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RONCONI

When Giorgio Ronconi sang at the opening season of the Royal Italian Opera Company at Covent Garden during the Spring and Summer of 1847, the periodical "Musical World" published two extensive articles on the singer. The first, which appeared in the issue of Aug. 21 1847 deals with his career, and while it has a few errors is still interesting enough to be republished here. The second appearing on Sept. 11 1847 is an appreciation of him as an actor and as an artist, by one who heard him.



GIORGIO RONCONI.

THIS celebrated dramatic vocalist was born in Venice on the 6th of August, 1814. His father, Domenico Ronconi, an 1
artiste of great eminence in his time, was first tenor to Alexander, Emperor of Russia, Francesco 1st of Austria, and Maximilian of Bavaria. Giorgio Ronconi received his earliest instructions in singing, at Milan, from Rosa Ronconi, his sister, who, though an amateur, was an excellent musician. During this time his father was at Munich, fulfilling the office of *maitre de chant*, at the court of Maximilian—father of the present King of Bavaria, renowned as a warm patron of the arts and Lola Montez. At his return, young Giorgio, who had made considerable progress, and already knew more than his sister, profited by the experience and knowledge of his parent, and under his admirable tuition advanced rapidly in his studies. After two years practice he went to Pavia, a university town situated about ten miles from Milan, and, bitten with the rage for dramatic representations, entered into an engagement with the manager of the Opera there. He made his *debut*, at eighteen years of age, in the part of Arturo (created by Tamburini), in Bellini's *La Straniera*. The composer himself was present, and felicitated Ronconi warmly on his success; and here a friendship was begun between Bellini and Ronconi, which endured until the lamented death of the former put an end to it. The *impresario* of *La Scala* at Milan, the well-known Merelli, was also present on this occasion, and was desirous of securing the services of the youthful *debutante* for the *troupe* he was then forming for the Carnival. But Ronconi was fearful of risking the consequences, at his early age, of a failure at the largest theatre of Italy, and preferred accepting an engagement which was offered him, for the Carnival, at the little theatre of Cremona. There he appeared in *La Straniera*, Donizetti's *Olivo e Pasquale* (not *Don Pasquale*), and *Il Barone di Dolseim*, an opera by Pacini. His success 2
was uncontested, and the result was an engagement for the Opera at Bologna, with Madame Ungher and Signor Poggi, afterwards the husband of Mdlle. Frezzolini, the now celebrated *soprano*. At Bologna, Ronconi gained fresh laurels in *La Straniera* and *I Normani in Parigi*, an opera by Mercadante. The sensation he produced in this last opera was so deep, that it procured him an engagement for the great *fiera* (fair) at Padua, where the same operas were produced, with the addition of Mercadante's *Gabrielle di Vergy*, and *Eufemio* 3
di Messina of Persiani. From Padua, Ronconi proceeded to Rome, where Donizetti, at the time, was engaged to write an opera for the *troupe* of the *Valle*, the second lyrical theatre in the city of the Cæsars. The popular *maestro* had but small faith in the new comer, and it was with a faint heart that he submitted to his care the principal part in his new work, *Il Furioso*. But contrary to all expectations, Ronconi created a perfect *furore* in this opera, and was the main cause of its success. So content was Donizetti, that the year following he wrote *Torquato Tasso*—one of his capital works—especially for Ronconi, the triumph of which is now a matter of history. For fifty-two representations in succession the theatre was so full, that crowds were sent away from the doors every night. After his success in *Il Furioso*, Ronconi appeared at Piacenza, and at Padua (for the second time), where he gained new honors. It was thence he returned to Rome, in the season of the Carnival, and achieved the triumph in *Torquato Tasso*, which we have already recorded. From Rome he proceeded to Turin, where, at the theatre *Carignano*, he sang in Rossi's *Il Disertore Swizero*, Herold's *Zampa*, and Donizetti's *Parisina*. In the same season he was engaged at the *Teatro Reggio*, where Mercadante wrote for him *La Francisca Donato*, which, in spite of the favor accorded to Ronconi, achieved but a cold reception, and was not played more than nineteen times. In Italy an opera that is only played nineteen times is considered almost a failure.

