and always declared that he, Mosca, was the true author of Rossini's celebrated crescendi.

Considering the very delicate relations subsisting between Rossini and the Venetian public, it must somewhat have alarmed him, when, the day before "Tancredi" was to be produced, he found that Madame Malanotte, the representative of the young hero, was dissatisfied with her first air.

Probably Madame Malanotte was difficult to please. At all events, it was necessary to please her; and Rossini went away from the theatre wondering what he could improvise for her in place of the cavatina she had rejected.

He went home to dinner – even the composer who has, at a moment's notice, to satisfy the caprices of a prima donna, must dine – and told his servant to "prepare the rice;" fried rice being the Venetian substitute for macaroni, oysters, soup, no matter what first dish. During the few minutes necessary for frying and serving the rice, Rossini had begun to note down an air. The beautiful melody afterwards known as "Di tanti palpiti" had occurred to him; and this he had made the principal subject of the air to be sung by the fortunate Madame Malanotte on making her entry. The whole of the cavatina is beautiful; and if, as Stendhal says, the air of the allegro was borrowed by Rossini from a Greek hymn (Lord Mount Edgcumbe says that it is taken from some Roman Catholic service), then we ought to be very glad that Rossini *did* borrow it.

But no one who has ever heard the very primitive music of the

Greek church will believe that the melody of “Di tanti palpiti” formed any part of it – certainly not in its present shape and setting. Berlioz is said to have admired the music of the Russian church; but then the Russians admired the music of Berlioz, and it is doubtful whether Berlioz admired “Di tanti palpiti.”

“It is said at Venice,” writes Stendhal, “that the first idea of this delicious cantilena, which expresses so well the joy of meeting after a long absence, is taken from a Greek litany; Rossini had heard it sung a few days before at vespers in the church of one of the little islands of the lagoons of Venice.”<sup>6</sup>

“Aria dei rizzi,” however, was the name popularly given to it; and wherever the first idea came from, the melody, as it now exists, is eminently Rossinian in form and style. How many great singers have sung this lovely air, beginning with the celebrated Pasta, who played the part of *Tancredi* as long as she remained on the stage, and whose favourite piece, after she had left it, to appear only at concerts, was still “Di tanti palpiti?” It has been seen that Madame Malanotte was the original *Tancredi* at Venice; Madame Pasta was the first representative of the character in France and England, and Pisaroni, Malibran, and Madame Viardot-Garcia afterwards distinguished themselves in the same part.

The most brilliant *Amenaide* ever heard was probably

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<sup>6</sup> M. Azevedo’s idea on the subject is certainly the best. “Since its production,” he says, “on the stage and in the universe it has been made the subject of a canticle for the Catholic Church, like all other successful airs. But a litany before the air and a canticle after the air are not the same thing.” M. Azevedo also rejects the rice.

Madame Sontag, who appeared in that character in 1829 to Malibran's *Tancredi*.

## CHAPTER VI

# ROSSINI'S REFORMS IN COMIC OPERA

AS Rossini found the opera seria of his day too serious, so he found the opera buffa too broadly comic. He was accused of treating tragic subjects melodramatically – which meant that he made them interesting. In dealing with comic subjects he took care to keep above the level of farce, his general tone being that of comedy, into which he now and then, but not often, introduced a touch of sentiment (“Languir per una bella” in “L’Italiana,” “Ecco ridente il cielo” in “Il Barbiere”).

The old opera buffa, with its separate set of characters and singers, and its own separate style, musical as well as dramatic, died out under the influence of Rossini’s innovations. It is said to have been very fine, by those who liked it; but apparently Rossini did not like it, for after trying his hand at a few specimens (of which the notorious little operetta or farza with the lampshade accompaniment seems to have been the last) he abandoned it, as after a single trial (Velluti in “Aureliano in Palmira”) he abandoned the sopranists.

If Rossini ever wrote an opera seria in the old style, it must have been that work of his early youth, “Demetrio e Polibio,” of which all that seems to be known is, that it was composed in

1809 for the Mombellis, and produced at Rome in 1812.

