CHAPTER VI

The Impresario and his Theatre

WHILE he was staying in Bologna, which is the headquarters of musical life in Italy, Rossini was offered commissions from every single town in Italy which is proud enough to boast a theatre. *Impresari* were everywhere granted their contracts on the express condition that they should succeed in commissioning an opera from Rossini. He was paid on an average about a thousand francs for each work,* and he composed about four or five operas a year.

Let me explain the inner workings of the theatrical system in Italy. A *contractor*—usually the wealthiest burgher of some petty township, for this particular office carries with it considerable social prestige and not a few other advantages, although it frequently turns out to be financially ruinous!—undertakes to run the theatre in the town whose leading citizen he has the honour to be; so to start with, he forms a company, which consists invariably of: a *prima-donna*, a *tenore*,[1] a *basso cantante*, a *basso buffo*, a second (female) and a third (male) *buffo* singer. Next, the *impresario* engages a *maestro* (composer) to write an original opera for him, having always due regard, in the setting of his arias, to the particular characteristics of the voices of the singers who are to perform them. The *impresario* then purchases a text (the *libretto*: always in verse), which may cost him anything from sixty to eighty francs, the author being usually some wretched *abbé* parasitically attached to one of the wealthier households in the neighbourhood; for in Lombardy, where the meanest of petty provincial towns invariably counts some half dozen landed estates bringing in a hundred thousand *livres* a year and upwards, the undignified profession of *parasite*, so brilliantly satirized by Terence, still flourishes in all its glory. Next, the *impresario*,

[1] The term *tenore* signifies a voice with strong *chest*-notes in the upper register. Davide is famous for his *falsetto*, that is to say, for his powerful *head*-notes. Generally speaking, *opera buffa* and *opera di mezzo carattere* are written for tenors with a normal voice-range, and such singers, taking their title from the works in which they most frequently perform, are known as *tenori di mezzo carattere*. The true tenor generally appeared to best advantage in *opera seria*.

himself the owner of one of these estates, proceeds to hand over all the business management of the theatre to his agent, who is usually a lawyer, and in fact the same arch-scoundrel who manages his personal business in private life; while *he* (the impresario) is more properly occupied in falling in love with the *prima donna*; at which point, the great question which arises to tickle the curiosity of the entire neighbourhood, is whether or not he will offer her his arm in public.

Thus "organized", the company eventually gives its first performance, but not without previously having survived a whole month of utterly burlesque intrigues, thus furnishing an inexhaustible supply of gossip to entertain the entire countryside. This *prima recita* is the greatest public happening in all the long, dull existence of the town concerned —so momentous indeed, that I can think of nothing in Paris which could offer anything like an adequate comparison. For three weeks on end, eight or ten thousand persons will argue the merits and defects of the opera with all the powers of sustained concentration with which heaven has seen fit to endow them, and above all, with the maximum force of which their lungs are capable. This *première*, unless blasted at the very outset by some scandal of positively catastrophic dimensions, would normally be followed by some thirty or forty others, at the conclusion of which the company disbands. A run of this type is usually called a "season" (*una stagione*); and the best season is that which coincides with the Carnival. Any singers who have not been engaged (*scritturati*), usually hang about in Bologna or in Milan, where they have theatrical agents who make it their business to secure them contracts, and to rob them unashamedly in the process.

Furnished with this little sketch of the life and manners prevailing in the Italian theatre, the reader will now have no difficulty in picturing the singular existence which Rossini led between the years 1810 and 1816, and which has no equivalent in France. One after the other, he visited every town in Italy, spending some two or three months in each. As soon as he set foot in the place, he would be welcomed, banqueted and generally adulated by every *dilettante* in the neighbourhood, so that the first two or three weeks would be gaily frittered away in the consumption of gala dinners, spiced with sighs and shrugs over the unspeakable imbecility of the librettist. Rossini, over and above the extraordinary and penetrating intelligence with which he was gifted by nature, was indebted to his earliest mistress (the countess

P***, in Pesaro) for a thorough training in literary appreciation, which he had perfected through reading the works of Ariosto, the comedies of Machiavelli, the *Fiabe* of Gozzi, and the satires of Buratti; and in consequence, he was exquisitely sensitive to the nicer absurdities of the average *libretto*. *Tu mi hai dato versi, ma non situazioni*,[1] is a complaint which, more than once, I have heard him thunder at some wretched literary hack, who is thereupon reduced to utter apologetic dissolution, and returns a couple of hours later with a penitent sonnet, *umiliato alla gloria del più gran maestro d'Italia e del mondo*.

