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Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
OF
ROSSINI.



CHAPTER I.

Rossini's family—Born at Pesaro, 1792—Studies music under Angelo Tesei—Goes on his musical tour—Composes a Cantata, in 1808, and the Operas of “Demetrio e Polibio,” in 1809; “La Cambiale di matrimonio,” 1810; L’Equivoco Stravagante,” in 1811; “L’Inganno Felice,” in 1812; “Ciro in Babalonia,” an Oratorio; “La Scala di Seta;” “L’Occasione fa il Ladro;” “Il Figlio per Azzardo,” all in the same year, and “Tancredi,” in 1813—Rossini accepts an engagement at Venice.

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI was born on the 29th of February, 1792, at Pesaro, a pretty little town in the Papal states, situated on the gulf of Venice. His father was an inferior performer on the French horn, of the third class, in one of those strolling companies of musicians, who, to gain a livelihood, attend

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the fairs of Sinigaglia, Fermo, Forli, and other small towns of Romagna, or its vicinity. The little musical resources, in which the company is deficient, are collected in the neighbourhood where they pitch their tent ; an orchestra is collected impromptu, and the good folks of the fair are treated with an opera. His mother, who passed for one of the prettiest women of Romagna, was a *seconda donna* of very passable talents. They went from town to town, and from company to company ; the husband playing in the orchestra, and his wife singing on the stage. Poverty was of course the companion of their wanderings ; and their son Rossini, covered with glory, and with a name that resounded from one end of Europe to the other, faithful to his paternal poverty, had not, before his arrival two years ago at Vienna, for his whole capital, a sum equal to the annual pay of an actress on the stage of Paris or Lisbon. Living is cheap at Pesaro ; and, although this family subsisted on the most precarious means in the world, they never lost their natural gaiety, and strictly adhered to the maxim of taking no heed for the future.

The political state of that part of Italy in which Rossini was born, is but little to

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be envied. All the Papal government requires from its subjects is the regular payment of taxes, and a strict attendance on mass. Its subjects, on the other hand, require from the Papal government free will in every thing else ; and, on the strength of this compact, all the tastes, propensities, and passions of man flourish and luxuriate in a fearless vigour, that would astonish the governments of France and England. Man may do what he will, or be what he will, in that land of sensibility. This, it is true, fills the roads with banditti ; but it crowds the convents with monks : it fills her palaces with impurity ; but it never leaves the *Cassinos* destitute of beauty : it fills the streets with mendicants ; but it sends hosts of amateurs upon the stage.

Music has irresistible charms for the Italian ; a guitar and a voice will carry him from Tarento to Domo d'Ossola,—through Italy, and through life. Italy has been happily termed—the land of love and of the *dolce far niente*.* Sunshine costs nothing ; and no man can contrive so well to dispense

* Sweet nothing-to-doishness.

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with clothes as the Italian. He can be luxurious, when luxury is before him; he can fast when he has nothing else to do. No living being can exist upon so little as he; he can live upon an onion, water, air. He “diets of the cameleon’s dish,” and, nestling by the side of his mule on the Apennine, or on a litter of straw in the valleys of Piedmont, he dreams of the pence and plaudits of the Boulevards, or the golden showers of the Haymarket.

Rossini’s portion from his father, was the true native heirship of an Italian: a little music, a little religion, and a volume of Ariosto. The rest of his education was consigned to the legitimate school of southern youth, the society of his mother, the young singing girls of the company, those *prima donnas* in embryo, and the gossips of every village through which they passed. This was aided and refined by the musical barber and news-loving coffee-house keeper of the Papal village.

In 1799, the parents of Rossini took him from Pesaro to Bologna, but he did not begin to study music till 1812, when he was twelve years of age. His first master was

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D. Angelo Tesei. In the course of a few months, the young *Gioacchino* already earned some *paoli* by singing in the churches. His pleasing soprano voice, and the vivacity of his youthful manners, gained him many friends among the priests who directed the *Funzioni*. Under Professor Angelo Tesei, *Gioacchino* became a tolerable proficient in singing, in the art of accompanying, and in the rules of counterpoint. In 1806, he was capable of singing at first sight any piece of music put before him, and great hopes were conceived of his future excellence; it was augured from his growth and the quality of his voice, that he would make an excellent tenor.

On the 27th of August, 1806, he quitted Bologna to make the musical tour of Romagna. He took his place at the piano, as director of the orchestra at Lugo, Ferrara, Forli, Sinigaglia, and other little towns. It was only in 1807, that the young Rossini gave up singing in the church. The 20th of March, in the same year, he entered the Lyceum of Bologna, and received lessons in music from Padre *Stanislao Mattei*.