It must have seemed strange and rather awful to some obstinate habitués (and habitués are often as obstinate as habit itself) that the same singer should come before them one night as *Moses*, and the next as *Doctor Bartholo*, one night as *Figaro*, and the next as *Assur* in “*Semiramide*.” At the same time they appear to have been annoyed with Rossini both because in his serious works he was not more severe, and because in his comic works he was not more grotesque.

The fact is, Rossini rendered both styles more natural, more like life, as far as life can be represented in opera, and certainly more dramatic.

In “*L’Italiana in Algeri*” we see only the first essay in the style which was to be brought to perfection in “*Il Barbiere*” and “*Cenerentola*,” but “*L’Italiana*” was the forerunner of these works, just as “*Tancredi*,” in the serious style, was the forerunner of “*Otello*” and “*Semiramide*.”

“*L’Italiana in Algeri*,” like “*Tancredi*,” was composed for Venice; this time neither for the San Mosè nor the Fenice, but for the San Benedetto. The principal part was written for Madame Marcolini, who again, as in “*L’Equivoco Stravagante*,” and “*La Pietra del Paragone*,” was provided with a brilliant rondo finale.

In the concerted finale of the first act the prolonged crescendo was found as effective as the same device had proved in “*Tancredi*.” Rossini had now adopted his crescendo, never to forsake it; and if he was faithful to it, it certainly was faithful to

him, and never once deceived him.

The recitatives in “L’Italiana in Algeri,” as in “Tancredi,” are still rather long. The dramatic progress, too, in “L’Italiana” is slow, and the acts, as in all Rossini’s two-act operas – that is to say, all his important Italian operas, with the exception of “Otello” – last a prodigious time.

It must be remembered that when these operas were written it was the custom in Italy to give a *divertissement*, or even a long ballet, between the acts. As to the lengthiness of the recitatives, that was an affair of very little importance. No one was obliged to listen to them, and private conversation took place between the pieces, as public dancing took place between the acts.

Not only recitatives, but inferior airs, were neglected in this manner. If *Tancredi’s* air was called “Aria dei rizzi,” because it was composed while rice was being cooked, *Berta’s* air in “Il Barbiere” got to be known as the “Aria di sorbetto,” because people used to eat ices while it was being sung.

Rossini, no doubt, effected a reform in the conduct of his audiences as well in that of his dramas. The public were quite right not to listen to interminable recitatives; and when Rossini shortened his, and gave them a more dramatic character, at the same time increasing the number and variety of musical pieces in each act, he soon gained the full attention of his audience; after which, one excuse at least for being tedious had disappeared.

The worst of it was that, almost as soon as Rossini had brought the Italian public to listen to his operas from beginning to end,

he ceased to write. “Il Barbiere” was composed in 1816, and he never gave Italy a note after “Semiramide” in 1823.

The moment has now arrived for recording an anecdote. It is not pleasant to tell it for the five hundredth time; but a place for the most celebrated of all the Rossini anecdotes must somewhere be found, and it belongs to the year 1813, of which we take leave with the present chapter.

It was in the eventful year, then, of 1813 – the year of “Il Figlio per Azzardo,” with its obbligato accompaniment for lampshades, of “Tancredi,” and of “L’Italiana in Algeri” – that Rossini was writing one morning in bed, when the duet on which he was engaged fell from his hands.

“Nothing easier,” an ordinary composer would say, “than to pick it up again.”

“Nothing easier,” said Rossini, “than to write a new one in its place.”

Rossini would not get out of bed for a mere duet. He set to work and composed another, which did not resemble the original one in the least.

A friend called. “I have just dropped a duet,” said Rossini, “I wish you would get it for me. You will find it somewhere under the bed.”

The friend felt for the duet with his cane, fished it out, and handed it to the composer.

“Now which do you like best?” asked Rossini; “I have written two.”

He sang them both. The friend thought the character of the first was most in keeping with the dramatic situation. Rossini was of the same opinion, and decided to turn the second duet into a trio.

He finished his trio, got up, dressed, sent the two pieces to the theatrical copyist, and went out to breakfast.

This anecdote is often told in illustration of Rossini's laziness, as if a really active man would have got out of bed to pick up the fallen duet rather than set to work, *lazily*, to compose a new one.

