# Two nineteenth century accounts of GIOVAN BATTISTA RUBINI





# by: Henry F. Chorley from 'Thirty years Musical Recollections'

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## GIAMBATTISTA RUBINI.

Of Rubini*—"king of tenors," as he was called on the Continent, and whose name became "a household word" in England among all opera-frequenters—I shall offer a separate study. As a singer, and nothing beyond a singer, he is the only man of his class who deserves to be named in these pages as an artist of genius. No one, in my experience, so merely and exclusively a singer as he was, so entirely enchanted our public, so long as a shred of voice was left to him;—no one is more affectionately remembered. His memory is, if possible, more prized than he himself was—fascinating though his sole admitted successor among Italian tenors has been.

Rubini's career in this country was marked by yearly progress in public affection more signally than any of his brother or sister artists. There

* Born at Bergamo, 1795.

were peculiarities to which we had to habituate ourselves. He was in no respect calculated to please the eye; for the openness of his countenance could not redeem the meanness of features impaired by small-pox. His figure was awkward; he dressed as any one else pleased, without a thought of his own as to taste, character, or picturesque effect—(in this how different to his successor!). He rarely tried to act, the moment of the curse in the contract-scene of "Lucia" being the only attempt of the kind that I can call to mind. The voice and the expression were, with him, to "do it all."

Before, however, Rubini, came to England his voice had contracted that sort of thrilling or trembling habit, then new here, which of late has been abused *ad nauseam*. It was no longer in its prime —hardly capable, perhaps, of being produced *mezzo-forte* or *piano*; for which reason he had adopted a style of extreme contrast betwixt soft and loud, which many ears were unable, for a long period, to relish. After a time these vehemences (in themselves vicious) were forgotten for the sake of the transcendant qualities by which they were accompanied, though in the last years of his reign they were exaggerated into the alternation of a scarcely-audible whisper and a shout; and it was said, not untruly, that it would be hardly possible



to form any idea of a new tenor part were it presented for the first time by Rubini, so largely did memory and knowledge of his intentions aid his public. Further, he was to be easily surpassed by every one in his declamation. Here and there (as in the garden scene in "Othello" with *Iago*) he roused himself to give point and passion to his recitative. But such an awakening was exceptional, since, for the most part, he went through this part of his task with correct accent, but without any remarkable intelligence—in this respect an utter contrast to M. Duprez. One remembers Rubini not by this or by the other character, but by his songs. Yet more, his taste in ornament was often questionable. His facility was apt to tempt him into enormous *roulade cadenzas* which had little variety. In *Paolino's* great song, "*Pria che spunti*" ("Il Matrimonio"), he revelled in embroideries of the phrase in retarded time which occurs just before the close, which, however ingenious and wonderful as vocal displays, I always felt to be superabundant.

The most enthusiastic admirers of Rubini cannot dispute the truth of these characteristics; the fact being, that the idol of the public made them all forgotten and forgiven by his excessive vocal finish, and by a geniality of expression that was resistless.—There was never an artist who seemed so

thoroughly and intensely to enjoy his own singing —a persuasion which cannot fail to communicate itself to his audiences.—Again, there was never an artist more sure of his own effects than Rubini. He would walk through a good third of any given Opera languidly, giving the notes correctly, and little more;—in a duett, blending his voice intimately with that of his partner (in this he was unsurpassed); but when his own moment arrived, there was no longer coldness or hesitation,—but a passion, a fervour, a putting forth to the utmost of every resource of consummate vocal art and emotion, which converted the most incredulous, and satisfied those till then disposed to treat him as one whose reputation had been overrated.—As the singer of one song, who has equalled Rubini?—whether the song was "*Vivi tu*" in "Anna Bolena," or his air "*Tutto e sciolto*" in the second act of "La Sonnambula," or his *bravura* in the second act of Donizetti's "Marino Faliero," or his "*A te o cara*" in "I Puritani," or his "*Il mio tesoro*" in "Don Giovanni," or his scene from Signor Costa's "Malek Adhel" (containing that resplendent song, "*Tiranno cadrai*," which no creature to come, in our time, may be ever able to attempt). These songs did not create a success for him so much as an ecstasy of delight in those who heard them. The mixture of musical finish with excitement which they displayed, has never been equalled within such limits, or on





such conditions, as the career of Rubini afforded. He ruled the stage by the mere art of singing more completely than any one—woman or man—has been able to do in my time. He had as many devoted admirers of the fair sex (of both sexes) as if he had been an Adonis—people ready to swear that his voice did not vibrate—to pour out their homage in sonnets—to maintain that he was an original and vigorous actor—that his declamation admitted of no improvement—he being all the while merely an honest, homely man, with few graces of manner, and none of that natural quickness which stands many of his countrymen in the stead of culture: a little vain—and who can wonder?—but not offensively so.

In one wise respect, Rubini did not resemble the majority of tenors—in foolishly flinging away the treasure which he had amassed by his songs. He is understood to have left behind him one of the largest fortunes ever gained on the Opera stage. The traditions of his method died with him. He may be said to be the last of the remarkable company of Italian tenors for whom Signor Rossini wrote; and, compared with whom, the best of those we hear to-day, nine out of ten, with finer natural voices than his, are incomplete, unsatisfactory; and whose reign in favour is brief, as it deserves to be.