

Balfe's Italian Operas

by Basil Walsh

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During the years 1834-5 Maria Malibran and "Guglielmo" Balfe sang together at La Scala and in Venice at La Fenice in Rossini's *Otello* (Malibran: Desdemona, Balfe: Iago in Milan, Elmiro in Venice) and in other operas. Possibly because of Balfe's early Italian operatic compositions, Malibran prophesied that one-day he would become "Il Rossini Inglese". It was a predication that must have startled the twenty-six year old Balfe, who had a young wife and small child and was struggling to earn a living as a singer. The astute Malibran, though only the same age as Balfe, knew enough about musical talent and her operatic partner to be able to predict his ultimate destiny.



Michael W Balfe, a portrait made in London circa 1860. (original photograph in the author's collection)

Balfe's fame today rests with his 1843 English opera, *The Bohemian Girl*, which perhaps was his most performed opera during the nineteenth-century. However, the composer's output was far more multi-dimensional, than one English opera. Born in Dublin in May 1808 into modest circumstances, Balfe received his early musical training there. At age nine, he appeared as a solo violinist at the *Rotunda Concert Rooms* with remarkable success. However, his real training was Italian. In total, he spent about eight years in Italy during three different periods. In the 1820s he studied music in Rome (with F. Paër) and Milan (with V. Federici) and later in Paris where he met Rossini he studied singing with G. Bordogni. His return to Italy in December 1828 set him on a course that would eventually propel him to great fame as a composer in London, Paris, Vienna and other capitals, and in Russia. He was of the same generation as Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini. Like so many other young composers of the time he was greatly influenced by Rossini.

Balfe initially pursued a singing career in Italy. His formal operatic debut was made at Palermo in January 1830 as Valdeburgo in Bellini's *La straniera*. While in Italy, the young baritone mostly appeared in Rossini operas. However, he did have success in one of Donizetti's newer works, *L'elisir d'amore*, in the part of Belcore at the Teatro Carcano in Milan a few months after the opera's première.

While in Palermo his talents as a potential composer were tested. He took on the challenge of writing a new opera (minus chorus parts) in order to meet the urgent needs of the theatre manager, when the chorus went on strike. Balfe's first Italian opera *I rivali di se stessi* premièred in February 1830, at the Teatro Carolino. Balfe performed the baritone role in the opera. The libretto was by Antonio Alcozer, who later worked on text revisions for Donizetti. The London *Harmonicon* reported some months later that Balfe's opera seemed to be gaining in success. The score apparently is lost. Balfe continued his singing career working his way up the Italian peninsula first to Piacenza, then to Pavia, where his next opera, *Un avvertimento ai gelosi*, premièred in spring 1831, at the Civico Teatro Frascini.

The librettist on this occasion was the important but aging, Giuseppe Foppa, who had created librettos for Rossini, Paër and Zingarelli. This new opera achieved some success and it went on to be performed at the Teatro Re in Milan in July 1831. The twenty-one year old future great Donizetti and Verdi baritone, Giorgio Ronconi was in the cast. The whereabouts of this score is also unknown.

Balfe clearly was having some success as a composer. However, he continued to sing in order to earn an income. In February 1833 his next opera *Enrico IV al passo della Marna* premiered at the important, Teatro Carcano, Milan, with Balfe in the baritone lead and his wife, Lina Roser-Balfe in the soprano role. The opera was later performed in Genoa in 1834. While the complete score's location is unknown, sheet music of a baritone/tenor duet from the opera *Se il labbro tuo E veridico* does exist (in the author's possession). It shows Balfe and tenor Lorenzo Bonfigli as the original performers. Publisher Francesco Lucca of Milan produced the score, which made it one of Lucca's very early editions. It's also possible that the full score may actually survive somewhere in the Ricordi archives since they bought-out Lucca's business in 1888.

Within two years Balfe's direction and career would greatly change. He returned to London in May 1835 and a few months later his first English opera, *The Siege of Rochelle*, created an overnight sensation at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. His career was set. His most ambitious plans for Italian opera came to fruition in 1838, when he composed the opera *Falstaff*, based on the Shakespeare play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The opera was composed over a two-month period. The Italian text was by S. Manfredo Maggione, who was an experienced librettist. Cramer, Addison & Beale, of London, published the score while F. Lucca of Milan owned the Italian rights and A. Pacini of Paris the French rights. Perhaps the most amazing accomplishment was the cast assembled for the première at Her Majesty's Theatre in July 1838. Luigi Lablache, sang the title role, Antonio Tamburini sang Ford, Ford's wife was Giulia Grisi and Fenton was the tenor Giovanni-Battista Rubini. The renowned "Puritani Quartet" - as they were known - had created Bellini's *I puritani* in Paris with great acclaim three years earlier.