Many volumes might be written on this question. It will be sufficient, however, to point out that activity is mere liveliness of the body, as liveliness is activity of the mind. So laziness is dulness of the body, dulness laziness of the mind. Rossini had a lively mind in a lazy body. He could not have walked a thousand miles in a thousand hours; but he wrote the "Barber of Seville" in thirteen days.



## **CHAPTER VII**

# **ROSSINI'S REFORMS IN WRITING FOR THE VOICE**

ROSSINI encountered no serious obstacles in his career. He was never crossed in love like Beethoven – indeed, in his numerous affairs of the heart, he seems always to have been met half way; nor did his works ever remain unappreciated for more than about twenty-four hours at a time.

He was never lamentably poor, like Schubert; for though in the earlier part of his career he was badly paid, he could always earn twenty or thirty pounds, the price of an opera, by working for two or three weeks.

To tell the truth, he seems never to have been depressed or elevated by the aspirations of Mozart; and he had (to use a favourite word of his) the same “facility” in succeeding that he invariably manifested in producing.

He attacked no subject that he did not make something of. If, as occasionally happened, an opera of his fell to the ground, he literally picked up the pieces and turned the best of them to account in building up and adorning some new work. This great artist and practical philosopher had already, as we know, written a “Cyrus in Babylon” for Ferrara, when he was called upon to produce an “Aurelian in Palmyra” at Milan.

“Ciro in Babilonia,” though it contained some very beautiful pieces, had not, as a whole, been particularly successful; and Rossini probably thought that in its oratorio form it was not likely to be repeated. At all events, he extracted from it a magnificent chorus for his “Aureliano;” to be thence transplanted in another shape – when “Aureliano” in its turn had failed – to the “Barber of Seville.” He also wrote for “Aureliano” an admirable overture, which a year afterwards was taken to Naples to serve as introduction to “Elisabetta,” and the year after that (“Elisabetta” having perished) to Rome, where it got prefixed to the immortal “Barber” – from whom may it never be separated!

Beethoven, for one opera, composed three overtures. Rossini made one overture serve for three operas; and it is remarkable that of these, two were serious, the third eminently comic.

Rossini’s life, as has just been observed, presents no dramatic interest. Such interest as it does possess belongs entirely to the composer’s artistic career, and consists in the reforms that he introduced into operatic art.

After “Tancredi,” in which we notice Rossini’s first innovations in opera seria, and “L’Italiana in Algeri,” which holds a corresponding place in the history of his comic operas, came “Aureliano in Palmira,” which marks another step in advance, not, as in the two previous instances, by reason of its success, but through failure.

In “Aureliano,” Rossini had written a part for the celebrated sopranist, Velluti (“non vir sed veluti”). Rossini did not like

Velluti's singing, and Velluti did not like Rossini's music; or, at least, did not like the composer's objecting to his music being so disfigured under the pretext of embellishment as to be rendered absolutely unrecognisable.

The result of this disagreement was that "Aureliano" was not played after the first night, and that Rossini worked no more for sopranists. "Velluti," the last of his order, went on singing for a dozen years afterwards, and Rossini from that time wrote his own ornaments for the singers, and so elaborately, that with the best will they were not likely to add much of their own.

We hear a great deal of the decay of singing as an art; but that art was thought so much of when Rossini began to write that more important things – dramatic propriety and music itself – were sacrificed to it. What would Italian singers of the year 1813 have thought of "William Tell?" and how would their highly-decorative style have suited that simple, energetic, thoroughly dramatic music? The development of Rossini's dramatic faculty was, no doubt, delayed by his having often to write for singers so accomplished, that they could think of nothing but the exhibition of their own voice.

In spite of the praise lavished by contemporary writers on the vocalists of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, it can be shown by the very terms in which the praise is sounded that these artists possessed a most undesirable talent, or, at least, exhibited their talent in a most undesirable way.

In the present day, many singers who have come before the

public with considerable success, are said never to have studied singing systematically at all. They have learned under a skilful professor so many parts – as amateur pianists learn particular pieces, without attempting to master the whole art of pianoforte playing.

