

Balfe and Malibran

Basil Walsh

Your coverage prompted me to send you a copy of a letter which Balfe wrote to Malibran about the opera he wanted to write for her for London. This was about six months prior to the premiere of *The Maid of Artois*. It gives a fascinating insight into the relationship of these two important personalities. I'm sure it's unique contents and tonality will interest your members.

The tone of Balfe's letter, particularly the salutation and sign-off clearly show that Balfe and Malibran had a very close personal relationship. They had initially sung together in Paris in 1828 and then later in Rossini's *Otello* at La Scala in 1834. However, it was in Venice in 1835 that their friendship truly came together. They had performed together at La Fenice in March. Then early in April, Malibran agreed to do one performance of *La sonnambula* at the Teatro Emeronittio as a benefit for the theatre owner. Balfe was Count Rodolfo in the performance. It was truly an eventful evening for all involved. Franz Liszt who was in the audience that night recorded thirty-six curtain calls. The name of the Theatre was changed to Teatro Malibran which is the name that exists to this day. This was when Balfe promised Malibran he would write an opera for her. Shortly afterwards Balfe went to London arriving there in May 1835, while Malibran went on a tour of Italy eventually arriving in Milan. It was while she was in Milan that she received this letter from Balfe who was in London.

The final sentence is somewhat intriguing, with Balfe's four exclamation marks?

London November 18th, 1835

Dear chère, Cara, Angelica, great Little Marietta!

I write you these few lines to express to you my gratitude for the manner in which you spoke to Bunn about me. Immediately after you left London he sent for me and engaged me to write an opera for the opening of Drury Lane. I have done honour to the very flattering recommendation you gave [of] me to him, and have written him an opera [Siege of Rochelle] which has the most extraordinary reception. What is better [than that] which fills his house every night. This evening was the 18th representation and every night it is gaining favour. There is not one piece in it that is not highly delightful. Now Bunn has spoken to me about writing an opera for you when you come. I have thoughts of a subject which would please me exceptionally to write and if it meets with your approbation I shall set about it immediately. It is, Notre Dame de Paris from Victor Hugo's romance and the part of Esmeralda I should compose for you. I suppose you know the subject, be good enough to write a few lines and let me know what you think about it. If you prefer some other to that, tell me and I shall do just as you like, but be quick as you can for there is not much time to be lost for I should like to write an opera worthy of my little idol Marietta Malibran. Give my love to De Beriot and all friends that are good enough to remember me at Milan, and believe me your most dear Friend.

Billy Balfe the
H' Irish Potato H' Eater

P.S. Direct to the Theatre Drury Lane and I beg of you write to me as soon as you can - God bless you - Take-care-of-yourself.

I hope that you'll find my pistol short and sweet!!!!