After two or three weeks spent in these and similar dissipations, Rossini begins to refuse invitations to banquets and *soirées musicales*, under the pretext that he must seriously give his attention to studying the vocal potentialities of his company. With this end in view, he commandeers a piano, and makes them sing; and on such occasions the observer may witness the depressing spectacle of a great composer compelled to distort and mutilate the finest flights of musical inspiration which have ever been known, for the simple reason that the *tenore* cannot reach the note which some noble vista of creative imagination has suggested, or else because the *prima donna* invariably sings off pitch in the course of transition from one key to the next! Frequently the only competent singer in the whole company turns out to be the *basso*.

Finally, three weeks before the *première* is billed, Rossini, who is by now quite sufficiently familiar with the voices of his company, starts to compose in earnest. He rises late, and settles down to work through a perpetual barrage of conversation maintained by his new-found acquaintances, who, despite every protest he can venture to make, obstinately refuse to leave him in peace for a single instant during the whole of the live-long day. He dines with them at the local *osteria*, and as often as not, sups with them as well; he returns home late at night, his friends convoying him back to the very door of his lodgings, all singing at the tops of their voices some song which he has improvised during the course of the evening; on occasions, they have even been known to indulge in an impromptu *miserere*, to the inexpressible scandal of all pure and pious church-goers in the neighbourhood. But eventually he does manage to retreat to the peace of his own room, and this is the hour—often towards three in the morning—when his most brilliant musical inspirations tend to come upon him. He scribbles them

[1] You have provided me with verses, but not with *situations*!

down, hastily and without a piano, on any odd scraps of paper which may chance to be handy, and tosses them aside until the morning, when, amid the roar and hubbub of convivial conversation, he may find time to "instrument" them (to use his own favourite expression). He must be pictured as a spirit of quicksilver agility, as a character of the most fiery temperament, perpetually subject to new impressions, perpetually on the alert for new ideas; the sort of man for whom nothing ever seems too difficult. Thus, latterly, while he was working on his *Mosè in Egitto*, an acquaintance chanced to remark: *Since you intend to have a Chorus of* Jews, *why not give them a nasal intonation, the sort of thing you hear in a synagogue?* Struck by the notion, Rossini promptly sat down and composed a magnificent chorus, which in fact does open with a most curious harmonic combination strongly reminiscent of the Jewish synagogue. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one thing which reduces this ever-brilliant, ever-fertile, ever-active genius to a state of utter paralysis, and that is the importunate presence of some pedantic *purist*, in whose conversation flattery alternates with an airing of theories, and who is only happy if he can overwhelm his victim with compliments decked out in academic verbiage. On such occasions, Rossini's temper tends to get the better of him, and he launches out promptly into a string of sarcasms which, generally speaking, are likely to be more remarkable for their grotesque imagery and energetic phraseology, than for their stylistic perfection and classical purity of diction. In Italy, where there are no idle and disdainful courtiers to while away their time by "purifying the language", and where no one would dream of considering his dignity and position rather than simply enjoying himself, the number of things which are accounted "coarse" or "in bad taste" is infinitely small; and so it comes about that we have the peculiar colourfulness of a poet like Monti—poetry which is certainly noble, and which can even be sublime, but which is yet a thousand leagues removed from the silly scruples and timid pruderies of the *Hôtel de Rambouillet* or its modern equivalents. If you desire to bring out the contrast, compare the works of M. l'abbé Delille; the very meaning of the word *noble* is different in France and in Italy.

