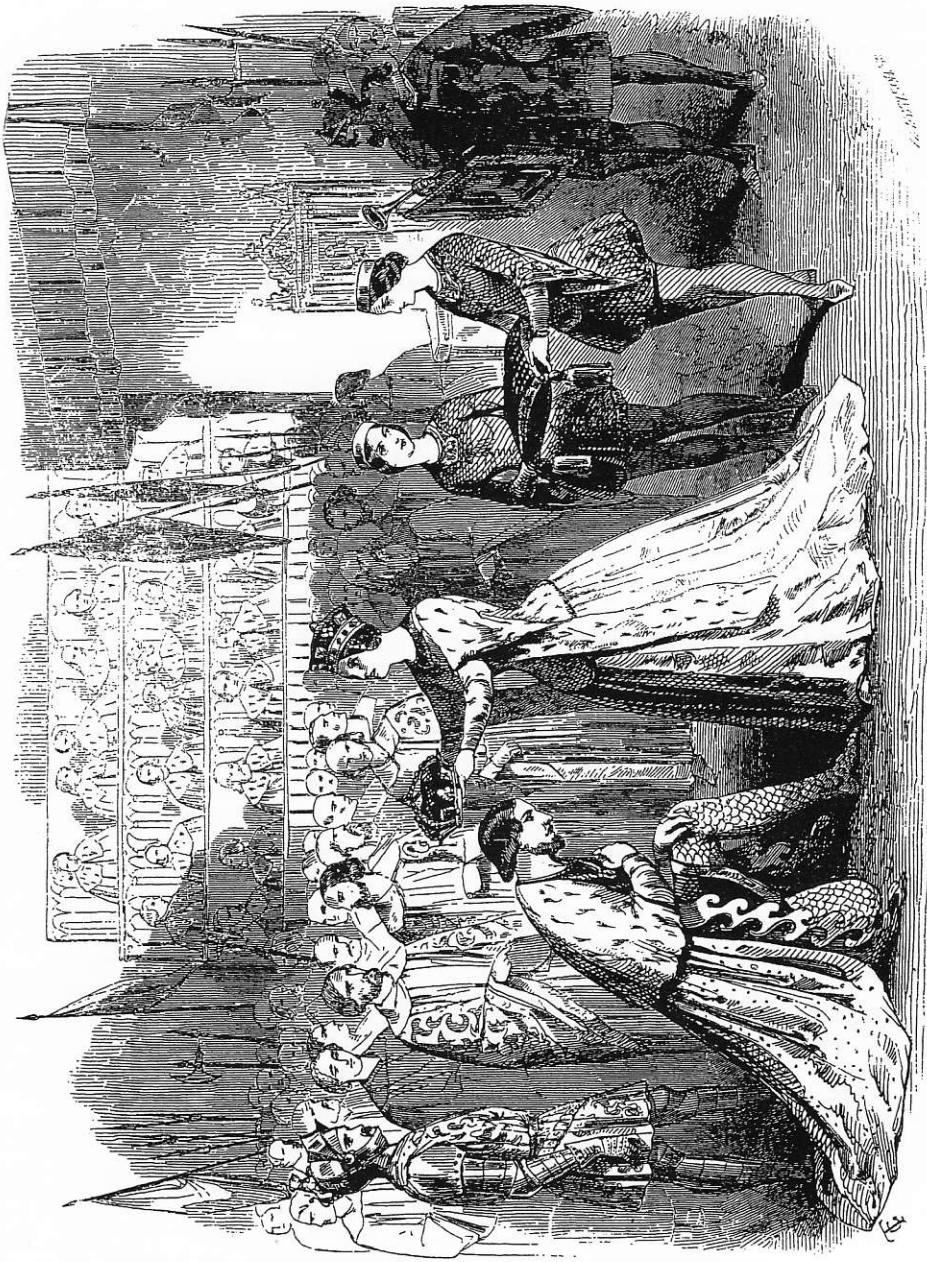


SCENE FROM WALLACE'S NEW OPERA OF "MATILDA OF HUNGARY," AT DRURY LANE THEATRE.

# Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No3

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## A forgotten English Opera

On Monday February 15th 1847 a new opera *Matilda of Hungary* was due to be premiered at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. The curtain was to rise at 6.45pm and the theatre was filled long before that by an excited crowd eagerly awaiting this second opera by the young composer William Vincent Wallace. His first opera, *Maritana*, had been given successfully on this very stage in November 1845.

