The Great Composers. No. XII. Rossini (Concluded)

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Our task is now ended, and, for the first time in the history of the oratorio, the changes made by Mendelssohn have been set forth with sufficient particularity for a just estimate of their extent and character. As regards the composer, we can now judge, not only his fas-

tidiousness, but his undaunted resolve that no labour should be spared to strengthen weak points. We learn also the value of second thoughts, and the fact that even genius requires many such for the perfecting of a great work of art. Mendelssohn, in "Elijah," reached the "Temple of the Sun," but his Pegasus was a slow and plodding beast. This should be at once a warning and an encouragement.

THE GREAT COMPOSERS

BY JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. XII.—ROSSINI (concluded from page 131).

ROSSINI remained in Bologna from 1836 to 1847, and during all that long time did nothing except complete his "Stabat Mater," under circumstances presently to be mentioned, and write three religious choruses—"La Foi," "L'Espérance," and "La Charité"—only the third of which was absolutely new. Still, it cannot be said that he idled away those eleven years of vigorous manhood. He took quite a fatherly interest in the Communal Lyceum at Bologna, and became not only the honorary, but, in effect, the acting director of that establishment, lifting it, if Azevedo may be credited, to the highest position in Italy as a school of music. It was there he marked the rising talent of Marietta Alboni, and there he trained her to become the acknowledged best exponent of his contralto rôles. Rossini's activity in these respects, however, went for little with the public. As year succeeded year, and "Guillaume Tell" remained without a successor, "all the world wondered." Then all the world began to ask the reason why. But there was no answer, and finally the matter became one of those permanent puzzles which are referred to only when topics of inquiry are scarce. We may add that the mystery of Rossini's inaction never has been cleared up. It may, however, be found discussed in an intelligent and interesting manner by Mr. Sutherland Edwards, who devotes to the subject one of the closing chapters in his life of the composer. The biographer marshals four popular explanations, which are these: first, disgust at the reception and treatment of "Guillaume Tell"; second, a conviction that nothing better than "Guillaume Tell" could be produced, while a worse was possible; third, annoyance at Meyerbeer's success; fourth, laziness. We hold with Mr. Edwards that the third should be dismissed at once. In one of his sardonic moods, Rossini may have said that he would recommence writing when the Jews had finished their Sabbath, but, apart from his consistent friendship with Meyerbeer, he was not a jealous man, the exalted idea he justifiably entertained of his own powers raising him above the level of so petty a feeling. As for laziness, he remained to the end of his life what he was at the beginning—a man who could do wonders under pressure, but without pressure preferred to enjoy himself. Far from being idle, he was keenly active, though the great vitality in him did not always find vent in what we call work. On the other hand, discontent at the fate of his greatest opera may have made him averse to once more taking up his pen, and the humour of a season finally became the habit of a life. Mr. Edwards contends that the master did not himself know with precision the reasons for his own silence: "It is astonishing how many persons had the coolness, not to say impertinence, to ask Rossini why he never composed anything for the stage after 'Guillaume Tell,' and it is amusing, though also provoking, to find that to most of these inquisitive persons he returned very evasive answers." Whether these premises be sufficient for

the biographer's conclusion we shall not stop to inquire, since it will serve a better purpose to quote several recorded sayings of the master that seemed to throw a little light upon the darkness. To Chevalier Neukomm he once said, "You have a passion for industry; I always had a passion for idleness," and, on Neukomm reminding him of his forty operas, added, "That was a long time ago. We ought to come into the world with packthread instead of nerves. But let us drop the subject." Reading between these lines we may, perhaps, see a record of the distress caused by the treatment of "Guillaume Tell," which all evidence goes to show that he keenly felt. On another occasion, when Hiller put the question point-blank, "How can you exist without composing?" Rossini answered "What! would you have me, without motive, without excitement, without a definite intention, write a definite work? I do not require much to be excited into composition, but still I do require something." These words have an important significance. We have seen the master writing all his life under the constraint of circumstances, but after "Guillaume Tell" he was perfectly free. Ambition dictated to him no more; he had won the highest honours a composer could reach. The struggle for material good ceased when competence was assured, and a pleasure-loving nature was naturally insensible to the promptings of a musical instinct theretofore identified with incessant, almost superhuman, toil. It is not wonderful that Rossini found all incitements to composition weak. Again the master, after explaining to Hiller his once-formed intention to write a "Faust," said: "Meanwhile, the Revolution of July had taken place; the Grand Opéra, previously a royal institution, passed into the hands of a private person, my mother was dead, and my father found a residence in Paris unbearable because he did not understand French, so I cancelled the agreement, which bound me by rights to send in four other grand operas, preferring to remain quietly in my native land and enliven the last years of my old father's existence. I had been far away from my poor mother when she expired. This was an endless source of regret to me, and I was most apprehensive that the same might occur in my father's case." Taking note of this filial regard, so honourable to its subject, and also of the statements before made, it is not difficult to discover an explanation of Rossini's conduct—one which satisfies us, though it may hardly be put forward as authoritative.