Ronconi's next engagement was at the *San Carlo* of Naples, where his *Torquato Tasso* created the same sensation as at Rome. Not only were the *abonnés* of the great Neapolitan Opera wound up to an unusual pitch of enthusiasm, but a young and beautiful lady, Giovannina Giannoni, an enthusiastic amateur, and daughter of the Cesare Giannoni (pupil of the celebrated Fenaroli, of the Neapolitan *Conservatoire*), was so charmed by the talent of the young barytone, that, on making his acquaintance, and finding a reciprocity of sentiment on his part, she consented to admit his addresses, and in

less than three months was wedded to him—which important event in the life of Ronconi happened on the 18th of October, 1837. From this time Ronconi remained two years at Naples, where he performed no less than 282 times. Among the operas in which he appeared, were *Torquato Tasso*, *Jean de Calais* (Donizetti), *Il Bravo* (Marliani), *Emma d'Antiochia* (Mercadante), *Il Campagnello* (Donizetti), *I Saraceni in Cattanea* (Persiani), and *Lara* (Ruolz)—all of which were written expressly for him—besides many others too long to recite. At this time the theatre was managed by a society of distinguished Neapolitan *dilettante*. The *troupe* comprised the following celebrities :—*prime donne*, Madame Malibran, 4
Madame Ronzi de Begnis, Madame Persiani, Madame Duprez (wife of the celebrated Duprez), Madame Schulz, Madame Ungher : *tenore*, Duprez (who commenced his career in Italy, and at this period, which was immediately previous to his appearance at the *Academie* in Paris, was a singer of very little note) ; Reina (a great vocalist in his day, and the admitted rival of Donzelli), Donzelli himself, Moriani, Salvi, Pedrazzi ; *bassi*, Lablache, Coselli, (for whom Donizetti wrote *Parisina*) Crespi, Porto (nephew of the celebrated Porto, for whom Rossini wrote the part of Brabantio, in *Otello*, and who had the most extended register of voice ever known of its *genre*), Ronconi, and many others. This was the greatest, most various, and most efficient company ever known in Italy. And yet, with so magnificent a *troupe*, it is a positive fact, that on one occasion, in consequence of Duprez being absent on leave at Ancona, and Ronconi being indisposed, *the theatre was obliged to be closed*—and that *on Sunday*, ordinarily the most profitable day of the week in the Italian operatic towns. Herefrom two great operatic establishments, not far off, which we will not specialise by name, might derive a beneficial lesson, to guide them in the formation of their future companies.

During the three succeeding years Ronconi visited Livourno, Florence, Bologna, Verona, Trieste, Venice, Sinigaglia (*la porte des Francais*,—Seno Gallia—the birth place of the great and renowned Pio IX, who was governor of the town at the time of the engagement of Ronconi, with whom he lived on terms of friendly intimacy,) Faenza, &c., each of which towns he visited at least four or five times. During his last season but one in Italy (the autumn of 1841), Ronconi was at Modena, where the well-known Laporte, formerly director of Her Majesty's Theatre, happened to be staying at the time. Laporte was so delighted with Ronconi's talents that he immediately engaged him for London, for the spring of the following year. Accordingly, after fulfilling his last engagement in Italy, at the Carnival of Milan, Ronconi arrived in England in April 1842. Laporte, whose judgment in artistic matters was justly renowned, had been struck with the talent displayed by Ronconi in two very opposite characters— Filippo, in Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*, and Dulcamarra, in Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*—characters demanding respectively the deepest tragic and the liveliest comic powers. Madame Ronconi, who played the part of Adina in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, also favourably attracted the attention of Laporte, and was included in the engagement. On their arrival in England, however, the Ronconis found poor Laporte dead, and Mr. Lumley, the present lessee, in his place as director. Their engagement, nevertheless, was equally valid, and in *Beatrice di Tenda*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Don Giovanni*, *Elena di Feltro* (Mercadante), *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *L'Elisir d'Amore*, *Torquato Tasso*, *Roberto Devereux*, *I Puritani*, and *Mosé in Egitto*, Ronconi exhibited the variety of his resources, and the energy and originality of his talent, to singular advantage. After the season he undertook a tour in the provinces, accompanied by Thalberg, Made. Ronconi, and John Parry, during which he sang at forty-six concerts, in rapid succession.