The great singers of the eighteenth century acquired their facility of execution, which was what chiefly distinguished them, by a very different method. Far from studying parts, they sometimes did not even learn airs. To take an oft-quoted case, in which the extreme of the system seems to have been reached, Caffarelli was kept practising scales and a few exercises for five years; after which his master, the celebrated Porpora, is reported to have said to him, —

“Now go, Caffarelli; you have no more to learn! You are the first singer in the world.”

Yet, with all respect to Porpora, what, after such meagre, mechanical instruction as this, would Caffarelli have been able to make of a great dramatic part? What would a vocalist, taught as Caffarelli had been taught, make in the present day of the part of *Arnold* in “Guillaume Tell,” or of *Raoul* in “Les Huguenots”?

Meyerbeer would certainly not have allowed such a singer to take the part of *Vasco di Gama* in “L’Africaine,” which he reserved (in Germany) for Wachtel – by no means a Caffarelli!

Rossini would have quarrelled with Caffarelli, as he did with Velluti, and would have told him not to overload his music with absurd embellishments.

Stendhal, who frequently takes the parts of the singers, sopranists and all, against Rossini, for whose music he nevertheless professes unbounded admiration, puts to himself this suggestive question, —

“If Rossini, in 1814, had found a greater number of good singers, could he have thought of the revolution he has brought about, would he have introduced the system of writing everything down?”

“His self-love,” he replies, “would perhaps have suggested it, but that of the singers would vigorously have opposed it. Look, in our own day, at Velluti, who refuses to sing his music.”

And, therefore, Stendhal adds, that if called upon to choose between the two systems, he should decide in favour of the ancient system somewhat modernised.

“I would not have all the ornaments written down, but I would have the liberty of the singer restrained. It is not right that Velluti should sing the cavatina of ‘Aureliano’ so that the author can scarcely recognise it himself. In that case it is Velluti who is really the author of the airs he sings, and it is better to keep two such different arts separate.”

These remarks occur in Stendhal’s “Vie de Rossini,” page 263 of the 1864 edition (chapter XXXI. – Rossini se répète-t-il plus qu’un autre?); but they belong to the Abbé Carpani, on whose “Rossiniane” (as already mentioned) Stendhal’s “Vie de Rossini” is founded. Beyle, calling himself Stendhal, took all his biographical facts, most of his critical opinions, from

Carpani, and added a number of those ingenious remarks on love, Walter Scott's novels, temperaments in the North and in the South of Europe, the points of difference between French, English, and Italian society, &c., which, together with the inevitable, and, at first, rather striking appeals to the reader to throw the book on one side if he does not feel quite capable of appreciating it, are common to all the works of Stendhal – a most original writer, in spite of his curious plagiarisms in connection with music. Beyle had previously borrowed the same Carpani's "Haydine," which he attributed to "Bombet." In thus plundering Carpani to enrich Bombet and Stendhal, Beyle has caused much needless confusion, especially in those passages where he speaks in the first person. Thus "Stendhal" represents himself as well acquainted with Rossini, – who though he constantly met Carpani in 1822, at Vienna, knew nothing of "Stendhal."

However, it is Carpani who raises the question whether Velluti ought to be sacrificed to Rossini, or Rossini to Velluti; and his views on the subject as an Italian connoisseur of the year 1823, and an enthusiastic admirer of Rossini's music, are certainly valuable.

The system – astonishing system! – of writing airs precisely as they are to be sung, is now recognised by all composers. Nothing is left to the singer. Formerly, even if restrained in regard to the body of the air, the vocalist was at least allowed to take some little liberties in the cadenza. Now cadenzas and everything are

written for him, and it is conceived a piece of bad taste if a singer substitutes a cadenza of his own for the one already set down for him by the composer.

As a matter of serious criticism the question so clearly posed when the singer Velluti, and the composer Rossini, came into collision at the first representation of “Aureliano in Palmira,” is scarcely worth discussing. It may have been good practice for the singers of the eighteenth century to exercise themselves on the composer’s melodies; but Rossini knew that it was not his part to supply these acrobats with bits of carpet on which to perform their gymnastic feats.