The year (1836) of Rossini's retirement to Bologna was that also of a visit to Frankfort, where he and Mendelssohn came together through their common friend Hiller. Mendelssohn has, of course, given us a vivid and charming sketch of the Italian master, with whom, however, he was so little in sympathy. We extract the following from a letter to his mother and sister, dated Frankfort, July 14, 1836:—

"Early yesterday, I went to see him (Hiller) and whom should I find sitting there but Rossini, as large as life, in his best and most amiable mood. I really know few men who can be so amusing and witty as he, when he chooses; he kept us laughing incessantly the whole time. I promised that the St. Cecilia Association should sing for him the B minor Mass, and some other things of Sebastian Bach's. It will be quite too charming to see Rossini obliged to admire Sebastian Bach; he thinks, however, 'different countries, different customs,' and is resolved to howl with the wolves. He says he is enchanted with Germany, and when he once gets the list of wines at the Rhine hotel in the evening, the waiter is obliged to show him his room, or he could never manage to find it. He relates the most laughable and amusing things about Paris and all the musicians there, as

well as of himself and his compositions, and entertains the most profound respect for all those present, so that you might really believe him if you had no eyes to see his sarcastic face; but intellect and animation and wit sparkle in all his features and in every word, and those who do not consider him a genius ought to hear him expatiating in this way, and they would change their opinion."

Writing of the master at the same time, and with reference to his encounter with Mendelssohn, Ferdinand Hiller says:—

"He had lost the enormous corpulence of former years: his figure was still full, but not disproportioned, and his splendid countenance, which displayed both the power of the thinker and the wit of the humorist, beamed with health and happiness. He spoke French quite as well as Italian, and with the most melodious voice: his long residence in Paris and intercourse with the best people there had transformed him from a haughty young Italian into a man of the world, dignified, graceful and charming, and enchanting everybody by his irresistible amiability. He had come to see us one morning to our great delight, and was describing his journey through Belgium and all that had struck him there, when I heard the bell, and, feeling certain that it was Mendelssohn, ran out to open the door of the corridor. It was Felix, and with him Julius Rietz, who had just arrived. I told them that Rossini was there and Mendelssohn was delighted, but, in spite of all our persuasions, Rietz would not come in and turned back. When Felix appeared, Rossini received him with marked respect, and yet in such a friendly manner that in a few minutes the conversation resumed its flow and became quite animated. He wanted Mendelssohn to play to him, and, after a little resistance on Mendelssohn's side, they arranged to meet at our house again next morning. These meetings were often repeated in the course of the next few days, and it was quite charming to see how Felix, though inwardly resisting, was each time afresh obliged to yield to the overwhelming amiability of the *maestro*, as he stood at the piano listening with the utmost interest, and expressing his satisfaction more or less openly. I cannot deny the fact—and, indeed, it was perfectly natural—but Felix, with his juvenile looks, playing his compositions to a composer whose melodies just then ruled the whole world of song, was, in a certain measure, ostensibly acting an inferior part—as must always be the case when one artist introduces himself to another without a corresponding return. Mendelssohn soon began to rebel a little. 'If your Rossini,' he said to me one morning when we met at our bath in the Main, 'goes on muttering such things as he asked yesterday I won't play him any more.' 'What did he mutter? I did not hear anything.' 'But I did. When I was playing my F sharp minor Caprice he muttered between his teeth, "*Casenti la Sonate de Scarlatti*." 'Well, that's nothing so very dreadful.' 'Ah! Bah!' However, on the following day, he played to him again. I must add that Rossini always looked back to this meeting with Mendelssohn with heartfelt pleasure, and expressed the strongest admiration for his talent. The impression made by Rossini on the whole colony of Frankfort musicians was really overwhelming. The second day after his arrival I had to drive about with him to all the artists of importance, and with many of them to act the part of interpreter. Some were ready to faint with fear and surprise when he appeared. My mother afterwards invited all these gentlemen, and one or two foreign artists who happened to be staying in Frankfort, to meet him at a *soirée*, and it was almost comic to see

