Past Present and Proposed No.13

Pip Clayton

Four theatres, The Queen's, The King's, His Majesty's and Her Majesty's in the Haymarket

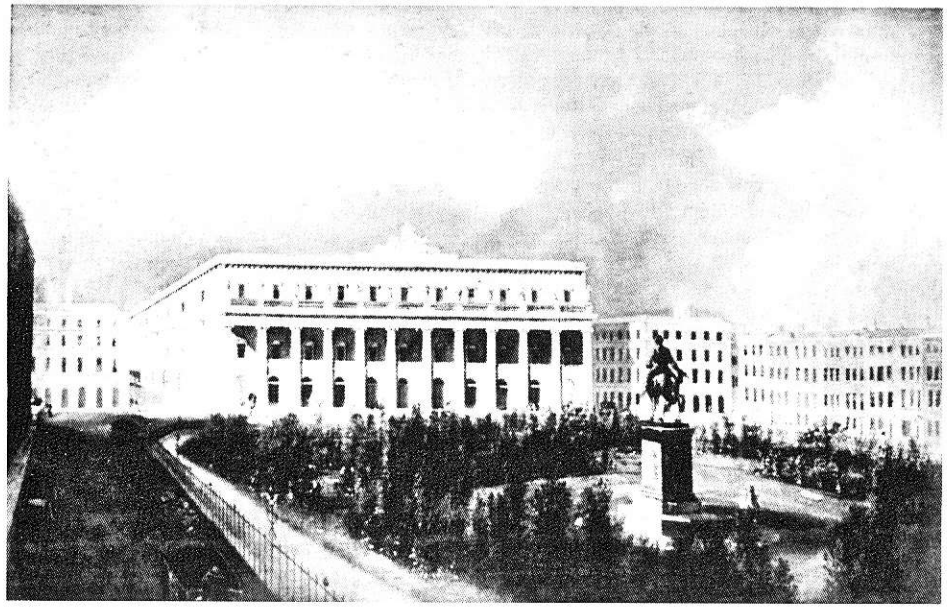
The Second Theatre, a Prologue

With the destruction of the old King's Theatre by fire in 1789, William Taylor, still in prison for debt, approached John Gallini with an offer to go into partnership with him and was refused. Instead Gallini went into partnership with Robert Bray O'Reilly now his legal adviser and these two applied for a license for an opera house to be built in Leicester Square, which the Lord Chamberlain refused. Not to be outdone Taylor next approached Edward Vanbrugh for the lease of the site of the old theatre. To add to the confusion the Duke of Bedford and the Earl of Cholmondeley also planned to build a new opera house but not on the ruins of the old one. Nothing came of this scheme. Gallini and O'Reilly however were granted a license to present operas at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket (this is where the Theatre Royal now stands) and presented their first season in 1789-90. In the meantime Taylor had obtained the lease from Edward Vanbrugh but when he applied for a new license the Lord Chamberlain told him that Gallini and O'Reilly had secured a license for the new theatre in Leicester Square and consequently Taylor was refused.

Gallini and O'Reilly had actually double-crossed each other. O'Reilly purchased the land in Leicester Square to build the new theatre, Gallini refused to help pay for it. O'Reilly appealed to the Lord Chamberlain who granted him the sole right to a license for a theatre on the site. Gallini turned his back on the whole sorry affair and joined forces with Taylor! These two, no better than each other, now conspired with the owners of Drury Lane Theatre and Covent Garden and together they formally objected to another theatre being built. Taylor still in the Debtor's prison and ever the chancer was going ahead with the foundations of the new theatre in the Haymarket, even having the corner-stone laid on 3 April 1790 by John, Earl of Buckinghamshire - even though he had still not had the license to do so from the Lord Chamberlain. On April 14 the case for O'Reilly's license for his new opera house was heard. It was refused. Consequently today, no Opera House stands in Leicester Square. (It is possible that the architect was Sir John Soane whose vision of the opera house would have been the most magnificent in Europe (**See illustration 1**), what I find curious is that this painting looks just like the Grand Théâtre at Bordeaux built in 1775-80 by Victor Louis who O'Reilly had originally approached for a design, also that this painting has been attributed to a certain George Maddox well known to O'Reilly, even more curiously that this design was adapted for the Petrovsky Theatre in Moscow - the first Bolshoi Theatre - built by Prince Pyotor Ourosov and an Englishman named Michael Maddox!) However O'Reilly was given a consolation prize, a license to present Italian Opera for four years at the Pantheon, a place of Assembly, Masquerades and Concerts which had opened in 1772. (This Pantheon stood in what is now Lower Oxford Street on the site now occupied by Marks and Spencer's)