Velluti is said to have been much applauded at the first representation of “Aureliano in Palmira” – merely a sign of bad taste on the part of the audience; but Rossini would have no more to do with him, and told him to take his talent for “embroidery” elsewhere. He took it to Meyerbeer. Fancy Meyerbeer – the Meyerbeer of “Le Prophète” – allowing his airs to be “embroidered!” But this was the Meyerbeer of the year 1824; and in “Il Crociato,” Velluti, the last of the sopranists, found his last new part.

“The great singers,” says Stendhal (meaning the sopranists from the end of the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century), “did not change the motive of their airs, which they presented the first time with great simplicity.<sup>7</sup> Then

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<sup>7</sup> “Le ombreggiature per le messe di voce, il cantar di partarrenti, l’arte di fermare la voce per farla fluire eguale nel canto legato, l’arte di prender flato in modo insensibile

they began to embroider.”

Exactly so. If they had begun to “embroider” before presenting the motive in all its simplicity, where would have been the proof of their inventive talent?

“Millico, Aprile, Farinelli, Pacchierotti, Ansani, Babini, Marchesi,” continues Carpani, “owed their glory to the system of the old composers, who in certain parts of their operas gave them little more than a canvas.”

In exhibiting their talent first in the simple, and afterwards in the highly decorative style, they appear in each case to have gone to extremes. If they had a fault, Stendhal admits that they were sometimes languishing and lackadaisical in their delivery of slow sustained melody; and he applauds Rossini for introducing a brisker style of sentiment into serious opera. But Rossini’s great objection to them was that they were too much addicted to ornament; and Stendhal has himself told us that Velluti, in “Aureliano,” decorated his music to such an extent as to render it unrecognisable by the composer.

“Aureliano in Palmira,” when it was brought out in London, met with no more success than it had obtained at Milan. It is interesting to notice that this was the only opera of Rossini’s which pleased Lord Mount Edgcumbe. The old habitu  liked it

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e senza troncare il lungo periodo vocale delle arte antiche.” This passage is from Carpani. Stendhal, not finding it easy to translate, gives it, in Italian, as his own, and endeavours to explain his use of the Italian language by saying that he finds “an almost insurmountable difficulty in writing about singing in French.” This mania for “adaptation” makes one doubt the originality of everything Stendhal has done.



because it was not a true Rossinian opera at all, but an opera composed after the manner of Rossini's predecessors.

"Rossini," says Stendhal, in his interesting account of the first representation of "Aureliano in Palmira," which he claims to have witnessed, "followed altogether, in his first works, the style of his predecessors. He respected the voices, and only thought of bringing about the triumph of singing. Such is the system in which he composed 'Demetrio e Polibio,' 'L'Inganno felice,' 'La Pietra del Paragone,' 'Tancredi,' etc. Rossini had found la Marcolini, la Malanotte, la Manfredini, the Mombelli family, why should he not endeavour to give prominence to the singing, he who is such a good singer, and who when he sits down to the piano to sing one of his own airs, seems to transfer the genius we know him to possess as a composer, into that of a singer? The fact is, a little event took place which at once changed the composer's views... Rossini arrived at Milan in 1814 to write 'Aureliano in Palmira.' There he met with Velluti, who was to sing in his opera: Velluti, then in the flower of his youth and talent, one of the best-looking men of his time, and much given to abuse his prodigious resources. Rossini had never heard this singer. He wrote a cavatina for him. At the first rehearsal with full orchestra, he heard Velluti sing it, and was struck with admiration. At the second rehearsal Velluti began to embroider (*fiorire*). Rossini found some of his effects admirable, and still approved: but at the third rehearsal, the richness of the embroidery was such that it quite concealed the body of the air.