A year after, (the 11th of August, 1808,) he had made so considerable a progress, as to

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be qualified to compose a symphony, and a cantata, entitled "*Il Pianto d'Armonia.*" This was his first essay in vocal music. Immediately after this, he was chosen director of the Academy of the *Concordi*, a musical society at that time existing in the bosom of the Lyceum at Bologna.

"*Demetrio et Polibio*" is the first opera composed by Rossini. It is said to have been written in 1809, but it was not performed till 1812, in the theatre *Valle*, at Rome. Some have imagined that it was re-written by the master for this representation; but there is no proof of the fact. Rossini's known indolence, and the active duties he was obliged to perform this year, would rather tell against such a supposition.

Such was the progress Rossini had made at nineteen, that he was chosen to direct, as head of the orchestra, the "*Four Seasons*" of Haydn, which were executed at Bologna; the "*Creation*," which was given on the same occasion, (May 1811), was directed by the celebrated Soprano *Marchesi*. When the parents of Rossini had no engagement, they returned to their residence at Pesaro. Some rich amateurs of this town, I believe of the

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family *Perticari*, took the young Rossini under their protection. A young lady, of considerable beauty and fortune, formed the happy idea of sending him to Venice; he there composed, for the theatre *San-Mose*, a little opera in one act, entitled "*La Cambiale di Matrimonio*" (1810). This was the first opera of Rossini performed upon the stage. After a success very flattering to a beginner, he returned to Bologna; and, in the autumn of the following year (1811), produced "*L'Equivoco Stravagante*." The following year he returned to Venice, and composed for the carnival, "*L'Inganno Felice*."

In this piece genius shines forth in every part. An experienced eye will at once recognize in this opera, in one act, the parent ideas of fifteen or twenty capital pieces, which at a latter period contributed to decide the fortune of the *chefs-d'œuvres* of Rossini. It contains a beautiful *terzetto*, between the peasant *Tarabetto*, the lord of the domain, and the wife, who has been exiled by her deluded husband.

The "*Inganno felice*" resembles the first pictures of Raphael, which he painted in the school of Perrugino, and which display

all the faults and all the timidity of early youth. Rossini, not venturing to assume the master at twenty, was fearful as yet to attempt to please himself only. The great artist is composed of two elements : of a soul tender, impassioned, fastidious, and demanding much ; and of a talent that makes every effort to please this soul, and to delight it by the creation of new beauties.

The same year, the patrons of Rossini procured him an engagement at Ferrara ; and, during the last season, he composed an oratorio, intitled "*Ciro in Babilonia*," a work containing many beauties, but considered by critics as inferior in energy to the "*Inganno felice*." After this Rossini was again summoned to Venice ; but the *Impressario* (director) of *San-Mosè*, not content with gaining, for a few *sequini*, the talents of a pleasing composer, who was patronized by the ladies, and whose rising genius was destined to bring new honours to his theatre, thought that, as he was poor, he might treat him cavalierly with impunity. Rossini at once gave a proof of that originality of character, by which he has been always distinguished.

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In quality of composer, Rossini's power over the orchestra was absolute, and he could oblige them to execute whatever he composed. In the new opera, therefore, of "*La Scala di Seta*," which he made for the insolent *impresario*, he brought together an assemblage of all the extravagances and whimsical combinations, in which, it may well be supposed, a head like his is sufficiently fertile. For instance, in the *allegro* of the overture, the violins were made to break off at the end of every bar, in order to give a rap with the bow, upon the tin shades of the candlesticks. It would be difficult to imagine the astonishment and indignation of an immense concourse of people, assembled from every quarter of Venice, and even from the *Terra Firma*, to hear the new Opera of the young *Maestra*. This public, who, during the greater part of the afternoon, had besieged the doors; who had been forced to wait whole hours in the passages, and at last to endure the "tug of war" at the opening of the doors, thought themselves personally insulted, and hissed with all the vengeance of an enraged Italian public. Rossini, not in the least

moved by all this uproar, coolly asked the trembling *impresario*, with a smile, what he had gained by treating him so cavalierly. He then quitted the theatre, and started at once for Milan, where his friends had procured him an engagement. However, a month after, he made his peace with the humbled manager; and, returning to Venice, successively produced two *farze* (operas in one act,) at the theatre *San-Mosè*, “*L’Occasione fa il Ladro*” (1812), and “*Il Figlio per azzardo*,” (in the Carnival of 1813.) It was also during this Carnival, that Rossini composed his “*Tancredi*.”

No adequate idea can be formed of the success which this delightful Opera obtained at Venice,—the city which, of all others, is considered as most critical in its judgments, and whose opinions, as to the merits of a composition, are supposed to hold the greatest weight. Suffice it to say, that the presence of Napoleon himself, who honoured the Venetians with a visit, was unable to call off their attention from Rossini. All was enthusiasm! *tutto furore*, to use the terms of that expressive language, which seems to have been created