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978-1-108-06379-1 - *Memoirs of Rossini*: By the Author of the *Lives of Haydn and Mozart*
Stendhal

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Memoirs of Rossini

Marie-Henri Beyle (1783–1842), better known by his pen name Stendhal, is remembered today for such novels as *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Over the course of his life, he wrote in a variety of literary genres and under a multitude of names, or anonymously. Reissued here is the 1824 English translation of his *Vie de Rossini* of the same year, which was accused of being partly plagiarised from Giuseppe Carpani's *Le Rossiniane*, following similar claims regarding his biographies of Haydn and Mozart (which are also reissued together in translation in this series). Best known for *William Tell* and *The Barber of Seville*, Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) was by far the most popular opera composer of his day, adored by his public. Colourful, vigorous and forthright, Stendhal's brilliant though somewhat unreliable biography offers an opinionated contemporary critique of 'Signor Crescendo'.

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NOTE

BY THE TRANSLATOR.



IN the perusal of the following pages, the reader will meet with certain observations unfavourable to the professional talents of Madame Colbran Rossini, a lady who, for a number of years, has filled the situation of *prima donna* in Italy, and has been honoured with distinguished approbation. The Translator takes this opportunity of reminding the Reader, that, as these are the sentiments of an anonymous author,—for the different names he has chosen to assume are proofs of the fact,—no higher degree of importance attaches to them than as the opinions of an individual; opinions to be received with caution, and regarded only in the light of an *ex parte* statement, which may hereafter be rebutted by contrary evidence.

The Translator begs leave to state, that the anecdotes relative to Signor Rossini's journey to Vienna, in 1822, contained in Chapter xvth, as well as some further information relative to his later operas, have partly been gleaned from

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foreign Journals, and in part obtained from some of the friends of the composer.

It may also be proper to inform the Reader who is not acquainted with the original, that some liberties have been taken with the Author's text, relative to certain points of a religious, political, and local nature; which, as not bearing upon the leading subject of the *Memoirs*, it has been judged advisable to omit.

Indulgence is, at the same time, to be requested for some few errors that have unavoidably crept into the text: the apology must be the haste with which the work was carried through the press.

LONDON; JAN. 2, 1824.

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PREFACE.



THERE is no man, who, during the last twelve years, has been more frequently the subject of conversation. from Moscow to Naples, from London to Vienna, from Paris to Calcutta, than the subject of these memoirs. His glory already knows no other bounds than those of civilization, and yet he has scarcely attained his thirty-second year.

The object of the following pages is to attempt a sketch of the circumstances that have tended to place him, at so early an age, on such a point of eminence.

The title upon which the present writer founds his claim to the confidence of the reader, is his having resided during the last ten years, in

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the cities which Rossini has delighted by the master-pieces of his art. The author has journeyed many a league, in order to be present at the first representation of several of his operas; he has, therefore, been placed in the way of hearing all the little anecdotes current in society, as well at Milan and Venice, as at Rome and Naples, at the time these operas were claiming the public attention.

The author of this work has also written two or three others, mostly upon subjects of a light nature. The critics have told him, that, before putting pen to paper, he ought to have furnished himself with certain oratorical and academical requisites, &c.—that he would never be able to make a book, &c.—that he would never have the honour to be a man of letters. Well, be it so, and yet certain persons whom I leave it to

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the public to name, have so modified the latter title, that certain other persons may, perhaps, think themselves very lucky in never being honoured with it.

Let the present book, therefore, be considered as no book at all. After the fall of Napoleon, the writer, unwilling to pass the best season of his life a dupe to political animosities, set out upon his rambles through the world. Finding himself in Italy at the time Rossini was enjoying such extraordinary success, and being then engaged in a correspondence with some friends in England and Poland, this subject naturally formed a prominent feature in it.

It is from the letters written at this period, that the author has, in a great measure, drawn the materials which form the present volume: it will not be read from any merits of its

own, but merely from the interest that is felt with regard to Rossini. In whatever manner, say they, his history be written, it cannot fail to please, and the greater portion of the present materials were collected on the spot, and while the little events they record possessed a living interest.

I make no doubt but that some inaccuracies will be found amidst the variety of little details that fill the following pages. It is no easy task to write the memoirs of a cotemporary, much less those of Rossini, whose life leaves few other traces than the recollection of the agreeable sensations which he has awakened in our minds. It were to be wished that this great artist, who is, at the same time, one of the most agreeable of men, had undertaken the task of writing his own *Memoirs*, after the manner of Goldoni. As he is pos-

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sessed of a hundred times more wit than Goldoni, and never waives his joke upon any occasion, his *Memoirs* could not have been otherwise than piquant and interesting. All I hope is, that the present life of Rossini may be found incorrect enough to put him out of humour with my temerity, and stimulate him to write one himself. But, before he does get out of humour, let me hasten to assure him that I feel the highest respect for his person and talents; more, indeed, than for any other man living, however great his wealth, or exalted his rank. The latter—to use a phrase of Rossini's own—has gained a prize in the lottery of fortune, while he himself has gained the same in the lottery of nature;—and I may be allowed to add, a prize, the value of which no years will impair.