Subsequent to this tour, Ronconi went to Paris, where he gave several concerts, and sang at all the *soirées* of the nobility, in company with Mad. Ronconi. His reception at Paris was so great that M. Vatel engaged him for the Italian Opera, where he made a brilliant *debut*, and where he has remained ever since for five years) one of the most attractive members of the *trouve*.

At Vienna, where Ronconi had previously created a great sensation in 1839, Donizetti composed for him the opera of 5
Maria di Rohan, in 1843, which produced an effect that has never been effaced in that city of connoisseurs. From Vienna Ronconi proceeded to Pesth, in Hungary, where he was equally well received. The operas there performed were *Maria di Rohan*, *Beatrice di Tenda*, and *L'Elisir d'Amore*, 6
in all of which Made. Ronconi shared the success of her celebrated *caro sposo*. From Pesth Ronconi came back once more to Paris, where he formed an engagement with M. Salamanca for the opera at Madrid. At the Spanish capital he became such an immense favourite that M. Salamanca entered into terms with him, to form and direct the entire company for the ensuing year. The *troupe* engaged by Ronconi included Made. Persiani, Made. Ronconi, Salvi, Marini, &c. In the previous year (his first in Spain) Ronconi visited Barcelona, where he gave five representations; after which he returned to Naples, the scene of his most frequent triumphs, and performed with Made. Anna Bishop in *Beatrice di Tenda*. Since then Ronconi's visits to Paris have been annual ; he is an enormous favorite with the Parisians, who will not admit any one to be his equal as a dramatic singer. The result of his engagement this year with the Royal Italian Opera is well known to the readers of the *Musical World*. Ronconi is an honorary associate of the *Academia di Santa Cecilia*, at Rome, Naples, Venice, Bologna, and Firenza, and an honorary member of the *Capella Sistina* at Rome. His repertory is more varied and numerous than that of any other living dramatic vocalist. Twenty-five operas have been expressly written for him :—*L'avvertimento ai Gelosi*, by Balfe ; *Il Furioso*, *Torquato Tasso*, *Maria Rudenz*, *Il Campanello*, *Maria di Rohan*, and *Maria Padilla* of Donizetti ; *I Saraceni in Cattanea*, *Eufemio di Messina*, *Il Fantasma*, and *L'Orfana Savojarda* of Persiani ; *Corrado d'Altamura*, and *Il Disertore per Amore* of Ricci ; *Nabucco*, by Verdi ; *Francisca Donata*, by Mercadante ; and others by Ruolz, Vaccaj, Nini, Lillo, Rossi, Gervasi, Gerli, Raimondi, and Bornaccini. With these,

and the other operas in which he is famous, Ronconi's *repertoire* includes no less than 140 works by various composers, ancient and modern, in any of which he is ready to sing at a moment's notice!

Our own high opinion of Ronconi's dramatic and vocal talents has been given too often to need repeating here. It is enough to say that we consider him one of the most extraordinary of living artistes—one of the greatest and most versatile. And, to add another charm to all this, he is as modest and unaffected as a child.

Some few numbers back we gave a compendious notice of the artistic career of the above celebrated vocalist: to this notice we had, at the time, intended to have added a critical examination of Signor Ronconi's talents and genius, but the length to which the article was extended precluded us from giving more than the statistics of his dramatic career, and compelled us to postpone our mental analysis to another period. The present moment seems to us by no means inopportune to enter into a minute investigation of the artist's abilities; for, in the first place, the Royal Italian Opera has closed and with it the performances, for the season, of Signor Ronconi; and, in the next place, there is a sudden lull in the musical storm that continued to blow with considerable fury for several months past, which necessarily affords our readers more time for attentive perusal, and provides ourselves greater leisure to devote to matters pacific and argumentative.

Signor Giorgio Ronconi is universally acknowledged in Italy, Germany, and France, to be the greatest male dramatic artist on the lyric stage. This high award is *not* universally adjudged to him in England. The cause of this discrepancy of opinion we shall have to consider, when we have first examined the claims of Signor Ronconi to such superlative excellence.