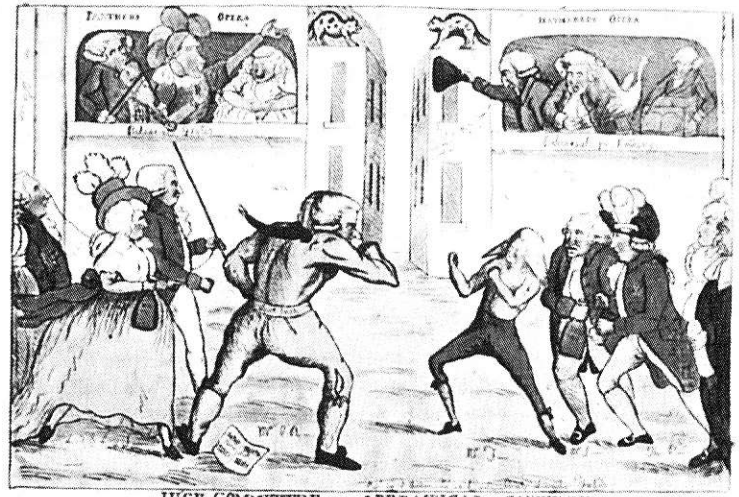
While the King's Theatre in the Haymarket was being rebuilt by Michael Novosielski, the Pantheon was being remodeled by James Wyatt the original architect. O'Reilly and Taylor tried to outsmart one another even to the point of asserting that the other's theatre was not capable of ensuring public safety, surveyors were called in and both houses passed inspection!

(I had asked in Newsletter 114 who held the balance of power in all the shenanigans of that period? I found the answer in a satirical print entitled "High Committee", which



Oil painting in the London Museum

Unexecuted designs for an Opera House in Leicester Square, 1789-90



High Committee, or Operatical Contest

'High Committee, or Operatical Contest', late 18th to early 19th century

shows the two managers as pugilists: Taylor is supported by the Prince of Wales and the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan; O'Reilly has on his side Lady Salisbury and the Lord Chamberlain who is leading King George III by a string through his nose. **See illustration 2**) The Pantheon opened on 9 February 1791 with an opera *Armida* by Antonio Sacchini. As a result O'Reilly played a final dirty trick, he renamed the Pantheon the "King's Theatre" a move which has thrown untold confusion among theatre historians to this day.

Also that year 1791 saw the demolition of the old Drury Lane Theatre leaving the actors headed by John Kemble without a theatre. Taylor rented out the King's Theatre to the Drury Lane manager Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the company opened there with *The Haunted Manor* an English comic opera by Stephen Storace on 22 September 1791. It is interesting to note the quirk of fate in the first and second theatre in the Haymarket. The first King's Theatre had been built as a playhouse for drama but became a house for Italian Opera: the second King's Theatre was intended for Italian Opera but for the first years it was home to legitimate drama. The first King's Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1789, and in 1792 the second King's Theatre was destined to become one of the greatest opera houses in the world. This took effect as on the night of 14 January 1792, when the Pantheon/King's Theatre burnt to the ground. Eventually O'Reilly like others before him lost his money and fled to France

Taylor immediately applied for a license to present Italian Opera which was granted, but with three conditions: first, there would be three trustees, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Bedford and the Marquis of Salisbury, and that Taylor could continue as impresario only as long as he conducted the management properly; the second condition was that Taylor had to agree to pay the debts contracted by O'Reilly at the Pantheon; the third condition was most peculiar, Taylor had to pay £5,000 to the manager of Covent Garden for the patent of Drury Lane (this had become dormant and was in the possession of a Thomas Harris of Covent Garden), without it the Drury Lane company of actors could not perform at the King's Theatre. Taylor was either a very brave man or a very stupid one, he started this venture buried in debt, he now owed £30,000 of the Pantheon's debt, £12,000 to the original subscribers, an unknown amount to Gallini, and £5,000 to Harris together with an unknown amount of debt from his previous management (for which he was still in prison!!)