Montmorency, Sept. 30, 1823.

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To enable the reader to form a correct idea of the talents of Rossini, and the rank he is entitled to hold in the art, it will be proper to take a rapid view of the *inter-regnum* that took place between Cimarosa and the subject of the present memoir, from 1800 to 1812.

It is a melancholy reflection; but the truth of which cannot, after due examination, be called in question, that the *beau ideal* of music undergoes a change about every thirty years. Hence, in seeking to give a correct idea of the revolution brought about by Rossini, it will not be necessary to revert to a more distant epoch than that of Cimarosa and Paisiello.

Cimarosa died at Venice, the 11th of January, 1801, in consequence of the barbarous treatment he had experienced at Naples, where, on account of his having devoted his talents to celebrate the new state of things, he was doomed to linger for some time in prison.

Paisiello died only in 1816; but it may with truth be said, that, during the present century,

the genius of the amiable and graceful, rather than brilliant and energetic, author of "*Il Re Teodoro*," and "*La Scuffiara*," had ceased to be productive. The musical talent develops itself early, and but too frequently is as rapidly extinguished.

Cimarosa produces an impression on the imagination by long musical periods, which, to great richness, unite great regularity. In proof of this, I might cite the two first duets of the "*Matrimonio secreto*;" and particularly the second, "*Io ti lascio perche finiti*." These airs are the most beautiful that the human mind can conceive; but they are perfectly *regular*, and it is a regularity which the mind perceives without an effort. This is the misfortune: once acquainted with one or two of his airs, we know the rest, and, from the very beginning, foresee in some measure all that is to follow. The whole mischief lies in this word *foresee*, and it is in the secret of avoiding this error, that we shall find much of the success and glory of Rossini to consist.

Paisiello has not the power to awaken such profound emotions as Cimarosa; the images he awakens in the mind of his hearers seldom rise beyond the *graceful*; but he is admirable in this respect. His grace is that of Corregio, tender, rarely piquant, but seductive and irresistible. In proof of this I might adduce the quartett from "*La Molinara*," "*Quelli là*." Paisiello has the

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remarkable custom of repeating the same trait in an air several times over, and yet every time with a fresh grace, that impresses it more forcibly on the mind of the hearers. Nothing is more opposite to the style of Cimarosa, sparkling with fancy, and full of energy and passion. Rossini also repeats himself, but he does it not expressly; what is a grace in Paisiello, is but indolence with him. But, lest I should be ranked among the detractors of this amiable man, I hasten to add, that he alone, among the moderns, deserves to be compared to the two great masters who ceased to shine towards the commencement of the nineteenth century.

After Cimarosa, and when Paisiello had ceased to write, music languished in Italy, and felt the want of an original genius. Rossini had composed something previous to 1812, but it was not till this year that he found an opportunity of composing for the grand theatre of Milan. In order to form a just estimate of his talents, we must take a rapid view of the composers who obtained any success from 1810 till 1812. After Cimarosa, and before the appearance of Rossini, two names present themselves, Mayer and Paër.

Mayer, a German, who finished his education in Italy, and has resided for a number of years at Bergamo, has written some fifty operas between 1795 and 1820, and obtained considerable success. There is much in his works to surprise and to please the ear. His talent prin-

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cipally consists in his orchestra, and the rich stores of harmony, which he has lavished to profusion in his *ritornellos*,* and the accompaniments of his airs. If his *fort* does not lie in making the human voice sing, at least he has made his instruments speak.

His "*Lodoiska*," given in 1800, eclipsed all the music of that period. This was followed, in 1801, by "*Le due Gironate*;" and, in 1802, by the "*Misteri Eleusini*," which made as much noise in that day, as "*Il Don Giovanni*" has in our own; but the latter opera was not then known in Italy, and was considered as of too difficult execution. "*I Misteri Eleusini*," passed for the most brilliant and powerful work of that period. The march of the art was extraordinary; rapid strides were made from melody to harmony. The Italian masters quitted the *easy* and the *simple*, for the *difficult* and the *learned*.

Messrs. Mayer and Paër, being possessed of profound science, made a grand *dash*, and accomplished that which the other *maestri* only attempted with timidity, and by committing at every step a hundred faults against grammar. This gave these composers a false air of genius; and what tended to complete the illusion was, that they were really possessed of considerable talent.