One such pedant, a full-blown *monsignore* by trade, who, in order to badger him with civilities, had tracked him down right into the very bedchamber of the inn where he was staying, and had effectively prevented him from getting out of bed, received the following admonition:

"*Ella mi vanta per mia gloria* . . . you are pleased to mention my celebrity; yet do you know, Monsignor, wherein lies my *fundamental* claim to immortality? I will tell you: it is because I am the handsomest man alive! Canova has promised me that, one day, he will use me as a model for a statue of Achilles!"—saying which, Rossini leapt eagerly out of bed, and stood before the dazed stare of that noble prelate in the very costume in which Achilles is usually depicted, and whose public exhibition, in Italy, is considered monumentally disrespectful. "Observe, my Lord, this *leg*," he went on. "When a man possesses a limb so exquisitely turned, is he not *certain* of immortality? . . ." The remainder of the harangue, I omit; for once launched on a thoroughly bad joke, Rossini gets drunk with the sound of his own voice, intoxicated with the wild gusts of laughter which are inspired by his own grotesque fancies; he seems to be inexhaustibly fertile in the invention of nonsensical inanities, which usually veer rapidly towards the obscene; and once he is set on *that* course, nothing in the world can stop him. The pedantic prelate soon discovered that there was no alternative but to retreat.

Composing, according to Rossini, is mere child's-play; the real drudgery of the job comes with *rehearsal*. Then begins the agony, for on such distressing occasions the poor *maestro* has to endure the torments of the damned, as, one by one, he hears his most inspired ideas, his most brilliant, his suavest *cantilenas*, distorted and disfigured in every key the human voice can embrace. "It is quite enough," Rossini maintains, "to make one want to boo oneself out of the profession for good and all." Invariably, after each rehearsal, he falls into a fit of black depression, utterly disgusted with music which, only the previous day, had seemed delightful.

Nevertheless, these rehearsal-sessions, painful as they must be for any sensitive young composer, are to my mind symbolic, for they reflect the triumph of Italian musical sensibility. On such occasions, gathered together around some evil, broken-backed piano in a decrepit shanty, known as the *ridotto*, belonging to the local theatre of some unspeakable little provincial town—say Reggio or Velletri—I have watched eight or ten fourth-rate, down-at-heel opera-singers proceeding to rehearsal, invariably to the accompaniment of a full concerto for saucepans and roasting-jack from some neighbouring kitchen and, under such appalling circumstances, both *experience* and *express* the subtlest and the most

intimately moving emotional nuances of which the art of music is capable; and it is precisely on occasions such as these that we cold Northerners must stand amazed to see a plain set of ignorant dolts, all totally incapable of picking out a simple waltz on the piano, or of telling the difference between one key and the next, singing and accompanying *by instinct alone*, and with such magnificent *brio*, music which is new, original and completely unfamiliar to them, and which, in fact, the *maestro* himself composes, alters and re-arranges before their very eyes while they are actually in course of rehearsal. They make countless mistakes, of course; but in music, mistakes which are due to over-enthusiasm are soon forgotten and forgiven—as quickly as the lover forgives his mistress faults which arise from loving too well. I, personally, was completely fascinated by these sessions; however, I have no doubt that M. Berton (*de l'Institut*) would have found them *scandalous*!

No truly honest observer, venturing into Italy from abroad, could dare for one instant to deny the hopeless absurdity of presuming to train singers or composers elsewhere than under the shadow of Vesuvius.[1] In this land, which is the very homeland of beauty, the child at the breast is lulled to sleep with singing; nor are the songs it hears mere nursery-rhymes like *Malbrouck s'en va-t-en guerre* or *C'est l'amour, l'amour*. Beneath a burning sky, oppressed by an inexorable tyranny under whose dark shadow all speech is perilous, joy and despair alike find expression far more naturally through the complaint and burden of a song than through the writing of a letter. The only subject of conversation is music; the only opinions one dare hold, or express with the least semblance of fire and frankness, are opinions which concern music. Everybody without exception, however, does read and write *one* thing, namely, satirical sonnets composed in the local dialect,[2] and directed against the Governor of the city; whereupon the Governor, given the first opportunity, retaliates by locking up every poet in the neighbourhood, on a charge of *carbonarism*. This is literal fact, completely devoid of exaggeration; I could quote a score of names and cases, if it were prudent to do so. All the same, reciting satirical sonnets aimed at the Governor or the King is *far* less dangerous than discussing

[1] *Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento.* Virgil.