The first grand requisite of a singer is a fine voice. Signor Ronconi does not possess this requisite in a superior degree. His voice is not particularly melodious, nor is his intonation always strictly true. This somewhat deficient organ, nevertheless, possesses advantages of a rare kind. Its power is immense, and its extent extraordinary for a barytone. In *forte* passages its volume fills the house like a thunder-peal; and in passionate phrases, when the artiste comes out with an upper G, or sometimes an A, with all his power, the effect is quite electrical. No barytone ever heard in this country combined power and compass of voice in the same degree as Signor Ronconi. We have heard barytones who could sing as high as Ronconi, Zuchelli for instance, who could take the high A with ease, and our own Leffler, with a range of voice nearly as extensive, but both quite deficient in power. On the other hand we have heard barytones with voices as powerful as Ronconi's, such as Coletti, Lablache (more powerful), Tagliafico, Marini, &c., &c., but all these are confined in the upper register, or, at least, are limited to the F, the extreme end of the legitimate barytone's vocal tether. But let it not be supposed that the finest displays of Ronconi's art are restricted to his energetic singing. We never heard an artiste, Rubini perhaps excepted, who could deliver an *andante* with more thrilling effect, or with more consummate beauty of vocalization. His method, or mode of using his *mezza voce* is singularly striking, the most delightfully pathetic sounds, softened to an extreme degree, being produced. These notes have quite a tenor tone, and are entirely free from that hardness which is a constituent portion of his *forte* singing. In this respect Signor Ronconi resembles the Swedish Nightingale, whose *sotto voce* singing is so much more beautiful than her *forte* singing. Only, let not our readers imagine we could dream of comparing Jenny Lind and Ronconi in any other respect. Ronconi has decided *genius*—whatever her *talent* may be, we are quite certain Jenny Lind has but moderate pretensions to *genius*. As an instance of the great excellence of Ronconi's *andante* singing, we would instance the "Ah! non avea piu lagrime," from *Maria di Rudenz*, which he introduced into *Maria di Rohan*, at the Royal Italian Opera, and the "Bella e di sol vestita," of the latter opera, both as genuine efforts of high art impregnated by intense feeling as ever came from human lips. This is the greatest praise, but, in this case, it is not too great. As a vocal artiste Signor Ronconi has further claims on our consideration. In comic music he sings with considerable effect. His Figaro in the *Barbiere*, an entirely new conception by the way, is admirable in a vocal point of view, the witty phrases being delivered with great point, and the florid passages being mastered with an ease hardly to be apprehended from having heard him in serious music. His Figaro produced a marked sensation at the Royal Italian Opera, some of the critics going so far as to say, it was the best ever seen on the stage. We cannot entirely coincide with this opinion. Signor Ronconi's Figaro was, undoubtedly, admirable and original, and deserved all the applause it obtained.

We have now to consider Signor Ronconi as an actor, that is, we have to estimate what power he possesses, while singing, of realizing the passions by appropriate gesture, attitude, and look. The first thing which strikes us in Ronconi's acting is his perfect masterdom of the feeling, not only of the scene, but of the moment. This requires the happiest skill to embody truthfully. It will be best to illustrate what we are saying by an example. The last act of *Maria di Rohan* provides one ready at hand. The scene in which Chevreuse reads the fatal letter revealing to him his wife's supposed infidelity, will exemplify this fully. Before Ronconi reads this letter, and even during the reading of it, we do not see any of that tragic making up, or emphatic preparation, which seems to say distinctly to the audience, "Now, look out, there's something coming," and which, unfortunately, may be witnessed in most of our best artists. With Ronconi all was calm and unexpected, neither look nor gesture declaring that anything was forthcoming; nor did he even give the customary theatrical start when he came to the fatal an-