The Times gave *Falstaff* a good review. Recognizing Balfe's unique accomplishment the critic made the comment "...no English composer now living [except Balfe] could have made himself so completely at home in such an undertaking. " Balfe was 30, years old. The autograph score of *Falstaff* is in the British Library (Ref . 29.334. Vol. X *Falstaff*). The opera has numerous solos, duets and trios and it probably deserves a hearing or possibly a recording given its remarkable origin and the distinguished cast that sang in the première.

Many years would pass before Balfe composed another Italian opera. In the meantime his fame spread with the première of *The Bohemian Girl* in 1843. He continued to compose operas for London and Paris and different language versions at an incredible rate. He became the musical director at the Italian opera in London in 1846, where he conducted a number of Verdi's new works. In July 1847 when Verdi decided to leave London after conducting two performances of his new opera, *I masnadieri* with Jenny Lind and Lablache, Balfe took over the baton to complete the run.

His next Italian work, *I quattro fratelli* (a rework of one of his French comic operas) was produced in London in August 1851 as a benefit for the composer. It was very successful, with soprano Sofia Cruvelli and tenor Italo Gardoni in the lead roles, both apparently singing superbly. The Musical World said; "The opera went off with immense éclat...we have rarely witnessed such genuine success." The French autograph score is in the British Library (Ref .29.339.29.340 Vol. xv. xvi).

In 1854 Balfe went to Trieste to première *La zingara*, the Italian version of his *Bohemian Girl*. Within a few months, *La zingara* was being performed in Bergamo, Bologna, Verona and Brescia. A few years later it was heard in London, Dublin, New York, Boston and San Francisco. German and French versions of this very popular opera were also produced in various cities. While in Trieste in 1854 Balfe composed another new opera, *Pittore e Duca*, to a libretto by Verdi's great collaborator Francesco Maria Piave. The opera premiered in Trieste, but was later translated into English and performed in London and elsewhere as *Moro, the Painter of Antwerp*. Alas, both scores are apparently lost.

Balfe's final Italian opera started out as *The Knight of the Leopard* based on the Sir Walter Scott story *The Talisman*. In October 1870 the composer, then age 62, died at his home outside London just before he had completed the opera. His long-time friend, conductor Michael Costa, put the finishing touches to it and at theatre manager Mapleson's direction, it was given an Italian libretto by Giuseppe Zaffira and he called it *Il talismano*, a grand opera in three acts.

Four years after Balfe's death, *Il talismano* premièred at Drury Lane in June 1874. The composer would have been proud of his final work, the principal singers and the première it received. Tenor Italo Campanini sang the title role, Christine Nilsson the soprano role and Marie Roze the mezzo part. Costa was the conductor. *The Times* reviewing the event spoke of Balfe with great reverence saying... "Balfe, was indeed our Rossini, and also, in a measure, our Auber." The writer speaking about the opera, went on to say... "[It] is one of its composer's most carefully considered and best balanced works; that abounds with melody from the first scene to the last."

Il talismano was indeed very successful. During the nineteenth-century, the opera was produced extensively in England and in Ireland, where future tenor Jean de Reszke sang the baritone role of Richard Coeur de Lion. The opera was also heard in America. A few years after the première in London, its two leading singers, Campanini and Nilsson were destined to open the inaugural season of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The music of *Il talismano* shows how Balfe had matured. It is truly a grand Italian opera with wonderful arias, duets and trios for the tenor, soprano and baritone, and great orchestration. The autograph score of this opera is also in the British Library (Ref. No. 33.535).

In all, Balfe probably composed about 40 operas when you consider his numerous versions in different languages with reworked scores. In many respects, Malibran's prediction was correct, as it would be more than one hundred years before Britain would produce an operatic composer who would achieve the level of international fame and success of Michael W. Balfe.

Some of Balfe's Italian operas certainly deserve a hearing, and possibly a recording [1]. It's time to look at these works which were so successful in their day and perhaps take a fresh approach to a marketplace that seems to have been saturated with duplicate recordings of the same operas by a few composers.

Balfe was an important composer, his two-hundredth anniversary will occur in 2008. Let's celebrate!

[1] A recording of Balfe's *Falstaff* was released in 2008, see <http://www.rte.ie/lyricfm/articles/releases/2008/1106/391329-balfe/>