

# ROSSINI AND HIS SCHOOL.

## CHAPTER I.

### ROSSINI'S CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH.

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

Lives of Rossini have been published freely enough during the last fifty or sixty years. It but rarely happens, even to the greatest man, to have his biography written or his statue erected during his lifetime. But Rossini lived so long that it seemed impossible to wait for his death; and more than one writer seized upon him when he was still a young man. Perhaps it occurred to the Abbé Carpani, the first of Rossini's biographers, that

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

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

Rossini made his appearance in public when he was only seven years of age; doing so not, it need scarcely be said, in the character of a composer, but in that of a singer. It was in Paer's *Camilla*, composed for Vienna and afterwards brought out at Bologna, that Rossini, in the year 1799, took the part of a child. "Nothing," says Madame Giorgi-Righetti, the original Rosina in the *Barber of Seville*,<sup>1</sup> "could be more tender, more touching, than the voice and action of this extraordinary child in the beautiful canon of the third act; *senti si fiero instante*. The Bolognese of that time declared that he would some day be one of the greatest musicians known. I need not say whether the prophecy has been verified."

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

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## THE GREAT MUSICIANS.

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

It may have been very desirable to show that Rossini was of distinguished ancestry, and that he had a great-uncle, who, in the middle of the sixteenth century, was governor of Ravenna. But it is more interesting to know that he was of good musical parentage. His father, it is true, was nothing more than town trumpeter at Pesaro; herald and crier, that is to say, to the sound of the trumpet. But his mother was what musicians call "an artist." She possessed a very beautiful voice; and when the town trumpeter fell ill or in some other manner incapacitated himself for supporting the family, she replaced him as bread-winner by taking an engagement as an operatic singer. According to one of Rossini's biographers, Rossini the trumpeter came to grief through his political opinions, which were of a more decided character than any that were ever professed, publicly at least, by his eminent son. When,

after the Italian campaign, the French army in 1796 entered Pesaro, the old Rossini so far forgot his official position and the duty he owed to the state, as to proclaim his sympathy and admiration for the Republican troops; on whose retirement he was punished for his want of loyalty, being first deprived of his employment and afterwards cast into prison.

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

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

probably some effect in developing that taste for wind instruments and especially for horns, for which his orchestration was one day to be remarkable.

In his thirteenth year Rossini was taken to Bologna and presented to Professor Teschi of that city. The professor heard the little boy sing and play, and was so pleased with his performances that he procured him an engagement as chorister in one of the local churches. It was of this period in Rossini's life that Heine was thinking when, in his well-known article on Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, he wrote: "The true character of Christian art does not reside in thinness and plainness of the body, but in a certain effervescence of the soul which neither the musician nor the painter can appropriate to himself either by baptism or by study; and in this respect I find in the *Stabat* of Rossini a more truly Christian character than in the *Paulus* of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy; an oratorio which the adversaries of Rossini point to as a model of the Christian style. Heaven preserve me from wishing to express by that the least blame against a master so full of merits as the composer of *Paulus*; and the author of these letters is less likely than any one to wish to criticise the Christian character of the oratorio in question from clerical, or, so to say, pharisaical reasons. I cannot, however, avoid pointing out that at the age when Mendelssohn commenced Christianity at Berlin (he was only baptized in his thirteenth year), Rossini had already deserted it a little, and had lost himself entirely in the mundane music of operas. Now he has again abandoned the latter to carry himself back in dreams to the Catholic

recollections of his first youth—to the days when he sang as a child in the choir of the Pesaro [for which read Bologna] cathedral, and took part as an acolyte in the service of the holy mass.”

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

Rossini's first work, written when he was sixteen years of age and executed at the Lyceum of Bologna in 1808, was the cantata in question, which, if not based on the favourite subject of Orpheus, was at least connected with it. *Pianto d'Armonia per la Morte d'Orfeo* was at once the subject and the title of this memorable composition. At this period Rossini was an ardent student of Haydn's symphonies and quartets; and after the production of his cantata, which obtained remarkable success, he was appointed director of the Philharmonic concerts, and profited by his position to

give a performance of Haydn's *Seasons*. A distinct reminiscence of this time, and more than a distinct reminiscence of one of the best known melodies in the *Seasons*, was to be found eight years afterwards in the lively trio ("Zitti, Zitti") of *The Barber of Seville*.

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

Rossini was just seventeen years of age when he produced his first symphony, which was followed by a quartet; and a year later he brought out his first opera. During his musical travels in the Romagna, where, among other places, he was in the habit of visiting Lugo, Ferrara, Forli, and Sinigaglia, he had, at the last-named place, inspired with confidence the Marquis Cavalli, director of the local theatre. The marquis was also impresario of the San Mosè Theatre at Venice (the San Mosè, like most other Italian theatres, took its name



from the parish to which it belonged), and he wished Rossini to compose an opera for his Venetian establishment. Rossini's previous work had been performed before the professor's pupils and a few invited friends at the Lyceum of Bologna. The opera ordered by the Marquis Cavalli was the first of his works performed before the general public. It was a one-act piece, entitled *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*. It was given for the first time in 1810 when Rossini was just eighteen years old. The sum paid for it was 200 francs, or, in English money, 8*l*.

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

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

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

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

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

Some forty years after the production of *Ciro in Babilonia* Rossini spoke to Ferdinand Hiller (who has recorded the words in his highly interesting *Conversations with Rossini*) of a poor woman who had only one good note in her voice, which he accordingly made her