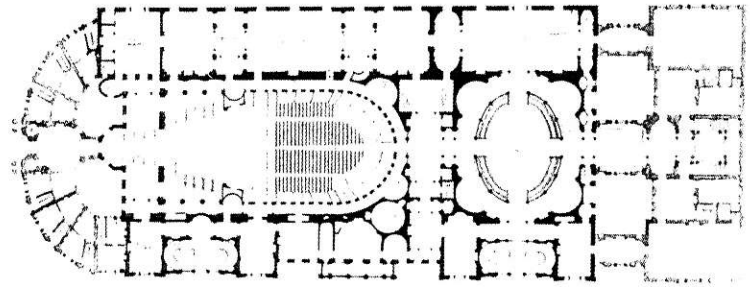
Act 1 The Great Opera House

Before I describe the theatre I would like to clear up a misapprehension which in some quarters has lasted to our present day. The celebrated architect Robert Adam **did not build the second King's Theatre** but he did draw-up plans and an illustration of the front elevation of a theatre which was never built. Possibly these plans were for the Duke of Bedford and Earl Cholmondley's scheme.(**See illustration 3**)

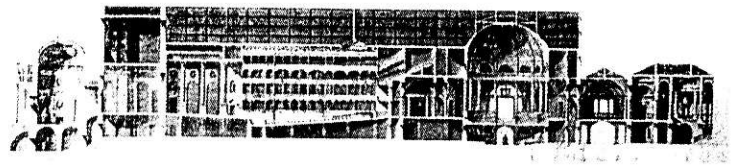
Michael Novosielski was the architect, but who was he? Despite his Polish name he was born in Rome in 1747. When he came to England is not known but by 1772 he was living in London. Between 1781-84 he was a scene painter at the King's Theatre. A portrait of him shows him holding the plans for the new theatre but these plans no longer exist. (**See Back cover**) The new opera house was going to be considerably larger than the old one, its walls now extended to Market Lane to the east and Pall Mall to the south. Some shops had survived the fire and Novosielski planned to demolish these so he could build a concert room in their place, this was not built in 1791 as funds were not there but more importantly at the time the license was restricted. This concert room was finally completed in 1793 (Joseph Haydn in 1794-95 gave a series of concerts of his symphonies in this concert room including the premiere of the *Military symphony*).



Haymarket elevation



b. Plan



c. Longitudinal section

OPERA HOUSE, HAYMARKET Unexecuted designs by Robert Adam

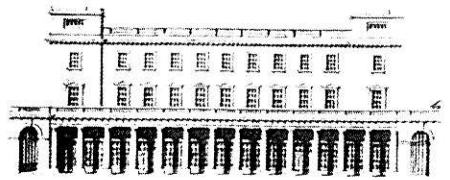
Only the ground floor of the Haymarket facade was faced with stone the rest was of plain brick with three pillars, two windows, an entablature, pediment and balustrade. Before 1800 two men, Thomas Leverton and John Fordyce, proposed to widen Pall Mall at the south end of the site and to extend Charles Street to the north to connect with the Haymarket thus giving the impression that the theatre was isolated on a island, but at that time nothing came of it.

In 1815 the crown lessee of the theatre secured a 97 year lease of the whole site to enable this plan to be completed. He also employed the architects John Nash and George Repton to furnish the facades with some decoration. (I should imagine that for the best part of thirty years the bottom half of the Haymarket resembled a building site. Not only changes were made to the exterior of the opera house but also to the auditorium). Their designs (borrowed from the idea of Leverton and Fordyce) turned a virtually plain brick building into one of finest opera houses in the known world. Between 1816-1818 an elegant arcade of shops named the Royal Opera Arcade became the first shopping arcade in London, this fronted the Market Lane facade (it is still extant today). Roman Doric colonnades by John Nash and his pupil George Repton completely enclosed the property on the other three sides. The entablature was of Bath stone with the brickwork covered in a Roman cement stucco (**See illustration 4**). During the next seventy-six years the interior was constantly being altered and refurbished. There were five tiers of boxes, four entire, and the fifth interrupted by the gallery. Each year a Plan of the Boxes was published and each year it seems as though the total number was different due to variation to the size of the boxes which could be altered to accommodate any number of people. In 1829 figures were published to give the answer: the Pit was 66 feet long and 65 feet wide and held 800 spectators, the boxes 900 and the gallery 800 making the total capacity 2,500. Even so we cannot be absolutely certain of the audience capacity as in the same article it stated that each box had six chairs, there were 150 boxes, thus earlier figures for the sum-total for the boxes vary between a total of 139, 163 or even 202 occupants!