[2] *Eg. Sonnet*, by . . . (Reggio); *Count Prina's Vision* (Milan, 1816); *Satirical Poems*, by Buratti (Venice), *etc.*

political theory or arguing about historical problems. For should the abbé ***, or the *Cav. di M****, or whomsoever the police may happen to be employing as their local informer at any given moment, return to the Chief of Police (who, in most instances, is an intelligent man, usually a renegade liberal), and report to him the bare bones of some argument which he claims to have overheard, and which seems to hang together more or less adequately, and to offer some semblance of rational logic, this very fact furnishes all the evidence that is required, and the case against the victims is complete; for the informers, the *abbé* ***, the *Cav. di M****, *etc.*, are so fantastically and inconceivably uneducated, that it is manifestly impossible that they should have *invented* any such argument out of their own heads! The sequel is inevitable: the Prefect of Police summons you into his presence, and gravely accuses you "of having conspired against my master the Governor *by having presumed to talk!*"[1]

On the other hand, since the sin of dabbling in satirical sonnets of a topical character is practically universal; and since the subject-matter in general does not usually transcend the known (limited) intellectual ability of the informer to grasp its rudimentary outlines; it follows that anybody may reasonably plead *calumny* in his defence.

When we last saw Rossini, he was busy directing rehearsals of his latest opera to the accompaniment of an abominable piano in the *ridotto* of some wretched theatre in some third-rate town such as Pavia or Imola. If it is true that this dismal little penthouse is the revered sanctuary of unadulterated musical genius, the very holy-of-holies of pure aesthetic enthusiasm, devoid alike of bombastic pretensions and of any sense of the absurd, it is likewise true that this same unmentionable piano is the focal point about which the most fantastical ambitions and the most inglorious squabbles, fired by the most naive and the most utterly outrageous vanity, are shamelessly unleashed. In the midst of all which, of course, it is not unknown for the piano itself to disintegrate, having been physically battered to smithereens, each separate smithereen then becoming a missile for hurling at the head of some detested rival! I strongly advise any traveller in Italy who has any claim to be considered a genuine lover of art to witness this noble spectacle.

[1] *Peccano in quel che dite.* "The citizens under my jurisdiction are guilty of potentially seditious activities; the fact that *you* have been talking proves it!"—this accusation is historically true, and dates from 1819.

The private lives of the company (it goes without saying) furnish an inexhaustible supply of gossip for the entire community, whose eventual pleasure, or the contrary, during the most exciting month out of all the months in the year, must depend wholly upon the success or failure of the new opera. When a town falls under the spell of this intoxication, the rest of the world may roll by unnoticed; moreover, during these anxious crises of uncertainty, the rôle of the *impresario* is most exquisitely gratifying to his vanity, for he is, literally, the Most Important Personage in all the land. I have known skinflint bankers happily fling away a round sum of fifteen hundred golden *louis*, and write off the deficit as money well lost in the purchase of so flattering an eminence. The poet Sografi has written a charming little play in one act, based on the adventures and the vanities of an operatic company of this type; among the characters involved, I remember especially a German tenor without a word of Italian, who provides the most uproarious comedy, and the whole thing is worthy of Regnard, or even of Shakespeare. The entire set-up, in the life and the flesh, is so utterly *outrageous*, so fantastic the sight of these Italian opera-singers, all drunk with the divine fire and the passion of music, squabbling like children over the prerogatives of their immortal vanity, that the dramatist's main concern must have been to *dilute* the extravagance of his raw material, to water it down by three parts at least, and somehow to constrict it within the narrow limits of truth, probability and nature, rather than to add touches of artificial dramatization. The most faithful of portraits, sketched with the severest eye to realism, must necessarily have appeared nothing but a caricature of the most fantastic improbability.

Marchesi (the famous Milanese male-soprano), during the latter part of his stage career, refused point-blank to sing at all unless his first entry in the opening scene of the opera were made either on horseback, or else on the top of a hill. Furthermore, whichever alternative was eventually agreed upon, the cascade of plumes which surmounted his helmet was required to be at least six feet high. In our own time, Crivelli still refuses to sing his opening aria, unless the librettist agrees to provide him with the words *felice ognora*, which are particularly convenient for the execution of certain series of roulades.