* "Mendelssohn: Letters and Recollections," p. 36 *et seq.*

how each did his best to shine before the great leader of the light Italian school. Capellmeister Guhr played a Sonata of his own; Ferdinand Ries, the Study with which he had first made a sensation in London; Aloys Schmitt, a Rondo; and some one else, a Notturmo. Mendelssohn was intensely amused at the whole thing. Rossini was more pompous that evening than I ever remember to have seen him; very polite, very amiable, and very complimentary—in fact, *too* complimentary. But next day his sly humour came out. A grand dinner had been arranged in his honour at the 'Mainlust,' and as many celebrities of all kinds as there was room for took part in it, Mendelssohn among the rest. When the dinner was over, the hero of the day began walking up and down the garden, talking in his usual way; meanwhile the place had become crowded with people who wanted to see the great man, and who pushed and squeezed and peered about to get a peep at him, he all the time pretending to ignore them utterly. I have never witnessed such a personal ovation to a composer in the open air—except, perhaps, on his way to the grave."

We do not apologise for presenting the foregoing picture of Rossini at the height of his fame. It may well serve as our last glimpse of him in his capacity as a maker of history. Henceforth, though the view extends over near upon forty years of life, there is little to record.

In July, 1839, the ex-trumpeter and inspector of slaughter-houses at Pesaro died in the arms of his illustrious son. Rossini felt the loss of his father deeply, and the acuteness of his grief brought on an attack of illness which at one time threatened serious consequences. From an ethical standpoint, it may seem a thing of course for a son to cherish his parents, no matter in what circumstances he and they may be placed. But we must take human nature as we find it, and, not seldom, when children have risen to wealth and fame, they cease to take pleasure in personally ministering to the humble authors of their existence. Rossini was incapable of such poverty of spirit. He delighted in honouring his parents, as they did in contemplating the greatness of their son, and we already know that one of his reasons for quitting Paris was to be near his aged father for the purpose of making his last days bright and happy.

The "Stabat Mater" next claims attention. In course of time Don Varela, of Madrid, died, and the work, partly written for him by Rossini, and completed by Tadolini, was, in September, 1841, sold to a certain publisher for 2,000 francs. The new owner made no secret of his intention to print it, and the news soon travelled to Rossini, who promptly authorised his own publisher, Troupenas, to intervene for the protection of his reserved rights. The matter, on going before a court, was decided in Rossini's favour, and soon Troupenas became, for 6,000 francs, proprietor of the "Stabat" as we now have it—that is to say, with Tadolini's four movements cut out and others by Rossini substituted. Six movements of the now perfected work were heard in the *salons* of M. Herz, October 31, 1841, and made so favourable an impression that MM. Escudier *frères* purchased for 8,000 francs the right of performance during three months. Under their auspices, the "Stabat" was given for the first time at the Théâtre Italien, January 7, 1842, the soloists being Grisi, Albertazzi, Mario and Tamburini. At this point another speculator stepped in—M. Darmoy, director of the Italien—purchasing the rights acquired by the Escudiers for 20,000 francs. Even he did not lose money. Fourteen performances took place under M. Darmoy and brought into the treasury no less a sum than 150,000 francs.