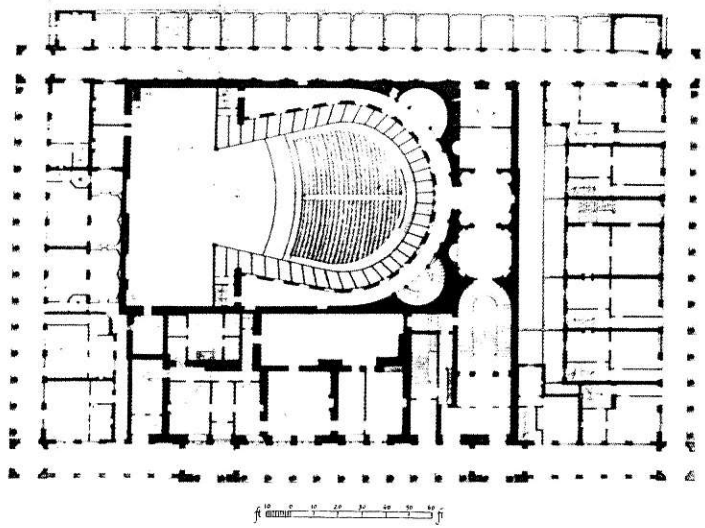
The fronts of the tiers of boxes were painted blue within a gold frame and each tier was distinguished by a decoration centred upon Tritons, Mermaids and Dolphins or wreaths of flowers with Cherubs and Leopards, Lions and Griffins. The top of each tier was hung with a scarlet drapery edged with a gold fringe. There were two boxes at each side behind the proscenium and in front of the drop cutain, some sources say it was three. The width of the stage was 80 feet with the opening of the proscenium arch 37 feet and the depth from the back wall to the orchestra pit was 60 feet. The theatre was lit by candles held by sconces fixed to the front of each tier which meant that the grease and smoke were a constant annoyance to the audience sitting below. It was not until 1818 that the theatre installed a central chandelier lit by gas. (Both Covent Garden and Drury Lane, even though less affluent had done so the year before). The Pit in most theatres did not have seats until about the 1830's but they appeared in the King's Theatre much earlier than that, but when is not known. About 1802 a Lord Galloway noticed to his confusion that a long Bench had been substituted in the place of a row of armchairs. The manager Pierre Laporte re-instated four rows of stalls in 1828, Benjamin Lumley added three rows of stalls seats in 1841 and John Mapleson added three more rows in 1862. Each time it caused a near riot as the audience objected to the increased prices they had to pay for the privilege of sitting instead of standing.

Act 2. The Music and the Artists.

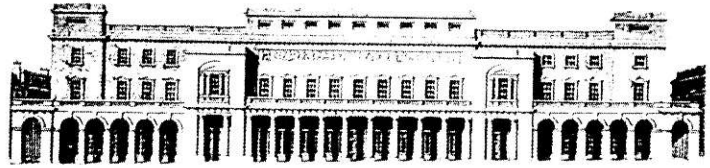
The history of Italian Opera, certainly in London up to the middle of the nineteenth century is frankly the history of the King's Theatre. In 1737 the Licensing Act was passed by Parliament, this gave Drury Lane and Covent Garden a permanent license to present



a. Pall Mall elevation



b. Plan



c. Haymarket elevation

OPERA HOUSE, HAYMARKET. G. S. Repton's designs for the addition of 1816-18 *Demolished*

drama, with the King's Theatre holding the only license to perform *Italian* Opera. Opera composed in other languages, even in English, was translated into Italian. Its monopoly was not challenged until 1846 when the Royal Italian Opera company was formed at Covent Garden.

