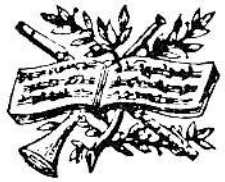
by: John Edmund Cox



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Gian Battista Rubini was born at Romano, a small town in the province of Bergamo, April 7th, 1795, and was the youngest of three brothers, all tenors of considerable celebrity. His

father, like Tamburini's, was a professor of music, a horn-player in the theatre, and the conductor of religious musical services in various churches and chapels, having a complete corps of singers and players, with a collection of masses, vespers, motetts, and litanies, all at the service of any chapter or convent that chose to hire them. His three sons were enlisted in this corps, the eldest being taught to play the organ, and the two younger the violin. The young Gian began his career as a vocalist at the early age of eight years, and showed such talent and aptitude that his father, diffident of his own powers as a singing-master, placed him under the tuition of a priest, an organist of Adro, in Brescia, named Don Santo, who sent him back to his parents at the end of a year with the consoling assurance that nothing would ever make him a singer, and that, as this was the case, it would be as well to look out for some other more likely means of livelihood for him. The father, better understanding the boy's capacity, at once set to work to instruct him, and not long afterwards invited his discouraging master to hear him sing a *Qui tollis*, which he delivered in such a style as to enable both to have their revenge, and to force from the old organist the confession that he was utterly wrong in his conjecture. At twelve years of age Rubini made "his first appearance on any stage" at Romano, in a female character and for his own benefit, with considerable advantage both as to fame and pecuniary results. Soon afterwards he went to Bergamo, where he played the violin between the acts, and sang during the operatic season in the chorus. Whilst fulfilling that engagement, a *petite comédie* was put in rehearsal, in one scene of which a cavatina had to be sung, which not one of the troupe was competent to

undertake. Somebody, in a lucky moment, having suggested that young Rubini might be able to serve the purpose, the manager liberally offered him a five-franc piece if he would undertake the task. He did as he was requested, and created a *furore* at once, which was in all probability the first step to his future success in life. This cavatina was the composition of a Signor Lamberti, who was born at Savone, Oct. 22, 1769, and went to Paris in 1806, where he dedicated some of his compositions to the Princess Pauline, sister of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, but made no position for himself, and was still living in 1817, most probably in poverty.* Rubini never laid that cavatina aside, but frequently sang it, both in private and public, to remind him, as he said, of his first success. Very little, however, seems to have immediately come of that success; for until 1814 he seems to have held no better position than that of a mere stroller, whose earnings were necessarily precarious and miserable. At Milan in that year he fell in with an engagement-broker, a so-called Marquis Belcredi, who, perceiving that there was something to be made of him, offered him an engagement at Pavia for the autumn season, at the liberal salary of eleven crowns—about £1 18s.—a month, which "the poverty, not the will, of the indigent stroller compelled him to accept. Here he made so great a sensation, that he was heard of at Milan, which caused the scheming Marquis to engage him at once for the Carnival of 1815 at 1000 francs for the season. Having first of all sent him to Brescia, he next transferred him for the spring season to the San Moire Theatre at Venice, at a salary of 2000 francs. Rubini next entered into an engagement with Barbaja, the director of the Neapolitan theatres, for six

* See Fetis' *Biographie Universelle des Musiciens*, tom. v. p. 178.

months, at eighty-four ducats (about £18) per month, with a proviso in his engagement, that at the end of the first three months, the engagement should be renewable for a year, at the increased salary of 100 ducats a month. He sang at the Teatro del Fiorentini with Pellegrini,* and was rising in public favour, when Barbaja, instead of renewing his engagement at a higher salary, proposed to dismiss him entirely, and only consented to retain him on condition of his terms being lowered to seventy ducats. Rubini had many cogent reasons that made him anxious to remain at Naples. He naturally desired to improve the hold he already had upon public favour there. He found himself also in the society of the celebrated tenor Nozzari,† his own countryman, from whom he received most valuable hints and lessons, watching his method and imitating his manner so carefully, as to derive almost as much benefit from each as from his instruction. He, therefore, accepted Barbaja's terms, saying, however, at the same time, "You take a mean advantage of my present condition; but before long you will have to pay for it." During the Carnival of 1819 he made an immense hit in Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* at Rome, which he confirmed at Palermo, where he sung with Donzelli and Lablache; so that upon his return to Naples he was able to make his own terms, as he had

* See p. 173.

† Andreas Nozzari, born in Bergamo, 1775; studied first under the Abbé Petrobelli, the second chapel-master of the cathedral of that town; and next under David, senior, and D'Aprile. Having *débuted* at Pavia, he went to Rome and Milan, and in 1803 to Paris, which he left for Naples, where he fixed his residence, after having sung in the principal cities of Italy. He was said to be an *artiste* of the highest qualifications, for whom Rossini wrote the chief tenor parts in his *Elizabeth*, *Otello*, *Armida*, *Moïse*, *Ermione*, *La Donna del Lago* and *Zelmira*, which he "created." In 1822 he retired from the stage, and died of apoplexy, December 12th, 1832, in his fifty-sixth year. See Fétis' *Biographie Universelle des Musiciens*, tom. vi. p. 340.