It was a misfortune for these authors that

* Introductory symphonies to an air.

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Rossini came ten years too early. The epoch of a composer's musical era is, as we before remarked, limited to a period of about thirty years; these masters have, therefore, to lament that it was not allowed them quietly to finish their stated period. Had Rossini not appeared till 1820, Messrs. Mayer and Paër might have figured in the annals of music, and ranked with a Leo, a Durante, a Scarlatti, &c. great masters of the first order, who enjoyed their period of renown.

Mayer is the most learned, as well as the most prolific, master of the *inter-regnum*; every thing with him is correct and according to rule. You may examine all the scores of his "*Medea*," "*Cora*," "*Adelasio*," and "*Elisa*" without finding a single fault. It is the desperate perfection of a Boileau; one cannot imagine why one is not moved. Pass from this to an opera of Rossini, and you find yourself at once in the fresh and pure air of the Alps; you seem to breathe more at large; you at once feel the difference between the productions of genius and those of science. The young composer scatters abroad his ideas with a liberal hand; sometimes he is successful, at others he fails of his object. It is all negligence, all disorder; it is a thoughtless squandering of riches that have no end. To sum up all in one word, Mayer is the most correct composer; Rossini the greater artist. Mayer is to music, what Johnson was to

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English prose ; he created a powerful and emphatic manner of his own, which was very far from nature and true beauty, but which nevertheless has its merit, and pleases, especially when we become accustomed to it. But Rossini came with his more free and natural style, and at once drew off the attention of the world from the ponderous magnificence of Mayer. Such is the fate that awaits all affectation in the fine arts: nature and true beauty are sure to predominate in the end, and the world feels astonished how it could have been a dupe so long.

M. Paër, in spite of his German name, is a native of Parma ; and, after M. Mayer, is, of all the composers of the *inter-regnum*, the one that has enjoyed the greatest success. This, independent of his great and incontestable talents, may be attributed to other causes. He is a man of very agreeable manners, much wit, and considerable address. His being able to keep the Parisians for eight years strangers to Rossini, is cited as a proof of the eminent degree in which he excels in the latter qualification. For, if ever there was a composer formed to please the French, it is Rossini ; Rossini is the Voltaire of music.

One of the first productions of M. Paër, is "*L'Oro fu tutto*," which was composed in 1793. "*La Griselda*," his *chef-d'œuvre*, appeared in 1797. But why speak of an opera that has made the tour of Europe? Besides this, all the world

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admires "*Sargine*," which was produced in 1803. I should not hesitate to rank these two operas above all the rest of M. Paër's productions. "*L'Agnese*" does not appear to me to merit a place in the same class. It owes its success to the powerful fidelity with which it paints one of the severest infictions with which humanity can be visited. The dreadful spectacle of a father driven to madness by the desertion of his daughter, is calculated to produce a powerful effect upon the mind, and easily dispose it to receive the impressions of music. Galli, Pellegrini, and particularly Ambrogetti, have been sublime in this character. But, however successful the attempt, I cannot but think that the fine arts ought never to avail themselves of subjects of horror. The filial piety of Cordelia consoles me for the madness of Lear; but nothing can render the frightful situation to which the father of *Agnese* is reduced, supportable. Music only serves to double our sensibility, and to render the scene more painful, by giving it an additional reality.

After speaking thus in full of the two leading names of this period, it only remains to give a list of composers of secondary abilities: they are as follows:—Anfossi, Coccia, Farinelli, Federici, Fioravanti, Generali, the two Guglielmi (father and son), Manfroce, Martini, Mosca, Nazolini, Nicolini, Orgitano, Orlandi,

Pavesi, Portogallo, Salieri, Sarti, Tarchi, Trento, Weigl, Winter, Zingarelli.

The reader will doubtless be surprised to find me introducing the name of Mozart, as belonging to this period: I intreat his indulgence till he hears the reasons that have induced me so to do. While the musical scene in Italy was occupied by the composers above named, who all flattered themselves with being the legitimate successors of Cimarosa and Paisiello; and at the moment the public were beginning to persuade themselves of the same, a colossus was suddenly seen to appear in the midst of these lesser composers, who were only great by the absence of great men.

Mayer, Paër, and their imitators, had for a long time been endeavouring to adapt the German to the Italian taste, and, as half-measures please the feeble-minded of both parties, they gained considerable success with those whose admiration is not difficult of attainment. Mozart, on the contrary, like all great artists, had no other wish than to please himself, and those of his stamp: he never once dreamed of flattering or being flattered.

Besides, his personal presence was wanted; he was not there to pay his court to the great,—to bribe the venal journalist, in order to have his name in every mouth: the consequence was, that, till after his death, he was scarcely known