The King's opened on the 21 February 1791, not with an opera but with an evening of music and dance owing to the Lord Chamberlain's delay in licensing opera performances, but on the 10 March a private performance was given for subscribers of Paisiello's opera *Pirro*. The first public performance was not given until 26 January 1793. This was of course due to the fact that the Drury Lane actors were in situ while their theatre was being rebuilt, though some records state that opera was given in concert form. The first theatre had seen opera's by Ariosti, Bononcini and Handel, names familiar to opera cognoscenti today, but who now today (other than historians and opera fanatics) know of Abos, Fischietti and Latilla whose opera's were also heard at the first King's Theatre? Now, with a brand-new opera house, London saw the beginning of a new era with operas by young composers coming to the forefront of the genre.

As this Society is concerned with Donizetti and the music of his time, I wish to give you some idea of the new works that were coming from young composers and the reaction to them by both critics and public.

The 19th century started well with four operas by Peter von Winter to libretti by Lorenzo Da Ponte (excerpts of two of which can be heard in the first two box-sets of 100 years of Italian Opera by Opera Rara). In March 1806 a notice in The Times read, *Mrs Billington respectfully informs the Nobility, Gentry and the Public that her benefit night is fixed for Thursday, March 27th, when will be performed a grand serious opera- with choruses, entitled La Clemenza di Tito, entirely composed by Mozart- the most celebrated ouvrage of that great composer, and the only one of his operas ever produced in this* country. Mrs Billington took the role of Vitellia but the papers instead of writing a criticism of the opera saw it more as a social event which I suppose it was as the fashionable audience was headed by the Prince Regent and his brothers the Duke of Kent and the Duke of Clarence. This brilliant occasion was followed in quick succession by *Cosi fan tutte* in May 1811 and then in June by *Il flauto magico*. The next year on 18 June a charity performances in aid of the Scottish Hospital saw for the first time *Le nozze di Figaro* with Angelica Catalani as Susanna, perhaps the highest paid singer at that time. This was followed by *Don Giovanni* in 1817.

On 19 June 1806 *Che originali* was produced at the King's by Donizetti's teacher Simon Mayr. Some of his music had been heard in 1804 when a duet 'Parto, ti lascio' and a chorus 'Qual orror' were inserted into the opera *La vergine del sole* by Gaetano Andreozzi. Other operas by Mayr to be heard in London were *Adelasia e Alaramo* in 1815 and *Elisa* (as *Il monte di San Bernado*) in 1820. The great Giuditta Pasta created a sensation with her *Medea in Corinto* in 1826, an opera revived many times subsequently, and she also sang in a (pasticcio version) of Mayr's *La rosa rossa e la rosa bianca* in 1828.

On 7 March 1818 it was announced that a new composer would be introduced that evening to London with a performance of an opera written in rivalry with the famous Paisiello, the performance was cancelled until 10 March when it was announced that Signor Garcia will make his first appearance in this country. Of course the opera was *The Barber of Seville* or is it was then called *Almaviva, o sia l'inutile precauzione* by none other than Gioacchino Rossini. The cast included Manuel Garcia (Almaviva), Giuseppe Naldi (Figaro), and Joséphine Fodor-Mainvielle (Rosina.) The next day The Times said: *"a young composer of extraordinary merit, who enjoys great celebrity in all parts of the Continent."* and his music *"bears marks of haste, and still more of extravagance: but we are persuaded*

that all persons must have been delighted and astonished by the occasional touches of genius, the variety and originality of his style."

From the Observer there was praise for Garcia: *His figure is good, his voice clear and sonorous, his execution most rapid and articulate, his intonation just, his science great and his acting excellent*. There was also praise for Madame Fodor: *The slight fioramentes with which she just touched particular passages were the triumph of delicacy and sentiment: it was the southern breeze that swept through an orange grove, waking the sweetness of its blossoms but forbearing to scatter any of its leaves.*

But four days later the News did its best to dampen the praise by writing that Rossini: *was a composer who is considerably more admired on the Continent (where the ankle of the Prima Donna is more critically examined than the music of her part) than he is ever likely to be in this country.* Just a month later came *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra*, Such was the success of the *Barber of Seville* that for the next six years Rossini's operas dominated the stage, in fact at least two of his operas were heard every year for the first time in London. 1820 saw *Cenerentola* and *Tancredi* which had many revivals in the next forty years. In 1824 of the twelve operas given that season eight of them were by Rossini one of them being his new *Zelmira* with his wife Isabella Colbran in the title role (it failed).

