

ALBONI AND THE OPERAS OF DONIZETTI by ROBERT POTTERTON

To the name of ALBONI is often attached the label 'the worlds greatest contralto', most certainly it applies to the 19th century. The great singer was born in the Italian city of Castello on 6th March 1826. She lived all her life in Paris and died there on 23rd June 1894, from that city which she adored, she made her many European tours and once to America in the early 1850's. The voice of Alboni was that 'ravavis' a true contralto with at the same time such a range that she sang not only all the mezzo-soprano parts, but other soprano roles as well. After one performance a gentleman once asked the great singer for her autograph, instead of the standard and customary manner she took his album and wrote the treble clef then inserted a low G with a line drawn up to the soprano top C, underneath she wrote - *My range - Marietta Alboni.*

Alboni had a repertoire of 45 roles including, incredibly the baritone part of Don Carlos in Verdi's Ernani !!! which she sang in London (1848). Rossini trained her voice and described it as 'like velvet and gold', she had the double accomplishment of perfect legato singing allied to complete command of coloratura, no necessary for Italian roles. In her repertoire were eight Rossini roles and seven of Donizetti, those last were Marie in The Daughter of the Regiment, the title role in Anna Bolena, Nerina in Don Pasquale, Leonora in La Favorita, Pierrotto in Linda di Chamounix, Kaffee Orzini in Lucrezia Borgia and finally Condi in Maria di Rohan. Despite her extended range it seems certain that Alboni had sung the part of the soprano 'Marie in The Daughter' and likewise Nerina in Pasquale transposed down somewhat to suit her better. It is known that in London, where she sang Amata in Bellini's Song of the 'ah non giungo' was transposed down by a third.

Alboni was an enormous woman and as round as a barrel, how quaint must she have looked in The Daughter of the Regiment, but always no doubt her catchless vocalism would triumph over a less happy appearance. Alboni herself tells of her birth (she was born the sixth child of a big family) "For three days I caused my mother the most cruel pains of childbirth - my tiny person was so very enormous that it was almost impossible for her to bring me into the world". The doctor who attended her did not know how to help her - my mother fell back inert and the two of us were in the greatest danger, then a good neighbour had the idea to fetch from the church a little bottle that contained the tears of a venerable saint with great faith this good creature applied the bottle to my mother's heart which started to beat regularly and ten minutes later I came into the world, there was a shout of miracle, miracle from all the neighbours". Such was the birth of the great singer. "Once when singing at Metz in The Daughter of the Regiment she received a huge shower of flowers at her feet and then some pupil from a military school having no bouquet threw her his "pom-pom"! It is not the first occasion that the role of "Marie" has been taken by a lower voice - many years ago when the Carl Rosa Company were playing in Dublin, Lea Fellows the soprano "Marie" was indisposed and at very short notice the company's leading mezzo Constantine Willis stepped in and made a great success - the higher tones were naturally omitted. It was in Bologna in the winter season of 1842 that Alboni made her debut and one of her outstanding parts Kaffee Orzini in Lucrezia Borgia, Milan and Vienna followed "the public was most enthusiastic" she wrote and "Donizetti was Director, he was delighted with my singing and invited me to sing for the Royal Court and himself chose what items I was to perform". St. Petersburg, Berlin, Hamburg, Prague, Budapest and London all brought the greatest success. The year 1848 she sang in London and Paris, while Brussels and Lyons both heard her Leonora in La Favorita, a tour of the French provinces next and then Paris in both opera and concerts. At the latter the 'brindisi' of Kaffee Orzini was always a special favorite. La Favorita was her first opera in Madrid and connected with a quite unusual and absurd happening, though quite funny - The theatre company had what the singer called "cars" which were sent to collect the artists and bring them to the theatre - Alboni was "en route" to the opera house when she saw coming towards them a big cortage with lighted candles and men all dressed in black and also a large number of women. They stopped the "car" and forced the singer and her maid to get out, giving them a candle for each hand and they had to follow the cortage, they were quite powerless to resist and it seemed they were carrying the Victim to a dying person - then the priests and their attendants got into the "car" no matter how Alboni implored, they would not listen, she shouted that she had urgently to appear and sing at the opera and must get away - finally her maid managed to slip away unseen and got to the theatre who sent at once to the rousers - later Alboni learned that so strict is the rule when one met the priest carrying the Victim that one must give up the car to him and even royalty must also comply. Never wrote Alboni "would she think of anything but this happening when Madrid memories were in her mind".

After a few more years (1855) she sang at Lisbon's San Carlo in The Daughter of the Regiment and was driven home in a splendid carriage with four white horses. After the 1872 Alboni appeared but rarely, usually for some charity concert. She had always recollected a visit in 1842 to the famous Madam Pasta in Milan, Alboni wrote as follows "I sang for her the Brindisi from Lucrezia Borgia, she was amazed at my voice and quickly said "I'll give you some advice - Remember that every note that leaves your throat never again returns, which means you must never abuse your voice - also remember that shouting is not singing" - advice and wise words, I never forget said Alboni.

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