prognosticated would come to pass. In 1824 Barbaja, having been removed from the direction of the Neapolitan theatres, took his entire troupe with him to Vienna, including Rubini and his wife,* whom, as Mdlle. Chomel, he had heard on his return to Naples, and recommended that an engagement should be given her. Barbaja followed this advice, and was repaid by her popularity during two or three seasons at the San Carlo and Fondo theatres. After singing together for some time, they were married in 1819. Madame Rubini was a Parisian by birth, having been born in that city May 31, 1794. When sixteen years of age she was admitted as a pupil of the Conservatoire, and at first placed under the instruction of M. Gérard for vocalisation, but afterwards of M. Garat. Having remained eight years in that academy, she quitted France for Naples, and obtained there a brilliant success in Rossini's *Elizabeth* and Morlacchi's *Gianni di Parigi*, which her after-appearance in "the sweet swan of Pesaro's" *Maometto* completely confirmed. On the 26th April, 1831, she sang with her husband at the King's Theatre, in Bellini's opera *Il Pirata*; but, failing to make any impression,† she immediately retired from her profession, and was never again heard in public, either here or abroad. Madame Rubini's want of success in London was the more remarkable, inasmuch as she was described, by critics of the most competent knowledge and fairness, to have possessed "a voice of vast compass, which, although certainly not of a fine quality, was by no means displeasing, especially as she did not sing out of tune. Her person likewise was much in her favour, and her action not only correct, but even noble, when the character she represented required it." Because of her

† Ibid.

having been criticised in most decided terms, a competent writer stated that he had "paid more than ordinary attention to her performances, and could not discover those enormous faults which had been so undisguisedly condemned. We have, it is true," he adds, "heard her only seldom. Our opinion, therefore, is not unalterably formed; but we will go so far as to assert, that many a performer inferior to Madame Rubini has received lavish praises, and been ranked amongst the first of the day."*

The operatic company which Barbaja took with him to Vienna was perhaps the most numerous and splendid that was ever united at one time in any city. There were no less than nine *prime donne*, most of whom had established a high reputation, whilst the remainder attained the very first rank in their profession—viz. Sontag, Fodor, Mombelli, Rubini, Eckerlin, Ungher, Giulia Grisi, Dardanelli, and Grimbaum. How these ladies, most of whom were celebrated for their capricious conduct, both towards the public and one another, got on together, no record seems to have been made; but that they quarrelled, after the manner of *prime donne* of every age, not excepting our own, "to the top of their bent," and "led" their husbands—but more especially the *entrepreneur*—"a life," may easily be imagined. The tenors whom Barbaja had brought together were Donzelli, David, Rubini, and Cicimira, each of whom, except the latter, was of world-wide reputation; while the basses, equally strong in number, but not in talent, were Lablache, Ambrogi, Botticelli, and Bassi. At the close of this remarkable season, which for brilliancy has never been equalled, Rubini returned to Naples, whence he speedily made his way to Paris—taking Milan in his

* See *Harmonicon* for 1831, p. 157.

journey—and sung at "Les Italiens" for the first time, Oct. 6, 1825, in the part of Ramiro in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. Whilst at Milan, Bellini wrote the part of Gualtero in *Il Pirata* especially for him. He also sang in the same composer's *La Sonnambula*, and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*, in 1827; and in 1831 and 1832, freed from Barbaja's clutches, made as great a *furore* in London, if not greater, than he had produced in all other theatres. From that time until 1843 he alternated between Paris and London, with the exception of the year 1838, when he passed the summer in Italy, chiefly at Bergamo. In 1843 he went with Liszt to Holland and Germany; but after arriving at Berlin, made his way alone to St. Petersburg, where he not only added immensely to his fortune, but so far captivated the Czar Nicholas, that he raised him to the rank of colonel, and nominated him as musical director-in-chief in the Russian dominions. On his return to Italy he purchased an estate near Romano, where he continued to reside till March 2, 1854, when he died.*

Rubini's voice was of the richest quality, of a compass of eleven or twelve notes, from about E flat or F to B or C. To this was added a falsetto certainly reaching to E or F. His intonation was of the purest, and his delivery free from all impediment; but he may be said to have introduced that system of *tremolo*, of which there has been so much reason to complain in hosts of modern singers, male and female—a fluctuation of tone, so to speak, which rather excites the idea of age or weakness than as indicative of the effects it resorts to for the purpose of producing passion. His shake was excellent, and he was never weary of introducing it, accompanied with an overwhelming

* See *Harmonicon* for 1833, pp. 23, 24; and Fétis' *Biographie Universelle de Musiciens*, tom. vii. pp. 242-4.

multitude of roulades, latterly adopted to conceal the ravages of wear and tear, which, after a time, was apt to produce weariness amongst his hearers. He had also the habit of suddenly forcing out his voice, as it were, in gusts, and so suddenly withdrawing it, as to be nearly inaudible. This was done upon no fixed principle, or in order to express any particular sentiment or epithet, but merely to produce a succession of contrasts, that were thought by not a few, who, from the experience of the past, preferred a more level method of vocalisation, to be violent and unmeaning. In his *fioriture* there was much undoubtedly that might be called vicious, whilst his roulades were for the most part destitute of variety. Whoever heard him once, it might be said, heard him always; for he poured out the whole store of his embellishments in a single air, employing them indiscriminately—according to the then Italian fashion, which is now altogether lost and gone—in "grave and gay, in lively and severe." He nevertheless often sang in a highly impassioned manner, and especially in the well-known airs, "Tu vedrai la sventurata," and "Vivi tu," exemplified an amount of intelligence and passion that has never been surpassed. He was also void of affectation, and by his unpretending manners conciliated many of those who were unwilling to accord to him the undoubted merits to which he was justly entitled.