Carlo Coccia had been engaged as well as Rossini but as conductor and the two men where paid the same as the singers, Isabella Colbran, Guiditta Pasta and Giusepina Ronzi De Begnis. But what a cast! Even with the maximum publicity however it was not a success, at one point Angelica Catalani had to be recruited to give it a boost. It's not surprising that the impresario Giovanni Battista Benelli ended the season in debt to the tune of £25,000.

Bellini was not lucky. 17 April 1830 saw the first performance in London of *Il pirata*. The Times was not enthusiastic, *as a musical composition the opera is not destitute of merit, with the exception of the overture, which was very weak and puerile.* The Morning Post was equally damming, *its lively and sucré quality is such that almost imagined it to be the medium of comic rather than of serious action.* A year later *La sonnambula* given as a benefit night for Rubini with Pasta and Gabriele Santi was ignored by The Times while The Morning Post waited until the second performance and said of the music *its prevailing character is sprightliness rather than depth. La straniera* also failed to please in 1832 and in the following year *Norma* also had a poor reception. Again it was a benefit performance this time for Pasta and again The Times ignored it while the Morning Post dismissed it completely with: *We cannot award any high praise to this opera. It is lamentably deficient in original ideas and but for a certain dramatic character discernible in its music would, unusually short as it is, put the patience of the audience to a some-what severe test.* Less than four months after its premiere in Paris *I puritani di Scozia* opened at the King's Theatre on the 21st of May 1835 with the same stellar cast, Giulia Grisi, Giovan-Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburini and Luigi Lablache. For the first time the press reviews were not so disparaging as for the earlier operas. The Morning Post said that: *Bellini has, it must be admitted, not withstanding added materially to his reputation.* And, *In act two the magnificent duet Suoni la tromba with a beautiful symphony on the horn begins a musical dialogue in which the questions are given with dignity on the one hand, and stern defiance on the other. We never heard more tremendous cheering as each singer gave their words in turn and then together and was compelled to be repeated.* The Morning Chronicle was, I would say, its usual carping self, with: *The airs are pretty, but common, and the choruses are little better than noise,* and - *the brazen instruments and drums, the braying and beating of which hardly ever intermit from beginning to end of the piece.* The Times was more positive: *The whole of the first act, so far as the music is concerned, is a work of very superior merit.* Later in the review, *the whole opera abounds in choruses only some of which were given due the lack of rehearsal time and the performance a good deal*

shortened. If all the choruses be so good as the few that were given, they should not be left out in future. But the last paragraph amused me, it was about the curtain call for Giulia Grisi: *...on whom crowns and garlands were showered from the parts of the house nearest the stage. This practice, which a few contemptible sycophants have introduced within the last four or five years is an exceedingly silly one, and not at all in harmony with our English notions and customs. We wish its authors would testify their admiration by some other mode more suitable to our English manner. A shower of cabbage leaves is surely a very little better compliment than a volley of rotten eggs.*

The first opera by Donizetti to be given in London was *Anna Bolena* at the King's Theatre on the 8 July 1831 with Pasta in the title role, Rubini as Percy and Lablache as Henry VIII. Once again the first night was a benefit performance, this time for Pasta herself and unusually The Times critic was there and offered a review in which he said of Pasta:- *The energy of Medea, the dignity of Semiramide, the tender pathos of Desdemona, the profound afflictions of Mary Stuart, and that fascinating littleness which forms the charm of her mad scene in Nina were all displayed in turns.* Even so then and now in our present time, the composer seems to get a rather grudging review. The Times thought: *There is a great deal of good music in the opera, and the hand of a master is visible throughout, but imperfections are abundant. In some parts Rossinian recollections have strongly prevailed, and in others Bellini's Pirata has supplied the model.*