At last the grand day of the first representation arrived. The cavatina and all Velluti's part were enthusiastically applauded, but Rossini could scarcely recognise what Velluti was singing; he did not know his own music. However, Velluti's singing was very beautiful and wonderfully successful with the public, which after all does no wrong in applauding what gives it so much pleasure. The pride of the young composer was deeply wounded; the opera failed, and the sopranist alone succeeded. Rossini's lively perception saw at once all that such an event could suggest. 'It is by a fortunate accident,' he said to himself, 'that Velluti happens to be a singer of taste;<sup>8</sup> but how am I to know that at the next theatre I write for I shall not find another singer who, with a flexible throat, and an equal mania for *fioriture*, will not spoil my music so as to render it not only unrecognisable to me, but also wearisome to the public, or at least remarkable only for some details of execution? The danger of my unfortunate music is the more imminent in so much as there are no more singing schools in Italy. The theatres are full of artists who have picked up music from singing-masters about the country. This style of singing violin concertos, endless variations, will not only destroy all talent for singing, but will also vitiate the public taste. All the singers will be imitating Velluti, each according to his means. We shall have no more cantilenas; they would be thought poor and cold. Everything will undergo a change, even to the nature

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<sup>8</sup> There is nothing to prove that Rossini entertained any such opinion of Velluti's singing.

of the voices which, once accustomed to embroider and overlay a cantilena with elaborate ornaments, will soon lose the habit of singing sustained legato passages, and be unable to execute them. I must change my system, then. I know how to sing; everyone acknowledges that I possess that talent; my *fioriture* will be in good taste; moreover, I shall discover at once the strong and weak points of my singers, and shall only write for them what they will be able to execute. I will not leave them a place for adding the least appoggiatura. The *fioriture*, the ornaments, must form an integral part of the air, and be all written in the score.”

Velluti, who is said to have been prepared with three elaborate cadenzas of his own composition for every air he sang, must have been highly disgusted to find that Rossini objected altogether to his departing from the written text. For the sopranists were very great personages. When Caffarelli heard that the accomplished Farinelli had been made prime minister to the King of Spain, he is reported to have said: “He is a magnificent singer, and fully deserves the honour.” The sopranist, Marchesi, stipulated, when he was at the height of his fame, that he should be allowed to make his entry and sing his cavatina on horseback or from the summit of a mountain, also that the plume in his helmet should be at least five feet high!

Rossini’s dislike to Velluti’s style of singing, being founded on principle, was permanent; and on his visiting Paris many years afterwards, Mr. Eben tells us (“Seven Years at the King’s Theatre”) that “Rossini being at this time engaged at Paris under

his agreement to direct there, Velluti did not enter into his plans, and having made no engagement there, came over to England.”

Perhaps one of the best singing masters of the eighteenth century was Frederick the Great, who, as Dr. Burney tells us, was accustomed to take up his position in the pit of his opera-house, behind the conductor of the orchestra, so as to have a view of the score; when if a singer ventured to alter a single passage in his part, his Majesty severely reprimanded him, and ordered him to keep to the notes written by the composer. The Berlin opera would have been a good school for the sopranists, “who,” says M. Castil-Blaze,<sup>9</sup> “were at all times extremely insolent. They forced the greatest masters to conform to their caprices. They changed, transformed everything to suit their own vanity. They would insist on having an air or a duet placed in such a scene, written in such a style, with such and such an accompaniment. They were the kings, the tyrants, of theatres, managers, and composers; that is why in the most serious works of the greatest masters of the last century long, cold passages of vocalisation occur, which had been exacted by the sopranists for the sake of exhibiting in a striking manner the agility and power of their throats. ‘You will be kind enough to sing my music, and not yours,’ said the venerable and formidable Guglielmi to a certain virtuoso, threatening him at the same time with his sword. In fact the vocal music and the whole Italian lyrical system of the eighteenth century was much more the work of the singers than

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<sup>9</sup> A: Théâtres Lyriques de Paris, “L’Opéra Italien,” p. 317.

of the composers.”

Rossini then was not only a great composer, he was also a sort of Jack the Giant Killer. To be sure these giants of sopranists, with their vocal equestrianism, their shouting from the summits of mountains, and their plumes five feet high, were already approaching their last days. Still the great Velluti was in his vigour in 1814, and it was in that year that the young Rossini declared war against these Philistines, and succeeded in liberating vocal music from the tyranny of vocalists.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FROM MILAN TO NAPLES

ROSSINI would have been amused if any one had written a book about him and his music entitled "Rossini and his Three Styles." He liked discussing the principles and also the practice of his art in good company – witness the "Conversations with Rossini," recorded by Ferdinand Hiller. But he cared little for fine distinctions, and he is reported to have said that he knew nothing of French music, German music, or Italian music; that he only knew of two kinds of music – good and bad.