Rossini visited Paris for the benefit of medical advice in May, 1843, but returned to Bologna four months later, and there, in October, 1845, his wife, Madame Colbrand-Rossini, died. Two years later, the master found for her a successor in Mlle. Olympe Pélissier, a lady whom he had known for some time, and who had been assiduous in her attentions both to Rossini and his father during their illness. "She has acted," he said of her, "as a providence to father and son, and I have done my best to make her happy." Soon afterwards the revolutionary spectre, which had troubled Rossini's early years, came on the scene again, and to avoid it the master fled from Bologna to Florence, where a serious illness determined him once more to take up his residence in Paris. He reached the French capital in 1855 and never again left it, finding in its homage, respect, and affection—perhaps, also, in its vivacious life and ample opportunities for enjoyment—cause for entire content. There, though he produced no great work, he did not altogether avoid the pen. To the second Parisian period we owe the "Petite Messe Solennelle," first performed at the house of M. Pillet Will, March 14, 1864. Some smaller pieces have also been published, and many more remain in manuscript. These things, however—the Mass excepted—are but the results of whim or pastime. They have little value or significance as the productions of him who wrote "Guillaume Tell," while some of them are the merest jokes, dedicated to the composer's parrot, or bearing names like "Valse anti-dansante," "Fausse-couche de Polka-mazurka," and "Enchantillon de blague." From the crowd one piece stands forth, it is true, and that is the Hymn written for the Universal Exhibition of 1867, and performed at the distribution of prizes in July. Yet even this shines rather with a light borrowed from the occasion than by any illuminative powers of its own. The composer introduced it under a designation of obvious jocularly. He called it "Hymn with accompaniment for orchestra and military bands, for baritone (solo) in Pontife; chorus of High Priests; chorus of Vivandières, Soldiers, and People. At the end, danse, bells, drums, and cannon. *Excusez du peu!!*"

The position filled by Rossini in Paris during the best years of the second empire was, in a sense, unique. The master ranked among the "characters" of that illustrious city, and ruled in his world as absolutely as did the Cæsar of the Tuileries over broad France. His charming villa at Passy remained to the end the goal of many pilgrimages, and it was there that, on November 13, 1868, the master reached the end of his career. Rossini's funeral took place on November 21, the rites being celebrated at the Church of the Trinity in a manner becoming a great composer, who was also Foreign Associate of the Institute, Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour, and of the Orders St. Maurice and St. Lazare; commander of many other Orders, and honorary member of a crowd of Academies. A famous company assembled to pay the last honours, while the funeral music was sung by a choir in which such artists as Tamburini, Duprez, Faure, Gardoni, Belval, Delle Sedie, Agnesi, Krauss, Carvalho and Bloch were glad to have place. The soloists included Patti, Nilsson, and Alboni; and so, amid all that was fitting as regards the art he adorned, Rossini went down to the grave.

An estimate of Rossini's influence upon operatic music does not enter into the scheme of this work. Our endeavour has been simply to record the composer's doings and give some idea of the character which shaped his life. Yet even this can hardly have failed in helping the cause of justice to Rossini at a time when many affect to speak of him as superficial

and even dishonest. Faults he had in plenty, doubtless, but none the less was he a great and gifted man, who in his day increased the resources of his country's lyric stage, entranced the entire world with melody, and contributed as much as any artistic man to the sum of human enjoyment.

THE NATIONAL EISTEDDFOD OF WALES.

By JOHN G. E. ASTLE.

ALTHOUGH it was scarcely to be expected that the arrangements for the holding of this year's National Eisteddfod in Wales could be commenced without some little quibbling on the part of the promoters, the matter has now been established on a fair basis, and there is every prospect of the forthcoming competitive meetings being very successful in all departments. We may fairly assume that this is due to co-operation. Welshmen were of course the first to inaugurate the preliminary proceedings, and the Eisteddfod is theoretically, if not in fact, an essentially Welsh institution, but their English friends in Cardiff—which is a Welsh port more in a geographical sense than in any other, although it is deemed the metropolis of South Wales—at once came to their aid, and all parties are now bent on a concerted and unified action. A number of sub-committees are constantly meeting to advance the objects which they respectively have in view, and at frequent intervals the general committee assembles to ratify or amend the multifarious recommendations which are brought under their notice. In such a place as Cardiff, where division of opinion acts at times in a very prejudicial manner, this unity is both noticeable and commendable, and it may certainly be regarded as a prognostication of success. It is only fair, too, to allow that a by no means bigoted spirit has been shown in reference to the Eisteddfod by local Welshmen, and it will perhaps be a surprise to many English people, whose notions of the national institution are so often narrow and mistaken, to be informed that the Welsh were thoroughly pleased to invite the countenance and assistance of their English friends in this movement, and that there are many competitions arranged for in which English residents in Wales will be on an equal footing with them. The Eisteddfod, once purely Welsh, still retains its ancient forms, and, while being theoretically the means to some extent of preserving the native language, it is not so essentially Welsh as it was. The fact that it has adapted itself to the bilingual condition of the principality in modern times, is a proof that its promoters are not so narrow-minded as they have not infrequently been said to be, and the success which has attended recent Eisteddfodau ought to be a hint well worthy of the consideration of all English-speaking people. A writer in a recent issue of the *Art Journal* made a reference to the desirability of Englishmen—whose empire has now become so wide, and whose labours in the cause of music and literature are so vast—deciding upon a means of periodically celebrating their achievements, and he cited the ancient Greek custom of holding Olympic games as a national precedent for this proposed celebration. Might not Englishmen look nearer home for a model of such an institution? For ages the Eisteddfod has been a great civilising and patriotic agency among the aboriginal inhabitants of the land, and it may with reason be submitted that, with certain modifications, it would be most useful and acceptable in an extended form. The fact that it comes from the western side of the country ought to be rather an argument in favour of its acceptance than otherwise, and it may perhaps be assumed that the old English