What was thought to be the most Bellinian aspect was Anna's *Larghetto* in the finale ultimo, but William Ashbrook in his 1984 book on Donizetti points out that this passage is a reworking of an aria from *Enrico di Borgogna* of 1818, some seven years before the première of Bellini's first opera. The Morning Post gave this strange comment: *it was so well performed that it was impossible to judge the music at first hearing.* The critic then went on to say: *There are no airs that particularly strike the attention or impress the memory, yet is this work above mediocrity,* and;- *all writers after Rossini must more or less be followers of his style, and last night we were impressed with the conviction that Donizetti composed his opera with not only the music of Rossini in his mind but also the strains of the universally-known and admired Auber.* Of the singers the following was said: *Of Pasta's performance of the heroine it is impossible to give any adequate idea by description. We never heard her in finer voice than last night. Her acting was no less admirable, and at the conclusion of each act attained to the very perfection of the histrionic art. Rubini as Percy sang delightfully. We have never yet seen him in a part that offered so many opportunities for the display of his delightful and peculiar powers. Lablache completely identified himself with the character of bluff King Hal, and equal credit is due to him for the manner, at once chaste and forcible, in which he gave the music of the part, which led him to acquaint himself with peculiarities of appearance, costume, and the bearing of the man he personated. A Mademoiselle Gay* (as Jane Seymour) *made her debut before a London audience but labouring under the effects of timidity added to an apparent indisposition we can only say that her voice is of pleasing quality and considerable compass, that she has taste as a singer and much judgement as an actress.* The review ended with, *the whole of the dresses were beautiful and perfectly correct, and a similar commendation applies to the scenery.* On the side there was a lively domestic dispute, Sir Henry Bishop complained that his ballad *Home, sweet home* written in 1821 and introduced for Pasta to sing into *Anna Bolena* was plagiarism and he was prepared to sue for piracy and breach of copyright!

The following year two operas by our maestro were produced. Advertised as with new singers, the first was on 4 February and two days later The Morning Post had this to say: *The doors opened without any crowd, and although the house was comfortably filled by an audience of many of its distinguished aristocratic patrons, and a large number of well-known dilettante, yet there was room throughout the evening. The Opera was Esule di*

Roma of Donizetti a work which has acquired for that composer a considerable reputation amongst his fastidious and musically-gifted countrymen. We are much in doubt that it will give him a niche in the ideal temple, according to the judgement of the frequenters of the King's. Of the singers, *Madame Joséphine de Méric as* (Argelia) *we believe had been unheard in this country, and the Manager engaged her upon the sole recommendation of her talents, without that of fame. He was right, for she is an acquisition and will be popular. The tenor Signor* (Berardo Calvari) *Winter as* (Setttimo) *was a decided hit. His part is written rather high frequently touching A, and once we believe B, he had never occasion to resort to the falsetto. Signor* (Luciano) *Mariani* as (Murena) *has a baritone of considerable depth, but of good quality. We are sure, however that he will be heard with much more satisfaction if he will abate his efforts to prove its force.* The review ended with;- *the choruses were extremely well performed, the scenery, equipments and general arrangement are much superior to what we have been accustomed to.* On 31 March the second opera was offered. This was *Olivo e Pasquale* and The Morning Chronicle had this to say on April 2: *The entertainment was an Opera Buffe and like many modern operas, deficient in airs; but it contained several good-concerted pieces, and although not an original it is a lively and agreeable piece, and deserving of the success it has had on the continent.* The Morning Post was agreeable: *We like Donizetti better in this light and pleasant character than in his more elaborate attempts. If there is but little originality, this Opera displays taste, spirit and clever adaptation, and an entire absence of dullness.* The singers were de Méric as Isabella, Mariani as Olivo and Vincenzo Galli as Pasquale.

As was usual, in place of a programne the management sold a booklet that gave the plot plus the libretto in the original Italian and a translation into English. The Times however had a comment to make which I would say is just as relevant today as it was then: *It is impossible not to be struck with the slovenly and disgracefully incorrect manner in which the English translations of the libretti are executed. Can no one be found to do them who knows anything of the Italian and English languages? There is hardly a sentence the text of which has not been grossly perverted. These books are in fact, no translations at all. The English writer affects to give an adaptation of his own in blank verse, and he only succeeds in making it the most absurd and stupid trash that was ever seen in print.* Harsh words but perfectly true.

To be continued.