But we are in danger of forgetting all about our little Italian township, which we last beheld tense with anxiety, one might almost say

possessed with *frenzy*—the frenzy which heralds the great day of the *première* of its own specially-composed opera.

The critical evening arrives at last. The *maestro* takes his seat at the piano; the auditorium is stuffed to bursting-point. The crowds have come pouring in from every town and village within twenty miles' radius; enthusiasts bivouac in their open carriages in the middle of the streets; the inns have been overflowing ever since the previous day, and the customary Italian courtesy of these establishments is showing a tendency to wear a bit thin. Everyone has downed tools long ago. As the hour of the performance draws near, the town seems like a deserted, hollow shell; the passions, the wavering hopes and fears, the entire life of a whole thriving population is focused upon the *theatre*.

As the overture begins, you could hear a pin drop; as it bangs its way triumphantly to an end, the din bursts with unbelievable violence. It is extolled to high heaven; or alternately, it is whistled, nay rather *howled* into eternity with merciless shrieks and ululations. There is no parallel in Paris, where cautious vanity anxiously eyes a neighbouring vanity beside it;[1] these are men possessed of seven devils, determined at all costs, by dint of shrieking, stamping and battering with their canes against the backs of the seats in front, to enforce the triumph of *their* opinion, and above all, to prove that, come what may, *none but their opinion is correct*; for, in all the world, there is no intolerance like that of a man of artistic sensibility. If ever you chance to meet, in artistic company, an individual who seems fair-minded and reasonable, change the subject quickly; talk to him about history, or about political economy, or about some related topic; for whereas there is every possibility that he may one day turn out to be a distinguished magistrate, a fine doctor, a good husband, an excellent academician, or indeed whatever you will, he can *never* become a true connoisseur of music or painting. Never.

Each aria of the new opera, in its turn, is listened to in perfect silence; after which, the cataclysm is let loose once more; and the bellowing of a storm-tormented sea is nothing but the feeblest comparison. The audience makes its opinion of the singers on the one hand, and of the composer on the other, distinctly audible. There are cries of *Bravo Davide! Bravo Pisaroni!*, or on other occasions, the whole theatre will echo with daemonic shrieks of *Bravo maestro!* Rossini rises from his

[1] All first-nights are grim and chilly at the *Théâtre Louvois*.

seat at the piano, his handsome face assuming an unwonted expression of gravity. He bows thrice, submitting to storms of applause, and deafened by a most unlikely variety of acclamations, for whole sentences of adulation may be flung at his unresisting head; after which, the company proceeds to the next item.

Rossini always appears in person at the piano for the first three nights of each new opera; but, at the conclusion of this statutory period, having received his salary of seventy *sequins* (about eight hundred francs) and attended a grand farewell dinner given in his honour by all his new friends (that is to say, by the entire population of the town) he at length drives away in a *vettura*, his bags up beside him stuffed more tightly with music than with personal belongings, only to begin the same procedure all over again at the next port of call, perhaps forty miles distant. Normally, on the evening of the *première*, he writes a letter to his mother, sending her, for her own use and for that of his old father, two-thirds of the meagre salary which he has been paid. When all is said and done, he is lucky to have as much as eight or ten *sequins* in his pocket; yet it needs no more to make him the happiest of mortals, and if heaven but grant him on the road to fall in with a *fool*, the urge to play practical jokes grows supremely irresistible. On one occasion, when he was driving in a *vettura* from Ancona to Reggio, he pretended to be a music-master possessed of the bitterest undying hatred towards *Rossini*, and spent the whole journey singing the most execrable tunes (which he invented on the spur of the moment) to the words of his own most famous arias—tunes which he then proceeded to hold up to general scorn and ridicule as examples of the "so-called masterpieces" of that "unmentionable toad Rossini", whom certain tasteless individuals were imbecile enough to call a genius![*] Incidentally, nothing was further removed from mere vanity on Rossini's part than his thus turning the conversation into musical channels; in Italy, there is no subject with greater popular appeal, and conversation, after a brief reference to Napoleon, reverts inevitably to this one obsessing topic.