prejudice against it has exploded, and that the petty squabbles of humbler Welshmen have been overlooked in an honest admiration of the grand competitive principles which the ancient institution has commemorated for many centuries past. Four years after the battle of Hastings—viz., in A.D. 1070—an Eisteddfod on a large scale was held under the auspices of Prince Bleddyn ap Kynfyn, and from that remote period until now the historic hills and valleys of the principality have been the oft-recurring scene of literary and musical gatherings. A land upon which the visitation of war has fallen heavily has been faithful to its natural love of peace; and the descendants of the ancient Britons, who fully sustain on all occasions of peril the reputation of their ancestors for bravery, are, and have ever been, a race desirous of propagating a knowledge of the arts and sciences. Of course they have not occupied so prominent a position as the English nation, but that doubtless arises to a great degree from a set of circumstances over which they have no control. To begin with, their language, although poetical, is generally admitted to be one of a limited character. The most exclusive Welshman employs words of "Saxon" origin. Then the whole remnant of the ancient British race is comparatively small, and, finally, they are as a rule poor and uneducated. As it is, the sons of toil must be considered to have done wonders; and when it is borne in mind how much in poor Wales has been accomplished through the Eisteddfodau by a comparative handful of uneducated but exalted Cambrians, it may well be asked "What might not England, on whose possessions the sun never sets, be able to effect in the domains of science and art by means of such a powerful auxiliary?" To this it may be replied that exhibitions of the fine arts and of manufactures meet the case. But a small amount of reflection will show how essentially the two institutions differ. The Eisteddfod affords a more direct encouragement to the poor and unknown; it develops literary tastes, and it is calculated to especially promote what may be termed a social and collective feeling of patriotism. Englishmen individually are invariably patriotic, but there is often a want of cohesion among them as a body. The Eisteddfod could not, of course, be converted into a political agency, neither should it be made the means of bringing men together in clannish fashion. It may, however, be confidently submitted that the establishment of institutions embodying the competitive principles in art and literature would be socially advantageous to English people, and would have the effect of imparting a contemporaneous knowledge of the capacities of our race in the higher mental pursuits. The continuance of exhibitions would not necessarily be affected by the adoption of competitive institutions on the general lines of the Welsh model in various centres.

The Eisteddfod at Cardiff will doubtless be conducted in the ancient Welsh mode, which is described by Mr. John Jenkins in his translation of "The Poetry of Wales." The president or chief, followed by the various grades of the bardic order, will walk in procession (*gorymdaith*) to the place appointed, where twelve stones are laid in a circle, with one in the centre, to form a *gorsedd* or throne. When the whole order has assembled, the chief of the bards will ascend the *gorsedd*, and, from his laurel and flower-bedecked chair, will open the sessions by repeating aloud the mottoes of the order—viz., "*Y gwir yn erbyn y byd, yn ngwyned haul a llygad goleuni*," or "the truth against the world, in the face of the sun and the eye of light." Verses laudatory of the president will follow, and the competitions in music and art will subsequently take place, the successful competitors