nouncement. No, the great artiste saw deeper. A smile passed over his lips at the first sight of the dreadful accusation, as was natural to one who felt his wife's love and believed that love unshaken. The truth, unfired by jealousy, flashed slowly across his mind : but when conviction did come, it shook him like an earthquake. The burst of passion that followed the reading of the letter in this terrible scene has not been surpassed on our own, or any other stage. It is only the very greatest artist, like Signor Ronconi, who can abide the true moment when the train of passion should be fired. There are many so-called great artists who fume and fret themselves before the time of explosion, and dissipate, by petty and frequent flashes, prematurely evolved, the power and momentum of some violent commotion of the mind to be delineated. Patience is as necessary a qualification to an actor as to an angler. From what we have said of Signor Ronconi it will be concluded that he is placed, in our estimation, among the greatest dramatic singers of all times. And such is the case. We look upon Ronconi as the Edmund Kean of the operatic stage. Like Kean, Ronconi's *forte* lies in the sudden evolution of passions, or in the delineation of the more terrible mental emotions. Like Kean, though his range of characters be extensive, Ronconi's great parts are comparatively few. Although pathos forms a feature in the acting of both, it was, and is, occasional, and altogether dependant for its power on its contrast with some sterner feeling. In *physique* Edmund Kean had the advantage considerably. Ronconi's face is full of meaning, but he lacks the flashing eye and scornful lip of the great English tragedian; nor does he possess his dignity and grace of motion. Ronconi's forehead is high and massive, the form of the head beautiful, and, phrenologically speaking, strikingly indicative of intellect.

There remains for investigation the cause why Signor Ronconi is held in less estimation in England, than in Italy, Germany, or France. It must first be conceded that with the musical and thinking section of the public of this country his reputation stands as high as it does elsewhere. It is only with the English public *in general* that Signor Ronconi is not yet established in the highest degree of favouritism to which his genius entitles him, and to which, no doubt, it will eventually conduct him. The first and most obvious reason for Signor Ronconi's want of universal favouritism here, is that he has been too seldom heard, and at times under considerable disadvantage. His first season in London was almost a blank, having little to do, and that little of no consequence. Had Mr. Laporte, the then manager of Her Majesty's Theatre, wished to ruin the artist, he could have scarcely fixed upon a more successful plan, than that of entirely overlooking him. Two chances of creating a sensation he did obtain, wrung from the management, rather than bestowed upon him. The first was in the ***Beatrice di Tenda*** in which his success was tremendous, the opera being repeated a number of times: the second was in Basilio in the ***Barbiere***, which though a secondary part in the opera, arose to such importance in his personation, as to become one of the chief features of the performance, though it included in the cast Grisi, Mario, Tamburini, and Lablache. Ronconi's Basilio was a nine day's wonder at the Opera. But two characters were not enough to establish a great artiste's reputation. When the remembrance of these parts died away, the memory of the artiste faded too, and Ronconi left London bequeathing his name for recordation to those only who knew that, " like a thing of beauty," a thing of genius " is a joy for ever," and cannot die till the memory rot. In the few years between his leaving London and this season, when the directors of the Royal Italian Opera proved their judgment by engaging him, Ronconi advanced his reputation immensely in all parts of Italy, in Spain, parts of Germany, and France. In Paris he became at once one of the greatest favorites who ever appeared at the *Italiens*. The Parisians respect art above everything, and Ronconi was set down as the first of living dramatic vocalists. Of course such an artist could not be overlooked by the proprietors of the Royal Italian Opera. He was at once offered an engagement, which was accepted with certain stipulations. It was unfortunate that one of these stipulations provided that he should play Figaro in the *Barbiere*, thus depriving Tamburini of one of his best parts, and depriving himself of the opportunity of appearing in some other character in which his genius would have shone more conspicuously. At the very outset of his engagement at the Royal Italian Opera, illness assailed him, and he was heard to great disadvantage in *Lucia*. Strange to say, although an apology was made for Ronconi, and that it was stated he had been suddenly attacked by a severe cold, but that sooner than the opera should be changed, he would undertake his part, most of the audience went away disappointed, and criticised his performance with as much exacerbation as if he had been singing at all. We ourselves heard him. He could not literally sing four notes. We are now quite certain that his first appearance injured him considerably. The second night Ronconi achieved an immense triumph. But many who were there the first night of his performance *did not hear him then*. Another cause which militated against universal favouritism for Signor Ronconi, arose from the immense success Alboni obtained, and from the almost miraculous change that took place in Grisi, in consequence of the new impulse given to her genius by the sensation created by Jenny Lind. In fact the Jenny Lind mania, and its opposition dilapitated all reputations saving those which came in immediate contrast with her. At Her Majesty's Theatre Staudigl and Gardoni, the first season of their engagements, were non-entities, Lablache forgotten, and Coletti unknown : only at the Royal Italian Opera, where *ensemble* was more intimately considered than it had ever been previously, were Mario, Tamburini, and Ronconi, received with favour. But the Alboni *typhus* ran nearly as high as the Jenny Lind *scarlatina*. No opera would go down with the public in which she did not appear, and even Grisi's blaze of popularity was threatened with eclipse by the new planet. The necessity of producing operas for Alboni—a necessity most judiciously followed out by the management—was another reason why Ronconi did not