Nevertheless, all writers, painters, musicians, who have a style at all, have at least three styles – an imitative style, a tentative style, and finally, a style of their own. This division being admitted, Rossini entered upon his second style in writing "Tancredi," and "L'Italiana in Algeri" (1813); and did not attain his third style until he wrote in the same year (1816) "Otello" for Naples, and "Il Barbiere" for Rome.

If it be thought absolutely necessary to place "Guillaume Tell" and Rossini's French operas in a category by themselves, then we must say that Rossini had three styles (the consecrated number); and "Guillaume Tell" being manifestly in the third and last style, "Otello" must be put back to the second, and "Tancredi" to the first.

Theory apart, it is quite certain that Rossini, after his

collision with Velluti, altered his system of writing for the voice – embellishing his airs, where he thought embellishments necessary, in such a manner that to embellish them further, at the will of the singer, was out of the question.

It is also certain that at Naples, from his arrival there in 1815, he passed under the artistic influence of Madame Colbran, his future wife, for whom he wrote no less than ten important parts, beginning with *Elisabetta*, and *Desdemona*, and ending with *Zelmira* and *Semiramide*.

In the meanwhile, between the historical “Aureliano,” which represents his breach with decorative vocalists, priding themselves on their individuality and their power of invention, on the one hand, and the equally historical “Elisabetta,” which represents his arrival at Naples, and the commencement of the period in which he cultivated serious opera alone, on the other, an interval of more than eighteen months must be supposed to elapse, during which Rossini wrote two operas, “*Il Turco in Italia*,” and “*Sigismondo*.”

The manager of La Scala wanted a pendent to “*L’Italiana in Algeri*.”

The basso Galli, who had for several years played with great success the part of the *Bey* in the “*Italiana*,” was now provided with the part of a young Turk who finds himself alone among Christians, as the “*Italiana*” had found herself alone among Mahomedans. Shipwrecked on the Italian coast, the youthful infidel reaches land and falls in love with the first pretty woman

he meets. The pretty woman has, after the fashion of her native land, both a husband and a lover, and she torments them both by affecting a deep regard for the Turkish stranger. Galli was especially successful in his first air – a salutation to Italy, which was found very appropriate, inasmuch as the singer had just returned to Milan from Barcelona. The composer, however, was not so fortunate as the vocalist, the house resounded with cries of “Bravo Galli,” but “Bravo Maestro” was not once heard. The critics of the period found that there was a want of novelty in Rossini’s music, in fact that he had repeated himself. The truth is, continuations of successful works are seldom successful themselves. So much do first impressions count for, that the merit of a continuation must be superior to that of the original under pain of appearing inferior.

The shipwrecked Turk could not be permanently saved; but, true to his principles, Rossini rescued what he could from the general disaster. He had written an admirable overture for this “Turk in Italy,” which, when “Otello” was brought out, served with more or less appropriateness to introduce the Moor of Venice.

“Sigismondo” has left even fainter traces than “Il Turco in Italia.” It was produced at Venice (Fenice theatre) towards the close of 1814; and the night of its production Rossini, who always gave his mother the earliest news of the fate his works had met with, enclosed her a drawing of a bottle – or *fiasco*.

Rossini was not progressing. He had written nothing



successful (though “Aureliano in Palmira” contained much that deserved to succeed) since the summer of 1813, when “L’Italiana in Algeri” was produced. This year of 1814 was the only one in which he ever received anything like a check; perhaps he was collecting himself for the great achievements of 1816, the year of “Otello” and “Il Barbiere.” In the meanwhile, even in 1814, he had done his year’s work. He had written two operas, besides a cantata, “Egle e Irene,” composed for the princess Belgiojoso.

At this time Rossini received only the miserable sum of about forty pounds for an opera. This money was paid to him by the impresario and represented the exclusive right of performing the work for two years. Few if any of his operas seem to have been engraved at the time of production, so that there was nothing to receive from music publishers, the sole refuge of dramatic composers in England (if dramatic composers in England still exist) to whom no payment is paid by managers for the right of representation.

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