



Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.4

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Matilde Shabran

Rossini had agreed to write a new opera for the Teatro Apollo in Rome. This was to open in the Carnival season of 1821. He had been composing Act I of an opera based on a French play "Mathilde de Morwel" but had become dissatisfied with the libretto. Now, in Rome, he asked Jacopo Ferretti to supply the words for this new opera and Ferretti adapted the text of *Euphrosine et Coradin*, an opéra by Méhul, which had been premièreed in Paris in 1790. However, Rossini's opera had already been advertised as "Matilde" so the names of the two protagonists were changed to "Matilde and Corradino". As there was so little time left to complete the score before the opening date Rossini borrowed the Overture from *Eduardo e Cristina* and a chorus from *Ricciardo e Zoraide*; he also asked his friend Giovanni Pacini to compose three of the pieces in Act II.

Thus, an opera entitled *Matilde Shabran* opened on 24 February 1821, the "*di Shabran*" which became familiar later, was not added until after these Roman performances. But the evening was not a great success despite being conducted by the famous violinist Niccolò Paganini, discovering that some of the music was not by the *pesarese* and that, indeed, some of it had already been composed for other theatres the management refused to pay the fee it had agreed. As *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* commented sarcastically *à propos* the familiar strains to be heard in this initial *Matilde Shabran*: "*We find ourselves in a circle of old friends*"

In retaliation Rossini promptly removed the orchestral parts from the music stands and wrote a letter to Cardinal Bernetti who was Governor of Rome (and also the authority for its theatres) explaining what he had done and why he had done it. We can only assume that the fee was paid as the opera resumed and was performed until the end of the season.

By November 1821, and for a production in Naples, Rossini had replaced all the music by Pacini - as well as his own self-borrowings by new music. The opera now was entitled *Bellezza e Cuor di Ferro* (Beauty and Iron-Heart). This edition was heard the following year in Vienna by now entitled *Corradino* - and with a tenor aria inserted from *Ermione* (which was unknown in that city). From Vienna we go to London. But which version would London hear, that of Rome, Naples or Vienna? And under which title?

The opera opened at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket (the site now occupied partly by Her Majesty's) on 3 July 1823 as *Matilde e Corradino* with Mme Ronzi De Begnis and Signor Garcia in the title roles, Mme Vestris as Edoardo, Signora Caradori as the Contessa d'Arco and Signor De Begnis as Isidoro. As to which music was performed I have no idea as

the first actual performance was not reviewed at all. Instead all the newspapers devoted themselves to a far more stimulating occurrence. Between the acts was to be a ballet 'L'offrande aux glaces' and after the opera another (and new) ballet 'Alphonse et Leonore'; the first of these did not end until after midnight, the audience waited some time for Act II of the opera to begin but then observed that the orchestra was packing-up and going home. Calls were made for the management to give an explanation but no one appeared, those in the pit and in the boxes looked up to the gallery for support and from that part of the house coins were thrown at the Great Chandelier which was promptly extinguished leaving the auditorium in total darkness. Some ladies screamed and others fainted while the theatre slowly cleared. Outside, the gentlemen of the audience (several of whom were of the nobility) decided that unless they received ample apology for the insolent conduct of the management they would not allow a single scene of the opera to be performed on the following night. At the next performance, however, a handbill was distributed, apparently a young Stage Manager had felt that it was expedient to curtail the evening as it was so late, that he had been reprimanded and apologies were offered. This had the effect of allaying the anger and as a result it was the *second* performance that was reviewed.

The critics were mixed, the singers were well-liked with comments such as "*Mdme di Begnis, by her acting, and her delightful voice, keeps up a lively interest throughout*", "*Mdme Vestris as Edoardo acted and sang delightfully*", "*While Signor di Begnis' broad farce is a very perfect specimen of the buffo style of acting.*" Only one review seemed to think highly of the opera: "*We have seen few operas so well performed in every respect, which was well received throughout and promises to be popular*". But this was a lone voice crying in the wilderness. With comments such as: "*The opera places all its reliance on many concerted pieces which had they been new, would have gained applause*" and "*the music is like that of all Rossini's preceeding operas - it is plentifully pillaged from himself and others, and is more of an ingenious 'cento' than an original production*". Another said: "*The story, with something of an underplot might have been tolerable - as it is, we found it dramatically heavy. It is not sufficiently serious to be called semi-seria or comic enough to be called buffa, but something between the two*". There were only five performances and each one was advertised daily as having tickets available.

Halfway through the season a warning was printed in one of the journals: "*Things are going very ill this season and the profits which have been made in the preceeding two seasons will disappear before the books for the present year are finally closed*".

As predicted the season ended making quite a substantial loss with the management and shareholders well out-of-pocket, in fact the lessee did not renew his lease on the theatre. The loss was put squarely at Rossini's door. Eight operas were given that season, one my Mozart (*La clemenza di Tito*), one by Mercadante (*Elisa e Claudio*) - this last also having its

London première - and both having poor notices and poor attendance. The other six were all by Rossini with three of them being heard for the first time in London. The consensus of opinion seems to have been that his operas were too much alike to be enjoyed as separate works. Later in the year when the financial accounts were made public the following comment appeared in one of the papers: *"The merits of Rossini are becoming a question everywhere, even in Italy. He composes with a view to profit; therefore he writes often in a hurry, and five out of six of his operas are not intended by him to be addressed to posterity. Let him be judged as a musician and not by what Lady So-and-so, or the Countess of Such-a-one admires for a month or two - but by those operas that have received the stamp of universal approbation, such as Barbieri, Tancredi and La Gazza Ladra: if he be esteemed as a composer by these, his fame is in no danger."*

Covent Garden 1854

My print shows the finale to Act I in a new production given in April that year. To the left stands Matilde and Corradino (Mlle Bosio and Sig, Lucchesi); the central figure is Isodoro (Giorgio Ronconi), then stands Edoardo (Mlle Marai), the Countess d'Arco (Mlle Albini) and Raimondo (Sig. Polonini). This cast met with appreciation for their efforts with Mlle Bosio and Sig. Ronconi taking the honours, but the review in 'The Times' sounded the death-knell of the opera. The first paragraph was enough to seal its fate: *"An opera long since consigned to a well merited oblivion. This attempt to raise the dead, really seems unaccountable. Two or three previous attempts to produce this opera in London - the last some sixteen years ago - turned to total failures, and with good reason: for it is well known that the piece, whether regarded in a dramatic or music point of view is utterly worthless. The audience, notwithstanding excellent performances, gave the opera the coldest possible reception"*.

A second performance was given and then the opera was dropped. *Matilde di Shabran* has not been heard in London since.