6.45pm came and went, as did 7.45pm. Nearing 8pm the audience, now distinctly uneasy, started to call for a reason for the delay, as no answer was forthcoming unease turned ugly and it was quite apparent that a riot was about to break out. At ten minutes past 8, as reported in "The Musical World", Mr Bunn [the lessee] *"...stalked dolefully on the stage, followed by Mr Wallace who crawled lugubriously behind, both evidently in a moral fix."* It appears that seven minutes before the start of the opera they were informed that Miss Romer, who was to sing the title-role, was indisposed and could not appear. Another soprano, Miss Rainforth, who knew the role was contacted but she also was indisposed and therefore the performance would have to be cancelled. At this an uproar ensued punctuated with cries of *"Shame"*, *"Fraud"* and *"Money Back"*. Bunn pleaded for quiet and informed his furious audience that all monies would be returned to those who wanted it, however, if they stayed they could see a performance of Balfe's latest opera *The Bondman* (first produced in December last). This was met with cheers and no boubt to mitigate the disappointment he asked if the audience would like to hear the overture of the opera now postponed? The answer was an overwhelming *"Yes"* at which point a reanimated Mr Wallace leaped into the pit and the overture was soon under way. It was met with lound applause and an encore was demanded and given. Of Balfe's opera it was said that the first act and half of the second could hardly be heard because of the hubbub coming from the auditorium.

But what of *Matilda*? The first-night now took place the following Monday 22nd February. The libretto (his last) was by Bunn and is set in an early period of Bohemia's history, it is in three acts and has thirty numbers including the overture. There are eleven characters of which five are principals, nobles, soldiers and peasants make up the chorus. There is Matilda, Queen of Hungary - Lilla, Lady in Waiting - Count Magnus, First Minister of Bohemia - Mathius, an Innkeeper - and George Podiebrad, a Serf. Two events have taken-place before the opera begins. The King has been presumed killed in battle but his body has not been found; secondly George has saved a young woman (the Queen of course) from death on a bolting horse and she has given him a ring in reward. The following is a resumé of the plot: George has come to the Inn of Mathius to see his friend. Magnus enters, he knows that the King is dead but is horrified to see that George is the double of the King and even sounds like him. The Queen enters, she is there at the request of Magnus who now tells her that some of her nobles want to depose her, also that the peasants are in open revolt. He proposes marriage to save her life. She scorns him and departs. Magnus

entices George to go with him to Prague where he will impersonate the King. Of course Magnus wants the throne for himself. The next two acts show how his plans are thwarted.

Bunn's libretto has been described as one of the worst in existence, and is thought to be the main reason for the opera's "failure". Having read it through I thought it no worse than any other of the Victorian era. But the opera had mixed reviews, one critic said *"unlike the pretty tunes of Maritana this score is a more ambitious grand opera seria"*. Another considered that it leaned towards the German School, *"a second edition of the hindredth psalm"* and *"the opening chorus devotional in style and beautifully written for the voices"*. A duet for Matilda and Magnus reminded one critic of a duet from Spohr's *Jessonda* but an aria for Magnus was felt to be *"monotonous and the singing did little to help it as the voice was of a disagreeable quality"*. It was suggested that the aria and some of the spoken dialogue should be cut in futher performances. Another critic said that echoes of Mozart, Rossini and even from Beethoven's *Fidelio* were heard but was no bad thing as the composer had obviously studied the older masters. One reviewer said that the first-act finale a quintet in the second, and a trio in the third *"excite the utmost admiration of the musician"* and that the final rondo for the Queen *"is a fresh bit of melody that will haunt the ear a long time after it is once heard"*.

*Matilda of Hungary* is supposed to be a failure. Many books either do not mention it or just write it off disparagingly as unsuccessful. But was it? Five new operas were to be given that season. The first was *Loretta* by Louis Henry Lavenu in November 1846, followed by *The Bondsman* and now by *Matilda*. The others should have been *Quentin Durward* by Henri Laurent and Otto Nicolai's *Il templario* but both of these were cancelled due to the public's demand for *Matilda*. Consequently the opera ran until the end of the season in May with over fifty performances. Some failure!! It need not have been the end of the run either, Bunn himself was to blame as he allowed the lease of the theatre to expire; when asked if he wanted to renew it he decided to do so but not as a venue for opera. His next attraction was the *Cirque National* from Paris with performing elephants!

William Wallace had left London before May and was in Italy convalescing from the ill-health that plagued-him all his life. From there he was to go to Vienna where both *Maritana* and *Matilda of Hungary* were to be produced at the Theater auf der Wieden. If you accept Loewenberg (emulating Bauer) as gospel only *Maritana* reached the stage in January 1848, but a small book published in Ireland entitled A Vagabond Composer' by Robert Phelan tells us that *Matilda* had a three-week run where it was seen by Leopold of Belgium who graciously accepted the dedication of the score.

The print shows the finale to Act 3. The scene is the great hall of the States of Bohemia. The Queen has denounced Magnus as a traitor and he is led off to the scaffold, she has also revealed George as an imposter but naturally (as she loves him) pardons him and confers on him the diadem of Bohemia as the saviour of her crown. No one looks particularly pleased. A vocal score and libretto survive in the British Library.

PS *Ladislas V, King of Hungary, born in 1440 was crowned King of Bohemia in 1453 as Ladislav I with George of Podébrady as Regent. The latter usurped the throne when Ladislav died unmarried in 1457. It was long thought that he had poisoned the young King but in 1989 when the body was exhumed it was found that the cause of Ladislav's death was infantile leukaemia.*