elevate himself to the highest point in public favour, inasmuch as Alboni's success precluded the production of operas for him. True, the *Due Foscari* was produced, and the performance of Ronconi was pronounced, without a dissentient voice, one of the most sublime ever witnessed on the stage: but the music was villanous, and no transcendancy of acting alone can support an entire opera. There are many minor reasons we could adduce, had we time, to show how unfortunate Ronconi has been in his engagement this season at the Royal Italian Opera. We can hardly attribute any degree of blame to the management for not producing operas for Signor Ronconi, but we do think more frequent opportunities might have been found of bringing him before the public. We entertain much respect for Signor Marini as an artist, but how comes it that he, who is so immeasurably Ronconi's inferior, should be cast for two of his parts, viz: the Podesta in *La Gazza Ladra* and Figaro in *Le Nozze?* We shall not pursue this subject any farther. The Royal Italian Opera directors, by this time, know the worth, and have weighed the value of the great artist of whom we are writing; and will, no doubt, next year, know how to turn his immense abilities to the best advantage.



After 1847, Ronconi hardly ever sang in Italy, concentrating instead on the great lyric stages of the "International Circuit" until 1866, primarily Covent Garden in London, the Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg, the Théâtre-Italien in Paris and the Teatro Real in Madrid. He also sang a season in Havana which was followed by a brief tour of the U.S. During this period, his activities were not limited to singing - he was the impresario of the Théâtre-Italien in the late 1840s, and also established a singing school in Granada in the 1850s. He spent a fair amount of time in the Spanish provinces, singing not only in Granada, but also in Cadiz, Malaga, Oviedo, Santander and undoubtedly other Spanish towns as well.

During the above period he gradually replaced Tamburini as the world's foremost baritone, and took over most of his roles at Covent Garden and in St Petersburg. But his voice began to decline from over use, and he switched to singing buffo roles almost entirely. He also sang almost exclusively in the United States, specializing in such roles as Crispino, Dulcamara, the Englishman in FRA DIAVOLO, Antonio in LINDA, Leporello, etc. As his voice declined further, a great Don Giovanni wound up singing Masetto. He even sang Tristan in MARTHA. What a sad end to a once glorious career!

He lost his fortune during the mid 1870s, after which he obtained a post at the Madrid Conservatory. He lived off his salary for a few years, but then suffered a paralytic stroke which made it difficult to continue his teaching. He finally died in extreme poverty in 1890 by which time only a few people identified the shabby old professor as being the greatest baritone of his time.

ANNOTATIONS

1. The more generally accepted date of his birth is August 10, 1810.

2. The chronology for Cremona lists only LA STANIERA, but the Censore Universale de' Teatri (Milan) indicates that other operas were also given, only to be replaced by LA STRANIERA.

3. EUFEMIO DI MESSINA was given as I SARACENI IN CATANIA during his first season in Padua; GABRIELLA DI VERGY was given a year later.

4. Malibran had already left Naples before Ronconi's arrival, and was not part of this company.

5. Ronconi first sang in Vienna in 1840.

6 Ronconi did not sing in Budapest until 1844, and there is no record of his singing MARIA DI ROHAN there.

7. Ronconi may have learned the roles in 140 operas, but it has been possible to trace him in less than 90.